Inayat Ali had already done a lot of explaining during his trip last winter to the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan, the 200-mile-long valley separating the Pamir Mountains to the north from the Hindu Kush to the south, reaching east like a slender arm toward the steppes of China. It took Ali many days to travel there from Kabul, driving perilous roads and fording rivers in temperatures so cold his car’s diesel fuel froze. Sometimes he had to stand back while his driver applied the local remedy of starting a fire under the engine to get it going again. Ali’s destination: the narrow strip of land that winds between two walls of craggy mountains, where 42 Wakhi villages cling to the stony valley floor. This is Afghanistan’s Shangri-La, far from the guns and bombs that plague much of the country—an area so starkly beautiful that people in the cities sigh with longing when they hear its name.

Far from the guns and bombs lies the Wakhan

By Kristin Ohlson
As part of the ancient Silk Road, the 4,000-mile trade route linking Europe to the Far East, the Wakhan historically attracted many travelers. It is even said that in the thirteenth century, one of the world’s most famous explorers, Marco Polo, walked along paths the Wakhi still tread today. Before the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979, tourism was Afghanistan’s number two source of income. Now, revitalizing the environment can attract many travelers. It is even said that in the thirteenth century, one of the world’s most famous explorers, Marco Polo, walked along paths the Wakhi still tread today. Before the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979, tourism was Afghanistan’s number two source of income. Now, revitalizing the environment can attract many travelers.

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“The Marco Polo sheep run around in wide areas at high altitudes, and it’s hard to get within a kilometer of them,” Dehgan observes. “One thought was to employ Wakhi horsemen to drive the sheep into nets—like a Wild West roundup, but at fourteen thousand feet.”

WCS eventually discarded the idea of roundups and satellite collars, realizing that it was much easier to study the sheep and other large mountain mammals by looking at their feces. Scats tell many stories about the animals’ diets and population structures. They show whether a population has been through a recent genetic bottleneck, when its numbers drop and cause a corresponding decrease in genetic diversity. Scats also yield estimates of population size and migratory patterns.

After WCS researchers determine the baseline population, they can develop solid protection plans. Of course, Marco Polo sheep don’t observe political boundaries. Earlier observations have shown that in the Wakhan, the sheep and other wildlife wander a single ecosystem known as the Pamir Knot, where four mountain ranges converge. The animals wander from Afghanistan into neighboring Pakistan, Tajikistan, and China. Any plan to protect them would require the cooperation of all four countries. George Schaller, WCS vice president for science and research, recognized this years ago. He studied Marco Polo sheep in Pakistan during the 1970s, in China during the 1980s, and in Afghanistan in 2004. In the 1980s, he proposed the creation of a Transboundary Park where all four countries would manage joint resources in cooperation with local communities. WCS is now taking steps to realize his idea with representatives from each country, focusing on an area in the Pamir that encompasses the royal hunting reserve of Afghanistan’s former king, Muhammad Zahir Shah. This initiative not only bodes well for the wildlife, but for the region’s people.

“The Transboundary Park gives these countries a way to talk to one another,” says Dehgan. “Science provides a common language to people of different religions and cultures. And when you get people together to talk about environmental management and science, you provide an avenue for them to talk about other things, too.

With the longest horns of any sheep—the world record is 6.2 feet— Marco Polo sheep (opposite) are prized by trophy hunters. These massive animals can weigh more than 300 pounds. Because the sheep range between four countries—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and China—protecting them requires international cooperation and the involvement of local herdsmen.
Some 12,000 Wakhi live in Afghanistan, on the knife-edge of poverty. They are a community of herders, farmers, and traders who have lived in the area for centuries. The Wakhi are a unique and isolated group, and their way of life is threatened by modernization and the loss of natural resources. WCS is working with the Afghan government to set up protected areas in the Wakhan Corridor, which is a mountainous region that straddles the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The area is rich in biodiversity, with many rare and endangered species, but it is also a region of conflict and political instability.

The WCS team, led by Inayat Ali, has been working with the Afghan government and local communities to establish conservation areas. They have been training local people to become conservationists, and they have helped to create a network of conservation committees to manage the protected areas. The WCS team has also worked to develop ecotourism in the area, which is an important source of income for the local communities.

Ali and his team have been successful in reaching out to the local communities and building trust. They have held workshops and seminars to educate people about the importance of conservation and the benefits of ecotourism. They have also worked to improve the local infrastructure, such as roads and schools, to make the area more accessible and attractive to tourists.

Ali’s work has been widely praised, and he has received numerous awards for his efforts. He has been recognized as a hero in the conservation community, and his work has inspired others to take up the cause. The Wakhi people are grateful for his work, and they see him as a leader who is working for their benefit. Ali’s work has shown that conservation can be a powerful tool for development, and it can help to improve the lives of local communities.

Beyond reaching the guides and cooks everything from educating tourists about the wildlife to selecting camp sites to disposing of camp garbage, the team held conservation awareness meetings in the villages. They met with groups of schoolteachers to help them stimulate environmental awareness among the next generation of Wakhi. School attendance in the Wakhan Corridor is among the highest in Afghanistan, so the opportunity to reach young people is great.

The team showed the teachers how to enrich the national school curriculum with local issues. They suggested they bring herdsmen, cultivators, historians, and storytellers into the classroom so the children learn to value their own traditions and culture. They encouraged the teachers to give the children year-long projects that would show them how to evaluate the village’s—and their own family’s—use of natural resources. In one of the projects, the children will track the daily use of fuel wood, which the villagers hack from juniper and artemisia high on the mountains—sometimes a day’s trip away. If the villagers overuse this resource, the shrubs might not regenerate. Then the villagers will lose their source of heat, and the animals that feed on the leaves will lose a source of forage. From this project, students can learn that careful management of natural resources is critical to the survival of people and wildlife.

This is the heart of community conservation: showing people the linkage between environmental issues and their daily lives. “We want to take environmental education closer to the local society,” says Ali. “If you start discussing global warming or some of the big issues, people in small communities don’t feel the connection. We have to identify the things in their lives that they can relate to. For them, fuel wood is an everyday concern.”

The WCS team’s week in the Wakhan was not entirely solemn. Every night, the ecotourism trainees and other villagers settled the WCS trainers around an open space and took the stage and performed traditional songs and dances. On the last night they put on a skit. The hero was Ali—played by a local man—who came to teach two Wakhi villages about conservation. One village ignored Ali. But the wise village—which listened with an open mind—had an abundance of local wildlife and visitors eager to pay for the chance to see it. A fine denouement, indeed.