

# Of Tea & Tahr

by Ian Lockwood

Perched on a precipitous escarpment in the Palni Hills of southern India, I find myself dreaming again. Of a time when the hand of civilisation was less noticeable on these time-honoured Precambrian mountains. Pondering an age, not so long ago, when exotic eucalyptus trees didn't crowd out the high meadows of rolling grasslands. In my youth these streams were clear and not clogged with the now ubiquitous refuse of careless visitors. The mystery of their recent past consumes me. What had these hills looked like when a mysterious animal called the Nilgiri tahr thrived on the cliffs below me?

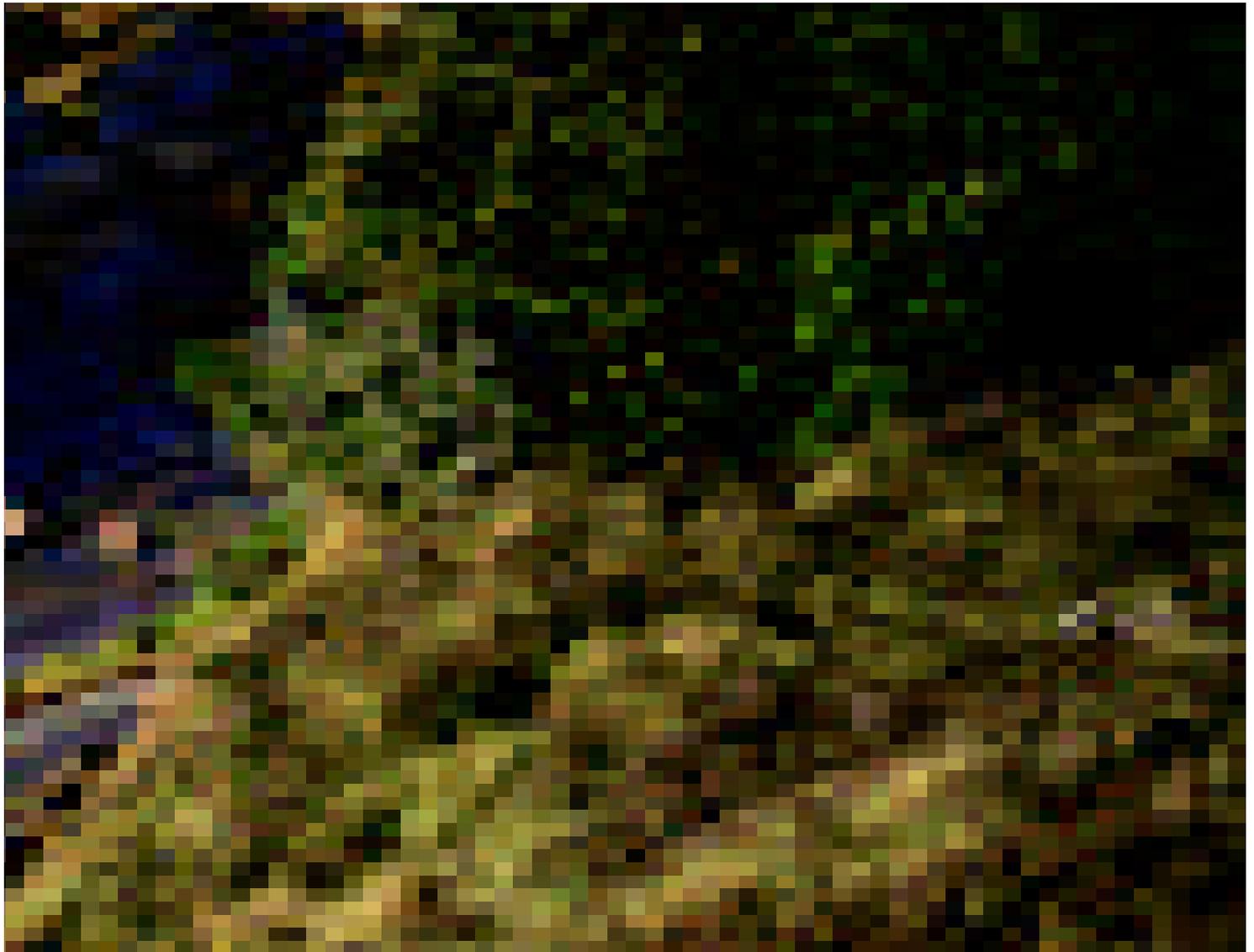
The Nilgiri tahr *Hermitragus hylocrius*, a mountain goat endemic to India's Western Ghats mountain chain, was an important part

