

## Blue Sheep: A Cry from the Wild

A joint team of the Forest Department, The Mountain Institute, Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee and Yambong Eco-tourism Committee organized a winter habitat survey in the Khangchendzonga National Park from 5<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> January 2006.



**A family flock of Blue Sheep**

During the summer habitat survey of 2005 it was found that the tourists camp right on the Sungmoteng Tsho (Samiti Lake) bank, which was rapidly degrading this sacred lake. Since the camping was right on the lake, more than 5000 persons defecate on the lake bank and the pack animals were also all kept here. This is also the habitat for water birds, blue sheep and snow leopard. It was felt that this site needs to be given higher conservation importance.



**Camping right on the Samiti lake**

Consequently the forest department shifted the camping on Sungmoteng Tsho (Samiti lake) to Lamune which is just half a kilometre downstream (20 minutes walk) with water availability and also being less windy, ensured a more comfortable camping. Movement of pack animal (horses and dzos) beyond Lamune [towards Samiti Lake (Sungmoteng Tsho)] and support staff was also prohibited throughout the year.

This conservation regulation has resulted in increasing the value of the lake, preserved its sacredness and conserved its rich wildlife. Right at Samiti Lake the team could sight a flock of 39 healthy and robust Blue Sheep. There is increased fodder availability of important fodder plants like *Sun Buki* (*Kobresia cappilifolia*) due to the reduction in domestic livestock like horses, dzos and yaks over the last year. The transfer of camping site from Samiti Lake to Lamune has given a new lease of life to the lake and saved this vital habitat of the Blue Sheep.



We also sighted a flock of 11 blue sheep at Zemathang valley. **After camping was shifted**

It was also found that main summer pasture for the blue sheep was the Yongzokdrak meadows beyond the Gochela pass. However these meadows were not available for the blue sheep during winter due to heavy snow cover. Hence all the blue sheep descend down the Thangsing valley during winter and inhabit the sunny, grassy slopes near Samiti and Lamune.

While surveying the grassy slopes above Thangsing at Yangzi, we were shocked to locate a trap laid to snare Blue Sheep. Like other domestic livestock, the blue sheep also love salt. It is this weakness that the hunter has played on. Below a huge boulder, salt had been sprinkled, and the entrance was blocked by a stone wall. A noose was laid at the narrow opening in this wall. This trap was dismantled by the team members.



Conservation status of the globally endangered Blue Sheep (*Pseudois nayur*) population – the flag ship species of the high altitude alpine ecosystem, and its habitat along with other high altitude flora, fauna, glaciers and alpine ecosystems has improved over the past year. Thanks are due to the sincere efforts put in by the Forest Department, Tourism Department, The Mountain Institute, Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee, Yambong Ecotourism Committee and all the Trekking Agents and their mother concern the Travel Agents Association of Sikkim (TAAS) and Sikkim Association of Adventure Tour Operators (SAATO).

In order to secure that future of the Blue sheep and other valuable wildlife, regular trap demolition exercises is necessary especially during summer and winter. Sufficient salt should be provided in open spaces to meet the dietary needs of the blue sheep, so that they are not lured by poachers using this as a tool. Support of the villagers, needs be enlisted in the conservation management of the *Himal*. Such villagers, who are willing, need to be recognized as *Himal Rakshaks* (Honorary Mountain Guardians) and their empowerment and capacity building done. This will result in a more effective, participatory “on ground” conservation of the *Himal* jointly with the Forest Department.



Though we have succeeded in providing a safe shelter for blue sheep in our *Himal*, a lot still needs to be done to secure their future. Let us all renew our pledge to protect this wild wealth of Sikkim.

We are grateful to the Indo Swiss Project Sikkim (ISPS) for supporting this study.