

GAME AND GOVERNANCE: MARKHOR HUNTING IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR DURING DOGRA RULE (1846-1947)

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Abstract

The Markhor (*Capra falconeri*), a majestic wild goat native to the mountainous regions of Central Asia, became a highly sought-after trophy for British colonial hunters in Jammu and Kashmir during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Revered for its distinctive spiral horns and impressive stature, the Markhor was not only a symbol of the wilderness but also of prestige and power among British sportsmen. This paper explores the historical significance of Markhor hunting, examining how overhunting, combined with colonial obsession for trophies, brought the species to the brink of extinction. It also discusses early conservation efforts, such as the establishment of the Kashmir Game Preservation Department and the introduction of game laws aimed at preserving the species. Despite these measures, the species faced critical declines due to continued poaching and habitat loss. This paper aims to synthesise the historical accounts, ecological habits, physical characteristics, and conservation challenges of the Markhor, drawing from sportsman records and naturalist observations.

Key Words: Hunting, Markhor, Horns, Kashmir, British, Maharaja.

Introduction

The Markhor¹ is recognized as one of the most remarkable members of the *Capra* genus. Known for its spiralling horns, flowing black beard, and imposing stature, it has long captivated naturalists, hunters, and locals alike. Colonel Kinloch, a renowned sportsman, famously remarked, “Of all the trophies that an Indian sportsman can obtain, none excels—or perhaps equals—the head of an old Markhor”.²

After the sale of Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh in 1846, British officials and soldiers frequently visited the region, seeking

refuge from the Indian plains heat and the thrill of the hunt.³ The Markhor's regal stance and its remarkable ability to navigate steep, rocky terrains made it a coveted yet dangerous prize among hunters in British India.⁴ Historical accounts from the 19th and early 20th centuries portray the Markhor as a symbol of the wild and untamed beauty of the mountains it inhabits.

Habitat and Distribution

The Markhor primarily inhabits the mountainous ranges of Central Asia, including the Pir Panjal, Astor, and Suleiman Mountain ranges, as well as the valleys of Kashmir, Baltistan, and Afghanistan. Early sportsmen classified Markhor into four distinct types, each associated with these geographical regions: *Astor*, *Pir Panjal*, *Kabul*, and *Suleiman Markhor*. However, it should be clearly understood that the names do not necessarily signify the districts in which the different types are generally found.⁵ Its habitat is defined by rugged, forested hillsides and craggy cliffs. Unlike the ibex, which thrives at higher altitudes, the Markhor prefers elevations just below the snow line, often venturing into rocky forests and steep ravines.⁶ In summer, they are found on higher slopes, while in winter, they descend to lower elevations, avoiding snow-laden areas. The Pir Panjal and Kaj-Nag mountains in Jammu and Kashmir were among the most notable hunting grounds.⁷

Colonel Markham, in 1854, along with later accounts by sportsmen like Colonel Kinloch and Andrew Leith Adams, highlighted the Markhor's seasonal migrations. They grazed on lower slopes in the mornings and evenings, while seeking shelter on higher, steeper cliffs during the day.⁸

Physical Characteristics and their Behaviour

The Markhor is a large, thick-set goat, standing up to 44 inches at the shoulder, with males being notably larger and more imposing than females.⁹ The most distinctive feature of the Markhor are its long, spiraling horns, which can reach up to 63 inches in length in some specimens.¹⁰ These horns vary between the four main varieties of the species: the Pir Panjal, Astor, Kabul, and Suleiman Markhor. While the Pir Panjal variety features a corkscrew-like spiral, the Astor type has wider, sweeping horns.¹¹ The horns typically exhibited between two and three spirals, with variations depending on the specific variety of the animal.¹²



Fig.1. Spiral Horned Markhor.

Source: - Colonel Kinloch, *Large game shooting in Thibet, the Himalayas and Northern India*, Thacker Spink and Co, Calcutta, 1885, p. 136.)