of my upbringing at a boarding school in Kodaikanal. Yet the irony of it all was that neither I nor anyone else ever saw a live Nilgiri tahr in the Palni Hills during the 1980s when I was in school! Every weekend the more adventurous of us groggily awoke in the early hours of the morning and set out hiking into the hills. Aside from the intrinsic desire to get away from civilisation, we were also logging in miles to win a coveted 'Tahr Pin,' an annual hiking award given by our school. The tahr's radiant eyes, etched onto a small piece of silver, emanated as much mystery as the animal after which it was named.

The hills, despite widespread conversion of native grasslands and *shola* forests to commercial tree plantations, still offered good

wildlife viewing. We would frequently encounter herds of muscular gaur and paths were strewn with the droppings, marks and feathers of less obvious creatures. There were even occasional tiger sightings in the hills but, despite our best efforts, we never did see a tahr! Although the Palni Hills had been a prime habitat for Nilgiri tahr a hundred years ago, even the school's old timers could not recall having sighted the sure-footed ungulates.

Like other species that had once been abundant in India, Nilgiri tahr populations suffered dramatically in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Legal hunting and later poaching, combined with habitat loss in the Western Ghats, have all conspired to bless the tahr with the dubious distinction of an 'endangered species'.



*A picture of undisturbed wilderness: tahr cross single file across a steep rock face in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.*

The Western Ghats, home to Nilgiri tahr and numerous other endemic species, stretch from the Tapi River, north of Mumbai, down the Malabar Coast to the tip of the Indian peninsula at Cape Comorin. Nourished by the deluge of two monsoons they are endowed with an abundance of life unparalleled in peninsular India. For most of human history physical inaccessibility and disease kept the Western Ghats free of man's disturbance. In the last century things have changed for the worse with roads and new technology making the hills accessible. Though there have been some notable conservation successes in the Western Ghats (the Silent Valley anti-dam campaign, for example), primeval habitat continues to be lost to encroachment,

development schemes and mining. The situation is so critical that the IUCN recently declared the Western Ghats one of 18 global 'biodiversity hotspots'.

As students we were acutely aware of these changes and were encouraged by our environmental science teacher to pull out eucalyptus and wattle trees planted on virgin grasslands! Years later, as an adult living in the US, I was still preoccupied with thoughts of tahr and their mountain habitat. Rumours of Nilgiri tahr populations outside the Palni Hills had filtered through to me, reawakening a dormant quest lingering in the back of my mind. When circumstances permitted, I returned to south India in search of this enigmatic creature and untrampled India.

Modern writers of Indian wildlife frequently quote early accounts of British hunters and surveyors, but finding the original manuscripts is next to impossible. After several months of inquiry, I was directed to Chennai's historical Coromandel Library. Beneath stained glass windows in a neglected Indosancretic structure, a heavy layer of dust covers an amazing record of colonial India. This beautiful building has received scant attention and an offensive pink structure, serving as the main library, has been erected in front of the original Coromandel Library. Nevertheless, after several hours of careful searching I located the natural history and 'sport' sections. Amongst a pile of moth-eaten books,



With habitat protection Nilgiri tahr populations near the town of Munnar in Kerala have recovered.

I discovered several point sources on 19<sup>th</sup> century sport and exploration in India.

By all accounts, there were many, many more Nilgiri tahr roaming the Western Ghats a century ago. Douglas Hamilton, one of the first British surveyors in this area, wrote in the 1850s that “the High Ranges abound in ibex (as Nilgiri tahr were mistakenly called for many years); every rocky crag and mountain has its herd, but they are exceedingly wild.” But by the latter parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nilgiri tahr numbers had dropped dramatically. In some ranges, notably the Brahmagiri Hills in the State of Karnataka, tahr populations were even hunted into oblivion. Further south tahr habitat was converted to tea or exotic tree plantations. Unregulated hunting and poaching severely reduced numbers in ranges such as the Palni Hills. By the 1960s, censuses indicated a raw figure of less than 1,500 Nilgiri tahr left in all of the Western Ghats!

While wandering through the mountains on an over-packed motorcycle, I was surprised to find the fate of the tahr held in delicate balance near the bustling town of Munnar in the state of Kerala. Due west of the Palni Hills, Munnar is in what is known as the High Range, an area that includes the highest mountains in India south of the Himalaya. Once a sleepy tea-planting town it is rapidly growing into a *pukka* hill-station, similar to Ooty and Kodaikanal. Surprisingly just 10 km. away, and within view of much of Munnar, more than half of the world’s tahr population (estimated at no more than 2,500) live in the small Eravikulam National Park!

It was pouring when I first pulled up to Eravikulam’s check post. I had just encountered a herd of elephants in the maze of tea gardens below the park entrance and I felt an electric sense of excitement in the place. Friendly forest guards offered me shelter while I waited out the storm. Looking through a park pamphlet I learned that Rajamalai, the site of Eravikulam’s so-called “tourist zone,” has one of the highest rainfall averages of all of peninsular India! When the monsoon hits



**The deep call of Nilgiri langurs echoes through the sholas – the stunted montane forest of the Western Ghats they share with the tahr.**

in early June there are weeks of continuous rain, making life and wildlife observation next to impossible. Thankfully the deluge waned in the afternoon and a forest guard named Matthew accompanied me up to where I could see the *varai aadu*, or cliff goats, as they are known in Tamil. He had tales to tell and described recent tiger encounters and *ganja* (marijuana) raids with lucid details, while answering my questions with a rhythmic wobble of his head. Meanwhile the sun poked out from behind the clouds, illuminating massive granite cliffs behind us and an undulating mix of tea and forest in the valley below.

As we approached a series of hair-pin bends in the road, the deep call of a Nilgiri langur echoed out from a nearby *shola*, the stunted montane forest endemic to the high Western Ghats. Half an hour later Matthew pointed to a shadow on a grassy cliff edge. At first I only saw brown, frost-dried grass. And then the shadow moved, revealing a female Nilgiri tahr and her new born kid! Her eyes, with a strange, near-horizontal iris, shone as beautifully as I had always imagined. Upon looking more carefully I noticed other similar shapes and realised that I was looking at a large herd of tahr, numbering over 20 animals!

I never could have imagined getting so close in the wild to a creature more myth than real to me. All the accounts of encounters that I had heard involved lucky sightings of tahr at no less than a kilometre away! And yet here, as I patiently watched, the herd was getting closer to the road and me! Eravikulam’s tourist zone, in fact, has zoo-like conditions brought on over the years by the maintenance of several salt licks at the side of the hair-pin bends. This practice was stopped recently, but several herds of tahr continue to leisurely graze in close proximity to visitors. This controversial practice, to which tahr had grown dangerously accustomed, was halted by a group of people intimately involved in both tea plantations and conservation.

Tea, that most environmentally incorrect of crops, is what the High Range lives on and, surprisingly, it is also why Nilgiri tahr have not gone extinct here! In fact, if the Palni Hills had had such foresighted individuals as Munnar’s, perhaps its populations of tahr wouldn’t be on the edge of extinction today. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a handful of Scotsmen leased land from the Maharaja of Travancore and introduced tea, among other crops, in the High Range. Enlisting the help of



**The shola was deep, dark and full of sounds of life. A Malabar giant squirrel scampered across the canopy as I trudged up a path well worn by migrating herds of elephants. The meandering song of a Malabar Whistling Thrush (better known as the Whistling Schoolboy *Myiophonus horsfieldii*) came floating through the dense undergrowth.**

Mudhuvan tribals and Tamil labour, they cleared vast swathes of tropical forest in the lower valleys around what is now Eravikulam National Park. Tea soon proved to be a profitable crop and the pioneers (as they are still fondly referred to by modern planters) developed much of the land into estates.

