

Poachers Set Kumaon Foothills on Fire to Hunt Musk Deer

Arpita Chakrabarty

For the past few days, the foothills of Panchachauli in the Kumaon Himalayas have been enveloped in black smoke. Forest officials say that this is the handiwork of poachers who have on past several occasions burnt down parts of the foothills of the area to smoke out musk deer and hunt it. Alleging that because the area is inaccessible -- it takes two days of trek from Munsiyari to reach the foothills of Panchachauli -- it becomes increasingly difficult to track the poachers.

From Monday, clouds of smokes could be seen billowing from the foothills - just two days after it received snowfall.

Munsiyari sub-divisional magistrate Kaustav Mishra told TOI that poachers use the burning of forests as a tactic to smoke out endangered musk deer and hunt them. "Whenever there was a report about a fire in Panchachauli meadows, our teams rushed to the spot. But it takes two days from Munsiyari to reach the spot. In November, we got a tip-off about the poachers, but they fled before our teams reached there. "

North Kumaun forest conservator Prem Kumar told TOI, "It is difficult to nab poachers who are active above 6,000 feet above the sea level. In a recent seminar attended by various forest officials from both India and Nepal, we decided to increase patrolling of forest teams in the region. Coordination between both the countries would also be increased to prevent poaching of musk deer. Besides, we also discussed to give incentives to villagers who would give information to the forest teams about poachers. Moreover, coordination between ITBP, SSB and forest teams is also necessary to prevent poaching."

The musk deer has been poached to the brink of extinction and is now listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

The musk deer is known to be a "shy" animal that emerges in the open only at dusk, to graze till dawn. The male species secretes a waxy substance in the abdomen, called musk, which the deer use to separate territories by smell and attract females.

This musk is used in perfumes and medicines and is sold for as much as US\$50,000 for a kilogram in the black market.

According to local residents, poachers set on fire the dry grass in lower part of the meadow and block off all escape routes for the animal. When the musk deer run for safety to higher reaches, the poachers trap and kill them.

According to them, the burning of forests to hunt musk deer has become an annual practice in the region. "Every year, during the chilly winter months, we see black smoke emanating from the foothills and covering the range of Panchachauli peaks. The forest office claims that they send teams to nab the poachers, but nothing happens. No poachers are held. A few years ago, police caught two poachers with body parts of musk deer. Even after that, nothing happened. The forest officials are silent now," said Pramod Rawat, a schoolteacher and a wildlife enthusiast.

In this winter alone (since November 2015), the meadows were spotted covered with black smoke more than half a dozen times. The forest department, on the contrary, claims that patrolling has been increased in the region to prevent poaching of animals, including the musk deer.

The Times of India 14-January-2016