In addition to their horns, male Markhor sport a long, flowing beard and shaggy mane, adding to their majestic appearance. Their coats change seasonally, becoming denser and lighter in colour during the winter months, providing insulation in the cold. The females, in contrast, are much smaller and less striking, with shorter horns measuring about 10 to 11 inches in length; whose killing was prohibited.¹³

Markhors are gregarious animals, often found in herds that can vary in size depending on the season. Smaller males and females tend to stay together, while older bucks often separate from the herd during non-rut seasons.¹⁴ During the winter, they descend into the

valleys, and during the rut in December, males rejoin the females to mate.¹⁵ They are cautious animals, known for their wariness and ability to blend into their environment. Their coats, ranging from grey in winter to reddish-brown in summer, help them remain camouflaged against the rocky, barren landscapes.¹⁶

Historical Significance and Hunting

For centuries, the Markhor has been considered one of the most prized trophies for hunters.¹⁷ Early sportsmen, such as A.E. Ward, Colonel Kinloch and Walter Lawrence, wrote extensively about the challenges of hunting Markhor, emphasising the skill and patience required to track and bag an old male.¹⁸ The rugged terrain, combined with the Markhor's wariness and preference for inaccessible cliffs, made hunting these animals a formidable pursuit.¹⁹

In England in the late 1800s, hunting for trophies or, more specifically, body parts to be displayed—particularly the horns—became an integral component of a novel hunting experience.²⁰ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British colonial elite saw hunting as a means to assert their dominance and enjoy the thrill of nature. They were seeking the largest trophy head for their personal collection. Colonial-era literature suggests that hunting was employed as a cultural strategy utilised by both the native rulers of colonial India and the British colonialists to maintain their supremacy. Local initiatives played a significant role in capitalising on the Europeans' obsession with trophy hunting, catering to their desire for prized game heads. The local expertise of *shikaris* (hunters) was crucial to the success of these hunts, their understanding of the animals and their habitats, as well as their experience interacting with the local population, guiding British sportsmen to the best game and often helping them bag numerous game animals.

By the start of the 20th century, the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir had developed into a paradise for big game hunters. British Army Officers and other White sportsmen flocked to the hills in the Vale of Kashmir and the mountains beyond, to pursue the wild animals.²¹ The ideal time for hunting was when the snow had sufficiently melted to allow access to the terrain. In Kashmir, the prime hunting season typically spanned from June 15 to September 15, as during this period, the game would roam the mountaintops, which were then clear of snow.²²

However, the extensive hunting practices, coupled with the use of modern firearms, severely impacted the Markhor population. Famous hunters like A.E. Ward noted that as early as the 1900s, the Markhor population was declining due to overhunting and it was

regrettable to wipe out the small animals,²³ while only the bigger heads were collected by these sportsmen.²⁴ In 1906, Sir Francis Younghusband reported that 52 Markhor were killed in one year alone, while 51 were killed in 1907, with the largest horns measuring 61 inches, taken by Captain Barstow. The size of the horns was the primary determinant of a trophy's value, with horns over 50 inches in length being particularly coveted. Notable trophies included horns measuring up to 63 inches, with the record being 65¾ inches, shot in the Kaj Nag in 1924 by Colonel A.B. Souter.²⁵ These grand heads, with their distinct spirals and massive size, were seen as the pinnacle of hunting achievement in the region. These hunters valued the largest horned Markhor, and obtaining such a trophy was considered a matter of immense pride.²⁶

Conservation and Threats

Initially, there were no formal hunting rules in Kashmir. However, as hunting pressure increased, particularly among British sportsmen, informal codes of conduct emerged, more akin to a gentleman's agreement, to guide their hunting practices. These guidelines advocated only shooting the largest heads and avoiding the killing of females.²⁷ Nevertheless, by the late 19th century, the Kashmir Markhor population had almost disappeared from areas like the Pir Panjal range due to excessive hunting²⁸ and being driven off with the help of dogs.²⁹ Throughout this period, hunters believed that a little head was better to no head when pursuing Markhor of all sizes. Because Markhor hunting was so well-liked by British sportsmen during this time, every nallah, or tiny valley, in the Markhor ecosystem used to be packed when the summer shooting season started.³⁰ Also, the use of technology had a significant role in the British sportsmen's successful hunting. The development of new technology—firearms rendered hunting too easy, speeded their extinction.³¹

By the early 20th century, it became evident that the Markhor population was declining due to overhunting. The *Gazetteer of 1890* and later accounts by Walter Lawrence lamented the fact that the Pir Panjal range and other key habitats were being "shot out," with few large males left.³² The advent of conservation laws helped slow the decline, but illegal hunting and poaching, particularly during the rutting season, continued to pose significant threats to the Markhor population. Markhor were also vulnerable to habitat loss due to deforestation and human encroachment into mountainous areas. In regions like the Kaj Nag and Shamsbari ranges, where hunting pressure had been especially intense, the population remained critically low.