Amongst these valleys several elevated tablelands rise to 2,300 m. and higher. By good fortune these plateaus are unsuitable for tea and places like Eravikulam were left untouched. It is important to note that these plateaus could easily have been turned into exotic fuelwood plantations, as later happened in places like the Nilgiri Hills. However, the High Range 'pioneers,' with their taste for 'sport,' decided to keep these areas pristine for what became very carefully managed hunting.

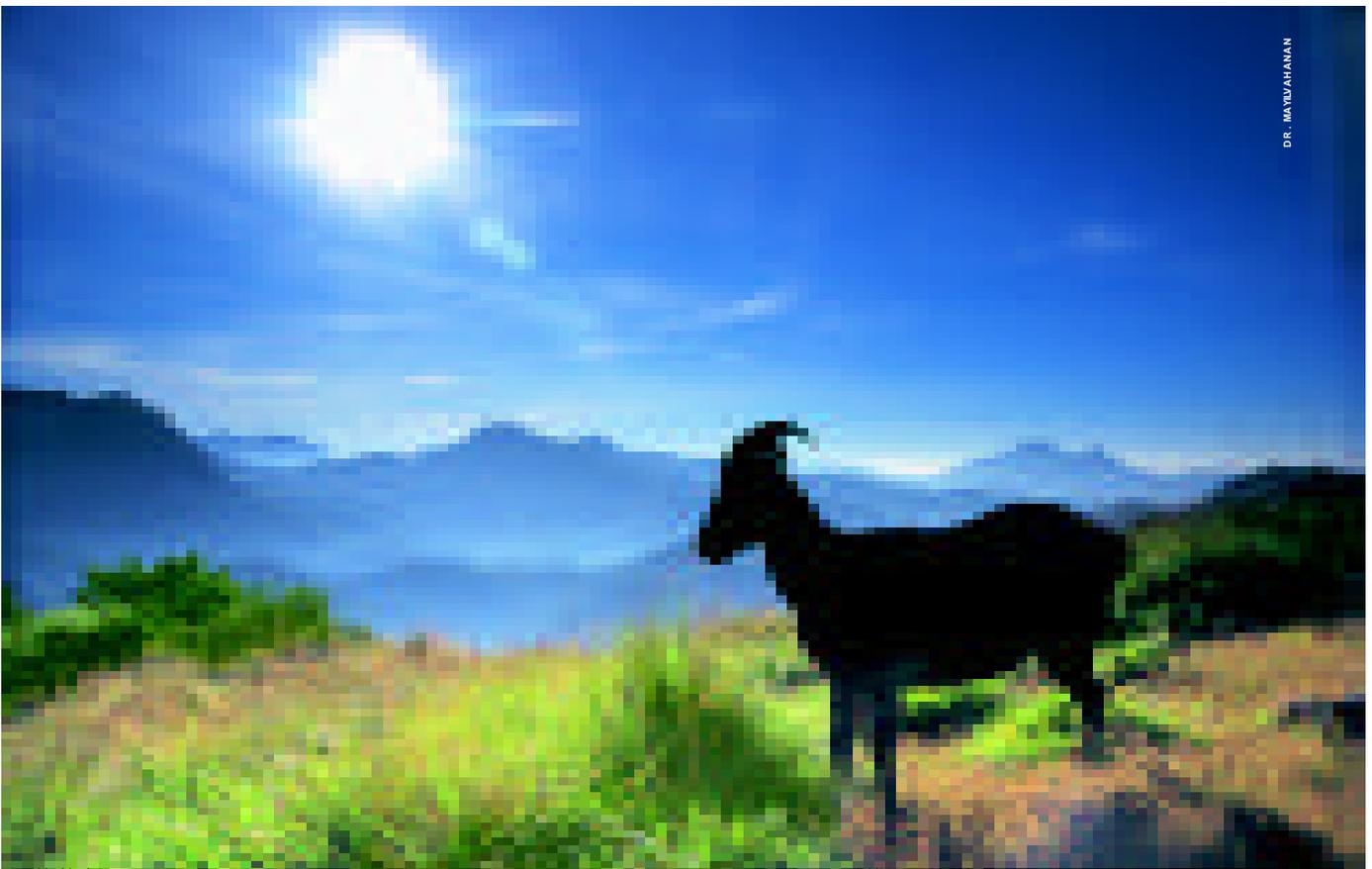
When speaking of tahr and tea, there are few people who are more knowledgeable than K.N. Changappa. An amiable tea planter with roots in the martial, planting district of Coorg, he is also one of the High Range's most respected conservationists. Changu, as he is known to friends, has planted for more than 30 years in the High Range. Starting in the 1960s, a time when most managers were still British, Changu has seen many changes in the hills.

We met in the High Range Club, watering hole and social nucleus for the many tea estates in the High Range. I couldn't help but feel history swirling around the teak-panelled corridors of the High Range Club. Waiters whisked around in spotless Raj-era uniforms, while planters' wives sat talking over a bridge table. Above the doorway to the bar hung an antique sign unambiguously stating

"Gentlemen Only." Hunting trophies, including a handsome male tahr 'saddleback,' adorned the walls with old planters' hats and other fading signs of the past. With female assistant managers now pioneering in the High Range, the sign appears to be largely ignored by the Indian planters who have long since replaced their British predecessors. However, the early planters' inimitable dress habits, annual social traditions and love of golf have been maintained with startling conviction. More important has been their sustained conservation efforts in the nearby Eravikulam National Park.

Seated in the club's airy reception my host detailed the history of tea in the High Range. "The park is perhaps the only one of national stature in the world where private estate managers are involved in its administration

*The participation of private citizens working with wildlife officials, so rare in India, is one of the secrets of the High Range's success and is perhaps the best security for the future.*



through the High Range Wildlife & Environment Association,” Changu noted. The Association, which is funded by local tea companies, was formed as a ‘game’ regulating group, but has since evolved into an active and effective partner of the Kerala State wildlife officials in the High Range.

I prodded Changu about his experiences in the High Range. As a young assistant manager he was becoming acquainted with Eravikulam when George Schaller conducted his landmark survey of tahr in the late 1960s. A decade later, he and his wife Ganga visited American researcher Cliff Rice while he was doing his more comprehensive two year study of tahr behaviour and ecology. (*Sanctuary* Vol.V No.2) Eravikulam’s tahr, estimated by Schaller at 500 individuals during his survey, were still being shot in small numbers in what was then a private hunting and fishing reserve. However, by 1972 India had enacted its *Wildlife (Protection) Act*, banning all hunting. During the same year the Kerala government took over the management of Eravikulam and converted it into a wildlife sanctuary. After years of managed hunting, balanced by successful conservation, many planters predicted doom. Thankfully no disaster took place and, in a rare exception, the High Range tea planters have worked alongside forest guards to preserve Eravikulam’s pristine habitat and threatened wildlife.

Looking up at the Anai-Mudi peak from a hill near Munnar, it is difficult to ignore the importance of tea. This majestic peak, solid, granite and covered in a velvet layer of wild grasses, rises to 2,695 m. Standing taller than

#### Yet another threat

Though the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve is one of the world’s biodiversity hot-spots and home to several endemic species of plants and animals, it is threatened by the multi-dam Pandiyar Punnapuzha project. This project involves four major dams, two diversion weirs, a 36.3 km. long subterranean tunnel, penstock laying, two major power houses as well as numerous roads and housing quarters. Aside from submerging large swathes of forest, the tunnels and other construction will disrupt wildlife corridors in one of India’s most crucial wildlife areas, at the junction of the Eastern and Western Ghats. It is feared that the entire water balance in the Chaliyar river basin will be disturbed and could even dry up as a result of the project. The forest areas threatened by submergence lie in the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, Gudalur division and the Nilgiri North division. In addition, a proposed 27.2 km. diversion tunnel connecting the two stages of the project lie underneath pristine reserved forest areas.

