

The Chepang Community and Rhino Conservation in Nepal: Unveiling Perspectives on Wildlife Trade to Foster Conservation

Abstract

Illegal wildlife trade remains one of the most significant threats to global biodiversity, driving declines in iconic species such as rhinoceroses, elephants, and pangolins. Despite intensified enforcement and anti-poaching measures globally, local communities living near protected areas often remain both affected by and implicated in these activities. This is evident in Nepal, where strict legal penalties, including long prison sentences, coexist with continued community involvement in rhino poaching. This paradox raises critical questions about the deeper structural and socio-economic drivers behind such participation and its implications for both communities and conservation.

This thesis explores these dynamics through a case study of the Chepang, an Indigenous Tibeto-Burman community residing in Nepal. Historically semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, the Chepang face persistent marginalisation, including poverty, food insecurity, low literacy, insecure land tenure, and limited access to state services. These conditions, alongside traditional hunting skills, have made some households vulnerable to recruitment into poaching networks. Understanding this contradiction continued involvement despite severe risks forms the central focus of this research.

The study is guided by three key questions: (1) What historical, economic, and social conditions are associated with involvement in illegal wildlife trade? (2) How do conservation-led relocations and top-down governance approaches intersect with existing vulnerabilities among Indigenous communities? (3) What community-inclusive strategies can address illegal wildlife trade while supporting both equity and conservation?

A mixed-methods approach was employed using semi-structured interviews with 236 participants across four groups: individuals incarcerated for poaching, their family members, individuals not involved in poaching, and their family members. Of these, 108 participants were Chepang, including 62 with direct or indirect involvement in poaching. Additional participants from non-Chepang communities enabled comparative insights. Qualitative thematic analysis and descriptive statistics were used to examine patterns of marginalisation, recruitment, and socio-economic conditions.

The findings highlight that involvement in illegal wildlife trade is closely linked to structural vulnerability rather than deliberate criminal intent. Experiences of marginalisation, limited access to resources, and inequitable conservation benefits shape community perceptions and choices. The study also points to the far-reaching impacts of incarceration on families, including economic hardship and social stigma, which can deepen existing vulnerabilities. Together, these insights reveal how conservation challenges are closely intertwined with broader social realities.

Overall, this research argues that enforcement-focused approaches, while necessary, are insufficient on their own. Long-term conservation outcomes depend on addressing underlying socio-economic exclusion through livelihood opportunities, equitable benefit-sharing, and inclusive governance. By foregrounding community perspectives, this thesis highlights the

importance of bridging conservation goals with social justice, offering pathways to transform vulnerable communities into active participants in conservation.