In response to the Markhor's declining numbers, Colonel Wigram established the Kashmir Game Preservation Department (KGPD) in the late 19th century. By the early 20th century, hunters were required to register with the KGPD, and shooting in certain areas was strictly regulated. Astor Markhor hunting was banned in areas like Rondu Valley and Bunji Valley in Skardu to protect the species. Hunting, which had previously been a leisure sport, was now integrated into the imperial administration. These measures, while limiting the number of animals killed, could not fully counter the damage done by earlier excessive hunting.³³

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Markhor population had become critically endangered. In 1896, A.E. Ward noted that Markhor hunters were largely confined to ravines flowing into the Indus between Skardu and Haramosh, as well as the Pir Panjal, Kaj-Nag, and the surrounding Shamsbari mountains, due to newly enforced regulations.³⁴ The state government also issued a general notification on April 21, 1896, outlining game preservation rules. It became illegal to use men and dogs for driving game in Kashmir, including Gilgit, Ladakh, and Skardu.³⁵ The Maharaja's administration began issuing hunting licences, restricting the number of Markhor that could be killed each season. Major Koenigsmarck, writing in 1910, noted that the practice of white men competing for the prime hunting grounds had become a thing of the past.³⁶ No one was permitted to hunt any kind of game, big or small, without a licence in the domains of the Maharaja.³⁷ Licences allowed hunters to take no more than two Markhor per season, and Kashmiri shikaris also had to be registered and licensed annually.³⁸ These restrictions were put in place partly to regulate hunting and partly to increase state revenue from the sale of licences, which by 1909 contributed 20,000 rupees to the state's coffers.³⁹ Despite these efforts, the Markhor population continued to decline, leading to outright bans on Markhor hunting in certain regions by the 1920s. The introduction of closed seasons, a cap on the number of heads per hunter, and restrictions on hunting female Markhor were part of broader efforts to conserve the species.

Conclusion

The Markhor, as one of the most distinguished members of the *Capra* genus, holds a significant position in the history of British colonial hunting in Jammu and Kashmir. From its majestic appearance and challenging habitat to its symbolic representation of the untamed beauty of the mountains, the Markhor captivated both British and local hunters alike. British sportsmen, driven by a combination of recreational pursuit, prestige, and imperial assertion, placed immense value on hunting this species, often at the expense of

its population. The introduction of modern firearms and unrestricted hunting practices, coupled with trophy-hunting culture, severely impacted the Markhor population, leading to its near extinction in certain regions by the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Despite the gradual introduction of informal and later formal hunting regulations—such as closed seasons, hunting licences, and restrictions on the number of animals that could be hunted—the damage inflicted by earlier hunting practices was significant. The establishment of the Kashmir Game Preservation Department and the Maharaja's efforts to protect the Markhor through hunting bans and regulation of shikaris represented important steps toward conservation, yet these measures were largely a reactive response to the rapid decline of the species. Although these initiatives helped to slow the rate of decline, they were insufficient to fully restore the Markhor population.

This analysis of the Markhor's historical significance, combined with its vulnerability to both human encroachment and the introduction of modern technologies, underscores the complex relationship between hunting, imperialism, and conservation in colonial Jammu and Kashmir. The Markhor's story serves as a poignant reminder of the consequences of unchecked exploitation of natural resources and the importance of sustainable practices in wildlife management. The British legacy of big-game hunting in the region, while it contributed to the sport's cultural and economic development, ultimately had a lasting and detrimental effect on the biodiversity of Jammu and Kashmir. Conservation measures introduced during this period laid the foundation for later wildlife preservation efforts, but they also highlight the delayed response to ecological crises driven by colonial ambitions.