Official projections suggest that 320-350 ha. would be submerged by the reservoir. Of this, 160 - 175 ha. fall within Mudumalai’s Avarahalla Reserve forest, where another 16 ha. would be required for the construction of roads, dams and power houses.

Karnataka’s Bandipur National Park will also be affected as the Segur power house falls within a stone’s throw of the park. The 13 km. long Punnapuzha reservoir, with an average width of 0.8 km. will cut across the migratory path of the Asian elephant between the Mukurthy National Park and the Nilambur forest division on the southern edge of Mudumalai. As a result elephants could be confined to non-viable patches, increasing man-animal conflicts.

all mountains in peninsular India, its cliffs are home to many of Eravikulam’s Nilgiri tahr. Like the rest of the park, its accessible points are surrounded by sprawling tea estates. Tea, for all its criticisms as a labour abusing, pesticide and fertiliser dependent crop, provides a very effective buffer to human interference in the interior of the park. Unlike most other tea estates in India, corridors of native forest (in this case *shola*) still bisect tea estates, demarcating plots and providing a natural corridor for animal migration.

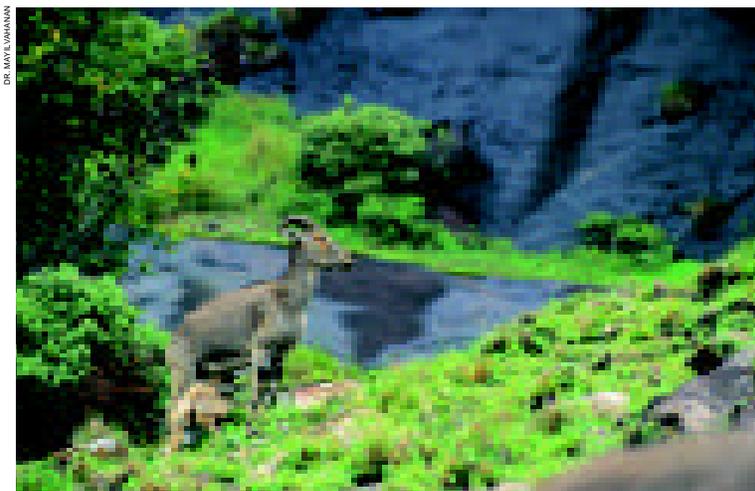
That these thin corridors are frequently used, was vividly illustrated to me. When visiting the Changappas at their bungalow, I was surprised not to be barked at by their large German shepherd. Upon inquiry, I was

informed that the unfortunate dog had been taken away by a leopard a week earlier! I didn’t need convincing of the forests’ merits, having encountered porcupine, *dhole* (Indian wild dog) and herds of wandering elephants near *shola* corridors on the road.

As the town becomes less of a trading post and more of a small city, such encounters with wildlife in the nearby hills become rarer. With the recent growth of India’s middle class, pressure on even the smallest hill-stations has exceeded their carrying capacities. Water shortages are acute, streams have become sewers, horns blare incessantly, concrete high-rise buildings have replaced bungalows, and forests have disappeared. Cynics ask why people bother coming to a place that has become no better than the crowded, polluted cities on the plains. In Munnar, the problem is compounded by the negative impact on wildlife - especially the tahr.

The Rajamalai tourist zone is not a pleasant place to be on a holiday, let alone any day during the winter dry spell. Buses, cars and the omnipresent auto rickshaws crowd the narrow road. Most tourists do not visit Rajamalai explicitly to see tahr. It is merely one of several frequent stops in a hectic itinerary. “So much money just for seeing a goat?” a confused visitor from Mumbai asked me. In spite of the signs and pamphlets providing information to tourists, National Park rules continue to be violated. On this particular visit I observed several tourists attempting to pet or feed tahr. Shortly after I stumbled across rubbish and broken liquor bottles on the nearby grassy slopes.

Tahr habitats must be defended from timber and animal poachers and also from illegal marijuana plantations.



DR. MAYEL VARGHESE



*Water shortages are the rule in all hill stations in India and the tahr's habitats should therefore be doubly valued for their contribution to the water security of the Nilgiris.*

The tahr at Rajamalai are apparently unperturbed by the close proximity of human beings. Their herds, which frequently swell to extended groups of 100 or more animals, gather around defunct salt licks at the roadside. Much too close, I was convinced, after seeing a young saddleback chewing on a plastic bag taken from a trash can. The growing problem of unregulated tourism has caused much discussion between wildlife officials and people like Changappa. In 1995, entrance rates were increased dramatically from Rs. 2 to Rs. 10! Yet the number of tourists keep growing.

But there is some hope. Most of the land around Munnar is owned by estates, leaving less room for outward expansion of the town. More important is the role that local organisations and individuals play in determining the future of the High Range. This participation of private citizens working alongside wildlife officials, so rare in India, is one of the High Range's best securities for the future. The High Range Wildlife Association recently held a successful and well-attended seminar on the "Biodiversity of the High Range." Attracting state and central government wildlife officials, conservationists from New Delhi, along with planters and concerned individuals, the seminar drew attention to some of the new threats to the High Range and its favoured species, the Nilgiri

tahr. Participants discussed several innovative ideas, among them a plan to limit visitors and give them a simple wildlife primer.

Seeing Rajamalai's tahr certainly awed me but, in many ways, my childhood yearning for a mysterious creature had not been fulfilled. Several months later I set out hiking across the Palni Hills, following in the footsteps of Douglas Hamilton. Here in a western corner of the Palni Hills, near the border with Kerala and the High Range, remains a small remnant patch of the unique high altitude grasslands/*shola* ecosystem. Many other hill ranges in the Western Ghats used to support similar rolling grasslands with their beautiful clumps of *shola* tucked neatly into the folds of hills. Sadly, places like the Nilgiri and Palni Hills have all succumbed to human pressure and only small reminders of the old hills survive.

On the border between the ranges is a massive *shola*, infamous for the illegal marijuana grown in its cleared interiors. Poaching is a problem, but researchers studying elephant movements reported finding 'goat-like droppings' on the steep grassy slopes of the escarpment overlooking the *shola*. Judging by the sheer enormity and inaccessibility of the cliffs in this remote corner of the Palnis, conventional wisdom has always suggested a surviving population of tahr. But, as far as I knew, no one had reported a confirmed sighting.

The *shola* was deep, dark and full of sounds and signs of life. A Malabar giant squirrel scampered across the canopy as I trudged up a path well worn by migrating herds of elephants. The meandering songs of a Malabar Whistling Thrush (better known as the Whistling Schoolboy *Myiophonus horsfieldii*) came floating through the dense undergrowth. Several hours later I emerged from the forest and onto a grassy escarpment. After two lonely days of camping on the cliffs I was getting anxious. The day before I had heard human voices in the *shola*, leaving me unnerved by the thought of encountering armed marijuana planters. But with a recent finding of tahr pellets, so easily mistaken for hare droppings, I was energised. The mist had come in and I carefully negotiated the edge of the escarpment. Wading through knee-high, dewy grass I stopped in my tracks when I heard several shrill whistles. Visibility was poor, so I waited transfixed by the strange call and ensuing lonely silence of the wind in the grass. The mist swirled around me, thickening and then thinning for a moment, revealing three dark shapes. Moments later the white blanket grew and I was left with only a faint sound of scurrying hooves. Cliff Rice had described such sounds as the alarm calls of Nilgiri tahr and I sat with a broad fulfilled smile on my face. 🐾