

Status Paper of Khaptad National Park

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Abstract

The Khaptad National Park (KNP) represents a unique landscape of rolling plateau with grasslands, rich in mid-hill flora and fauna. It encompasses various religious sites including Khaptad Swami's hermitage, temples, and stone statues, and Khaptad Lake. These plateaus are the traditional grazing land of people living in the surrounding areas. The grazing pressure in the Khaptad plateau is intense during the summer season (April/May-July/August), and illegal grazing is common towards the periphery round the year. This has resulted in the degradation of grasslands, increased soil erosion and gully formation, and a decrease in the number and variety of flowering plants. Wildlife populations such as musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*) are decreasing rapidly as a result of poaching and disturbances caused by livestock grazing. Little research has been done on the grasslands, and a study on the impact of grazing on grassland composition is needed. In addition, a pilot study is recommended on controlled burning of grassland to increase nutrient quality and reduce unpalatable species.

Background

Before the Khaptad National Park (KNP) was established in 1984, the local people had traditionally divided the grassland areas among themselves and grazed their livestock in their respective areas (Achham, Bajhang, Bajura, and Doti districts). However, the gradual increase in human population exacerbated grazing pressure and human encroachment for settlement, and exploitation of forest resources by cutting and burning also degraded the quality of the natural habitat. KNP was established to prevent further degradation of the natural resources and to conserve a mid-hill ecosystem.

Ecological attributes

Khaptad National Park represents the mid-hill flora and fauna of Nepal. It is situated at the cross point of four districts, Achham, Bajhang, Bajura, and Doti. It covers an area of 225 sq.km. The altitude varies from 1,450m (Chauki danda) to 3,300m (Shahasralinga). The KNP has innumerable sources of mid-hill biodiversity, including 21 mammals, some of which are rare and endangered such as musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*), Himalayan black bear (*Selenarctos thibetanus*), and leopard (*Panthera pardus*). From the park area, 270 species of birds, more than 15 species of butterflies, 192 species of flowering plants, and various medicinal plants have been recorded. Important attractions of this park include various religious sites such as Triveni, Sahasralinga, the Ganesh temple, and Khaptad Lake-including the *ashram* of the famous holy man, the Khaptad Baba. The park was established in 1984 on Khaptad Baba's initiative.

Grasslands: Status and Use

There are about 22 patches of grassland on the plateau within the Khaptad National Park. These grasslands cover more than 25% of the total area. In these

grasslands, the Park allows grazing for four months from March/April- July/August. The number of livestock grazing inside the park ranges from 3,200 to 3,700 (Table 6).

Table 6. The trend of cattle population in KNP pastures in the last five years

Fiscal Year (B.S.)		Livestock Number
2048/49	1990/91	3,250
2049/50	1991/92	3,650
2050/51	1992/93	3,700
2051/52	1993/94	3,200
2052/53	1994/95	3,450

After the establishment of the park, local people were encouraged to use the resources through the provision of park permits for harvesting *nigalo* (*Drepanostachyum* sp.) and thatch grass and extracting wood, firewood, and fodder. The number of permits given for the harvesting of these products is increasing every year.

Research Activities

So far no research on grassland management has been carried out in KNP. A demonstration plot to study the grazing impact inside and outside of the enclosure is planned to be conducted in the year for which the proposal is under preparation.

Grassland Management Issues

The following are some of the issues of rangeland resource management seen by the park management and the local people.

1. The livestock population is increasing annually as a result of the growing human population in the local (proposed Buffer Zone) community.
2. During the summer and rainy seasons, there is no alternative pastureland outside the park for grazing livestock.
3. The quality of pastureland is being degraded. (Pers. and observation)
4. The population density (biomass) of flowering plants in the grassland is decreasing (Pers. and observation)
5. Because of the degraded grasslands, gully formation and soil erosion are increasing.
6. The wolf population is gradually decreasing in the park, the reason is unknown.

Research Gaps/Needs

- Up-to-date information on the number of livestock grazing in the Khaptad National Park area is needed.
- The effect of controlled burning on grasslands has not yet been studied.
- The impact of grazing on the species composition and productivity of the grassland should be studied.
- Research on the impact of livestock grazing on the wild animals is lacking.

Management recommendations

1. Grazing should be prohibited at religious sites.
2. The time allocated for grazing (4 months) should be reviewed if any adverse impact of grazing is found by the research.
3. If controlled burning in this area is proven beneficial by the research, it should be applied on a rotational basis.
4. Grazing of horses and donkeys should be banned if any adverse impact is seen from the research.
5. Awareness programmes on grassland management and sustainable utilisation of resources need to be conducted to create awareness among grazers and local communities. Such programmes can include mass meetings, extension programmes, establishment of demonstration plots, and similar.
6. Alternative plans should be prepared for self-reliance to encourage local communities to plant fodder and grass species on their private land and marginal community land.
7. Local people should be encouraged to reduce the number of livestock by phasing out unproductive cattle.