Notes and References:

¹ Colonel Kinloch notes that "'Mar-khur' is a Persian name meaning 'Snake-eater,' referring to the belief among *shikaris* that Markhor consume the snakes abundant on the hills where they are found" See, Kinloch, *Large Game Shooting in Thibet, the Himalayas and Northern India*, 1885, p. 137. Another interpretation suggests the name Markhor, an apt description of the animal's spiral horns, likely originates from the Pashto words "mar" (snake) and "akhur" (horn). See, Wildlife Trust of India, (2005) *Goats on the Border: A Rapid Assessment of the Pir Panjal Markhor in Jammu and Kashmir: Distribution, Status and Threats*.

² Colonel Kinloch, *Large game shooting in Thibet, the Himalayas and Northern India*, Thacker Spink and Co, Calcutta, 1885, p. 136.

³ Captain Knight, *Diary of a Pedestrian in Kashmir and Thibet*, Richard Bentley, London, 1863, p. 42.

⁴ Colonel Kinloch, *Op. cit.*, p. 137.

⁵ Major G. Burrard, *Big game hunting in the Himalayas and Tibet*, Herbert Jenkins Limited, London, 1925, pp. 175-177.

⁶ Colonel Kinloch, *Op. cit.*, p. 137. Also see, Colonel Markham, *Shooting in the Himalayas. A Journal of Sporting Adventures and Travel in Chinese Tartary, Ladac, Thibet, Cashmere, &c*, 1854, p. 363. Also, James Abruthnot, *A Trip to Kashmir*, 1900, pp. 28-29. Also, Henry Zouch Darrah, *Sport in the Highlands of Kashmir*, 1898, pp. 81-82.

⁷ Walter R. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, Oxford University Press, London, 1895, p. 114.

⁸ Henry Zouch Darrah, *Sport in the Highlands of Kashmir: Being a Narrative of an Eight Months' Trip in Baltistan and Ladak, and a Lady's Experiences in the Latter Country; Together with Hints for the Guidance of Sportsmen*, Rowland Ward Ltd, London, 1898, pp. 81-82.

⁹ Colonel Kinloch, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

¹⁰ A.E Ward, *The Sportsman's guide to Kashmir & Ladakh*, Calcutta Central Press Co. Ltd, Calcutta, 1887, p. 21.

¹¹ *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh; together with routes in the territories of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir*, Calcutta, 1890, p. 96.

¹² Walter R. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir*, Oxford University Press, London, 1895, p. 113.

¹³ A.E Ward, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-176.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 24.

¹⁵ *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh, op. cit.*, p.96. Also see, Walter Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

¹⁶ Walter R. Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

¹⁷ Major, G. Burrard, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

¹⁸ Colonel Kinloch, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

¹⁹ Colonel Fred. Markham, *Shooting in the Himalayas, A journal of sporting, adventures and travel in Chinese Tartary, Ladac, Thibet, Cashmere*, Richard Bentley, London, 1854, p. 363.

²⁰ A.E Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

²¹ Shafqat Hussain, *Sports-hunting, Fairness and Colonial Identity: Collaboration and Subversion in the Northwestern Frontier Region of the British Indian Empire*, Conservation and society, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2010, pp. 112-114.

²² A.E Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 24.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 110.

²⁵ Major, G. Burrard, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-177.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 178.

²⁷ Henry Z. Darrah, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁸ Walter R. Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

²⁹ A.E Ward, *The Tourists and Sportsman's guide to Kashmir & Ladakh*, Thacker and Spink & Co, Calcutta, 1896, p. 138.

³⁰ Henry Z. Darrah, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

³¹ Walter R. Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

³² *Ibid*, p. 113.

³³ Shafqat Husain, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

³⁴ A.E Ward, *op. cit.*, 1896, p. 176.

³⁵ John Collet, *A Guide to Kashmir*, W. Newman & Co, Calcutta, 1898, pp. 177-178.

³⁶ Count Hans Von Koenigsmarck, *The Markhor sport in Kashmir*, Keagan Paul, Trench, Trubner, & Co. Ltd, London, 1910, p. 94.

³⁷ Major Arthur Neve, *The Tourists Guide to Kashmir, Ladakh, Khardo &C*, The Civil and Military Gazette Press, Lahore, 1918, p. 175.

³⁸ Author Unknown, *Kashmir Visitors Rules*, 1902, Lahore, p. 50.

³⁹ Count Hans Von Koenigsmarck, *op. cit.*, p. 106.