

# BEING A NATURALIST GUIDE IN BARDIYA, NEPAL: A PROFESSION IN THE IN-BETWEEN

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## Introduction

Because you know, I'm born here and I grew up here [...]. Usually we don't know how important the jungle and animals are. [...] [Being a guide] is a way to be close to people, and we can share some knowledge, too. They [the tourists] will learn some knowledge from us and we will learn some knowledge from other countries. [...] It's a good way to make friends, [...] which is another part of guiding [...]. Yeah, it's a kind of job, and I like to say what the animals in the jungle are and what kind of animals we see [...]. It's also because I want some money [...]. When I was in school, they said that we need to save the animals and to do conservation [...]. If we don't save them and some, you know, "nature things," maybe in the future [...] our children will not see them. They will see it only in books. You know, do you understand? [...] Of course I believe this.<sup>1</sup>

This is what Namal, a Dangaura Tharu<sup>2</sup> guide, explains when I asked him why he does this job and what he likes about it. These are the different elements that will lead this article. The interlocutors I've met are indeed people who were born and grew up around the Bardiya National Park in Nepal. For them, being a guide is both a way to share knowledge and to learn about the way of life of the *videšis* (foreigners). It is also apparently a more pragmatic way of earning money, while acting for a noble cause that is already discussed in school—namely, the conservation of species for future generations. This article attempts to understand how the relationship between tourist guides,

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Namal, August 5, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> The Tharu are "natives of the Tarai [subtropical zone along the border with India]. From east to west, one can distinguish the Kuchila Tharu, the Chitwanya Tharu, the Katharya Tharu, the Dangaura Tharu, the Rana Tharu" (Krauskopff 1989: 257).

locals, and animals in Bardiya National Park is organized today and what is at stake.

Socio-anthropological work on different types of tourism in Nepal does exist (Guneratne 2001, 2002; Baral, Baral and Morgan 2004; Liechty 2017), but it appears to be less extensive than on other South Asian countries (Grossman-Thompson and Linder 2015). Yet, tourism represents an opportunity to study an important point of contact between North and South, where the North precisely makes an attempt to understand the South. Tourism is an important element of globalization and also the place where a form of neo-colonization risks being maintained (Grossman-Thompson and Linder 2015). This article focuses more on the tourist guide profession (i.e., its relationship with the animals and local people) than on the tourist's point of view and/or the relationship between tourists and guides. However, this study also contributes to a better understanding of the fourth phase of Nepal's tourism industry that began around 1980, in which adventure and eco-tourism became integral to Nepal's tourism economy (Liechty 2017).

After an introductory methodological and historical section, we will review the training of naturalist guides in Bardiya and the issues facing such guides today. Following this, we will see how the profession of guide can be an effective (but also costly) adaptation at the level of interpersonal/intergenerational relations, and how guide work creates paradoxes among guides themselves. This article argues that the guiding profession—caught between the competing desires to earn a living, to protect animals, to respect parents and grandparents, and finally to be part of the increasingly globalized world—is both in full development and in great difficulty.

## **Method and Fieldwork**

This article is based on a socio-anthropological method: several months of immersion in the field participant-observing the different activities of the village, collecting life stories, and recording semi-directive interviews. The data was collected during a three-month field study conducted between June–September 2019 (during the monsoon season) in Shivapur, close to Thakurdwara village in south-western Nepal. The study was carried out with about 15 guide interlocutors from different castes and ethnic groups (e.g., Brahman, Chhetri, Dalit and Tharu). Their average age is around 30. Five of the interviews were conducted with women, including one with Bardiya's first female guide. The interviews were conducted in a semi-directed manner,

either in English or with the help of an English-to-Nepali translator, a friend and guide himself. The questions were often asked in an indirect way, allowing a discussion to be generated, thereby avoiding answers that were too obvious, pre-programmed, or based too much on social desirability (Fisher 1993). These one- to two-hour discussions were sometimes conducted in private (e.g., at their home, mine, or a resort), or else in public places (e.g., at the entrance of the Park, a coffee shop, etc.). Each interviewee is anonymized (unless explicitly requested otherwise) and has been informed of the recording of the data and its use in ethnographic research.

In addition to interviews,<sup>3</sup> a series of excursions into the Bardiya National Park (BNP) allowed for direct observations and the collection of audio-visual data (using a camera and/or a recorder) in a more informal way. This Park, one of twelve in the country, is located in the Tarai zone, which covers 34,019 sq.km. along the border with India (CBS 2017). This part of the “extreme west” of Nepal has long been seen as “poisoned” (Dollfus, Lecomte-Tilouine and Aubriot 2003: 165) or too dangerous to welcome life.<sup>4</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the Tarai was a preferred hunting ground for kings and their guests (Boulnois 1976). When from 1954 a malaria eradication campaign was launched with US assistance, the Tarai began to be accessible to groups other than the Tharu (who would be more immune).

Established between 1988 and 1989, the current BNP comprises 968 sq.km. of subtropical forest, 80 percent of which remains inaccessible to tourists in order to preserve biodiversity and animal safety (LeClerq *et al.* 2019). After having been particularly present during the civil war, poaching

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this article and to make it relevant, I also draw on data from other interviews conducted (e.g., with Baje, Harry, or a group of children) as well as a set of observations made on social networks with my interlocutors.

<sup>4</sup> “For those from the middle mountains, only their own environment represents a possible place to live, caught in a vice between two zones, the high mountains in the north and the plain in the south, described as ‘poisoned.’ In the plain, air, water and the sun’s rays are, in their eyes, a source of disease. The air is pestilential, loaded with the deadly breath of snakes which transmit malaria; water flows warm, a sign that it is not drinkable, since the temperature is the only criterion by which peasants from the hills judge that water is all right, by testing it with their hand before drinking. Finally, the sun is terribly scorching there. They tell of how people live at night, ploughing by the light of the moon like wicked spirits, how they have lost weight and the dangers they have escaped” (Lecomte-Tilouine 2008: 165).

has clearly decreased inside the Park since 2006. Patrols are frequent. The Park is now only accessible by paying 1,500 Nepali rupees for a permit, being accompanied by a guide, and registering at the Park's reception desk on arrival and departure (check-in/check-out). It is usually about NRs. 4,000 to 6,000 in total (more than 45 Euros). According to the weather, it is possible to do tourism on elephant back, on foot, by jeep, or by rafting. The number of guides listed for this Park is more than 250, of which 20–25 are considered permanent.<sup>5</sup> In high season (October–May), 150–200 people are regularly present in the Park at any given time. The annual number of tourists has increased from 6,000 in 2001 to 20,000 in 2018, following an increase in the number of tigers, which has more than doubled in less than ten years from around 40 to around 90. An important number of species can be found in the BNP, some of which are rare and threatened (Shrestha 2003): tigers (*Panthera tigris*), leopards (*Panthera pardus*), Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), Indian rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), deer (*Axis axis* chiefly), monkeys (*Macaca mulatta* and *Semnopithecus entellus*), various snakes (mainly Russell's viper, king cobra, and krait), crocodiles (*Gavialis gangeticus* or *Crocodylus palustris*), and around 520 species of birds.<sup>6</sup>

### **Becoming a Guide: An Inclusive, Increasingly Widespread Training**

The 2019 annual report of the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC, an independent research center that works to preserve the Park's wildlife and raise awareness of it) mentions,

212 youths from Chitwan, Bardia and Shuklaphanta were trained this year as nature guides. Over the past years, more than 2,000 youths have attended our trainings. Our aim is to develop trained human resources whose knowhow and skills can lead to quality service delivery for tourists and have a greater responsibility for nature. (NTNC 2019: 5)

<sup>5</sup> Registered guides are those who have an identity card given by the Park, with a number. They pay NRs. 2,000 every August to have unlimited access to the Park.

<sup>6</sup> By the end of 2021, the total number of bird species in Bardiya is estimated to be 520 by the Bardiya Nature Conservation Club (BNCC). The Bird Conservation of Nepal (BCN) report mentions 478 species in 2015. Personal communication with Jagat, August 8, 2021.

In August 2019, Jagat, a Brahman guide in his thirties, describes for the second time how this training course works, organized into several levels. The first level is “basic”: seven days followed, in most cases, by a month’s voluntary work in a tourist resort. This level culminates in an examination and then a license. After the “basic” level, it is then possible to do the “advanced” and then “senior” level trainings, each lasting seven to ten days, culminating in another examination and then a certificate. According to Jagat, there are a plethora of guides, but few of them practice and few of them are the “good guides.” In addition to the training, there is also physical fitness, special habits of the jungle, aptitudes in reading books, doing personal research, and ideally fluency in English or even French as well.

For these people, being a guide also means opening up to the world and meeting new people, as Namal said. Arjun Appadurai (2005) writes on this topic:

More people in many parts of the world can envisage a wider range of lives than ever before. One reason for this change is the media, which presents a rich and ever-changing stock of possible lives, some of which penetrate the lived imaginations of ordinary people more successfully than others. No less important are the contacts with, the news of, the rumors about those in everyone’s social neighborhood who have become the inhabitants of these distant worlds.<sup>7</sup> (Appadurai 2005: 97–98)

Media (e.g., social networking sites, TV, radio), meetings with foreigners, and also neighborhood discussions about tourists or locals who have already left all build bridges to other countries, feeding the imagination. And it works in both directions: some foreigners dream of coming to discover Nepal, while some locals dream of leaving Nepal for one reason or another (e.g., work, marriage, tourism). This is an aspect of what I mean by the term “globalization” throughout this article: a whole set of flows, both concrete and imaginary.<sup>8</sup>

If the official job of guiding is apparently forbidden to foreigners and inhabitants of Bardiya have priority, it is nevertheless allowed to come from

<sup>7</sup> All translations from French, unless noted otherwise, are done by myself.

<sup>8</sup> The flows discussed in the context of globalization naturally also include transnational environmental discourse and NGOs.

another part of Nepal. The training itself is in line with this openness. While Hinduism is undoubtedly influential in Bardiya, the training is accessible to all groups, notwithstanding the fact that castes are still associated with specific occupations in everyday life (Cornu 2015). However, being a guide without speaking English, without being able to buy adequate equipment (e.g., coat, water-resistant trousers, binoculars, telephone, etc.), without being able to afford an annual permit (NRs. 2,000), and/or without being able to advertise on social media, remains discouraging and disadvantageous to would-be guides.

Men are in the majority, but training is also open to women. On this subject, I had the opportunity to meet Chandra, who tells me that she was Bardiya's first female guide. She describes how difficult it was at the beginning. People around her told her that it was a dangerous and physically demanding activity—too much for a woman. Chandra's family and the men in her life gave her the impression that she was not in her place: "Men were always asking why I was doing this [...]. I can say that it's a very risky job. Wild is wild, you know."<sup>9</sup> Here Chandra speaks of the "wild," whereas women in Nepal tend to be associated with the domestic, the home, the non-modern, the immobile (Grossman-Thompson 2013). By associating herself with the "wild" of the Park, Chandra awakens the reactions of her family and the men around her. She builds herself as a "modern woman" (as she also adds later), earning her own salary and a form of freedom in consumption. It is interesting to see that, although the training is open to women, the reactions of the people around her in Bardiya remind us that a woman guide is still perceived as abnormal and exceptional.<sup>10</sup>

If guide training is intended to be accessible and relatively simple, regardless of gender/caste/ethnicity, it is also at the expense of the guides, who, being more and more numerous, may find it difficult to find their place. Consequently, a vying between "good guides" is taking place. Moreover, the practice of this profession remains very demanding physically and psychologically: many people find themselves in particularly dangerous situations, without any particular preparation.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication with Chandra, August 29, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Women guides seem to have been completely accepted for longer in Chitwan, another Tarai National Park. Personal communication with Michelle Szydlowski, July 15, 2021.

### **A Questionable Training and a High-Risk Activity**

We are in the middle of the monsoon period, characterized by heavy rain, crushing heat (40°C), insects, and high humidity. It is 7 o'clock in the morning and Jagat (Brahman guide), Tulsi (Dalit cook), Celian (German tourist), and myself (French researcher) are on our way to the Park. We walk about 15 kilometers, carrying two to three liters of water each. Tulsi plays the role of assistant, carrying a much heavier load than I do so that we all can eat at the lunch break. In more touristy periods, similar operations are repeated several times a week (see Image 1). Dressed in dark clothes, Jagat has only a simple stick that is used to ward off snakes by hitting the ground, to spread branches, and, in a worst-case scenario (which has already happened), to defend the group against a tiger or rhino. Sometimes, he also has a pair of binoculars, which he uses to see the animals in great detail. All day long he will invite us to pay attention to sounds, to footprints on the ground or on trees, to the movement of branches. He tells us all about the animals—their scientific names, their mode of reproduction, their migration routes, and what to do if we come face to face with them.



*Image 1: Excursion in Bardiya National Park (Photo by the author, 2019).*

Ashnik, a 39-year-old married guide and father of two, survived a tiger attack in February 2016. As I can see many scars on his legs, he comes to tell me his story: a female tiger attacked him and a Dutch tourist named Laurens, who was accompanying him. When the tiger appeared, Ashnik thought, “I have to fight. If we run, we will die.”<sup>11</sup> Laurens rushed and climbed up a tree, while Ashnik ran 100 meters with the female tiger on his heels. He then threw himself on her with a stick and pinned her to the ground. Ashnik then hid behind a large tree trunk, but the tiger bit and scratched him until he managed to climb up a tree. When he no longer saw Laurens, he called the Park, and several mahouts on two elephants came to their rescue. Ashnik waited for two hours at the top of the tree, being watched all the time by the tiger below him. The mahouts chased the mother tiger and her babies away. Then they found Laurens, and all went to the hospital. Ashnik remained there for over a month, and it took two months for his skin to cover the wounds. When I ask Ashnik what he thinks about what happened to him, he says, “It’s a powerful animal. It was a bad day. I’m still doing the same job [...]. I’m still going alone into the jungle [...]. Our life is that.”

In addition to all the theoretical knowledge, being a guide requires physical stamina and constant vigilance. Danger lurks, and sometimes theory is not enough. Perhaps being a “good guide” also means being able to bring out something “wild” about the self, to put fear at a distance, when necessary. It also means continuing to do this job, risking one’s life again, forgiving the animal, and invoking luck: being somehow resilient.

Rajendra, a 31-year-old guide, one evening when I talk to him about guide training, says with annoyance,

Everybody is a guide [...]. I did just seven days of training, and it was bullshit, you know. [...] You have to have practical knowledge. [...] Nature is changing. The forest could be absolutely different now. [...] You are responsible. You have to know the jungle and also have knowledge about yourself. Taking someone into the jungle is a hard job, in this darkness.<sup>12</sup>

The large number of guides generates a form of weariness and anger. As Jagat also tells me, the guide’s “level” is being judged. A real challenge of

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication with Ashnik, August 9, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication with Rajendra, August 16, 2019.



adaptation is taking place. Given the risks involved and the constant changes, it is fundamental to have “practical knowledge.”

Jagat, for his part, does not denigrate training. He learned the “scientific” names of the different animals and certain things that he was not necessarily able to observe directly in nature. Nevertheless, he insists upon the importance of self-training and the ease of being born here. Even as a child, he used to go into the jungle, crossing the river to collect fruit with the mahouts driving elephants.<sup>13</sup>

In the same vein, Ashnik says he has been taking tourists to the Park since the age of 15, long before he obtained his license. He tells me a few times, “I have loved nature since my childhood.”<sup>14</sup> He also deplors the fact that people who were not born in Bardiya can run the Park. For him these people don’t know because they were not born here, and, in the case of guides, that is paramount because the training brings little benefit. Here he expresses the idea of the importance of knowing, of being inhabited by something from birth, which goes beyond what is possible to learn with “training.” Would Ashnik have survived the tiger attack without having been born here, without having experienced this constant closeness to the animals? Would he have continued his work if he did not sincerely love “nature” and wildlife? Perhaps he would answer no to these questions.

Bishnu, a 25-year-old Brahman guide, shares Rajendra’s ideas about the responsibilities of a guide. He confides in me that going into the jungle sometimes causes him stress, especially when he accompanies a group of tourists who want to camp for the night inside the Park, as is sometimes suggested. He says, “I feel really responsible when I’m in the jungle during the night. I want them to be happy and safe.”<sup>15</sup> When I ask him if he remembers his first time in the jungle, he tells me about an experience with his father: “He let me get close to the forest [...]. I was so young. He said, ