

# Tibetan patrols risk their lives to save wildlife

Every time the patrol passes the Sonamdaje monument on Kunlun Mountain, members stop to pay their respects.

Sonamdaje, a former official in northwest China's Qinghai Province, was shot dead by poachers when patrolling the Hoh Xil region in 1994.

With an average altitude of over 4,600 meters, the region is an ideal habitat for endangered Tibetan antelopes and other wildlife such as Tibetan gazelles and wild yaks. It was added to the world heritage list last month.

The area was beset by poachers in the 1980s, who hunted Tibetan antelopes for their hide to be made into expensive shahtoosh shawls. Each shawl, priced up to US\$50,000, cost the lives of three to five antelopes.

The antelope population declined sharply from 200,000 to 20,000 due to illegal hunting.

Local people began riding yaks to patrol the mountain in 1992. When the Hoh Xil nature reserve was set up in 1996, a 16-person patrol was set up. Currently, over 70 people are employed to patrol the mountains.

The patrols are dangerous. In addition to steep mountainous roads and inhospitable wetland and marsh, members face the threats of guns and wild animals.

Zhao Xinlu has been patrolling the area for 20 years. He recalls catching an armed gang of poachers. "We were not as well-equipped as they were, and the seized rifles were all loaded," he said.

A dozen years ago, Zhao and his team seized over 500 antelope skins, but the smell of blood soon attracted a pack of wolves.

"They followed us to our vehicles and surrounded us at night," he said. "We fired shots into the air to scare them away."

The antelope population is now back over 60,000.

"Ten years ago, tourists asked me what the antelopes look like. Now they ask whether an antelope is male or female," said Lodro Cering, while feeding a baby antelope with a bottle of milk.

In the protection station where Lodro works, seven baby antelopes are being cared for.

Every June, when it is time for antelopes to give birth and migrate, patrollers save ill or orphaned animals. Since 2001, they have saved over 500.

Besides professional patrollers, thousands of local villagers are employed as part-time rangers to clean up garbage and protect local wildlife.

Herder Dawa, who is paid 1,800 yuan (US\$270) a month, said: "Although we were asked to keep less cattle to help the environment on the grassland, our income has increased thanks to the new job. It's great to see the grassland turning cleaner and the wildlife population growing."

However, Hoh Xil is now facing new challenges posed by climate change, said Budro, head of the Hoh Xil nature reserve administrative bureau. "The thawing icebergs have led to overflowing local lakes, forming new lakes totalling about 200 square kilometers," he said.

Inclusion in the world heritage list has raised the standards for Hoh Xil.

Lodro said: "In the future, we will not only patrol mountains, but also work as ecological observers to help heighten local people's environmental awareness."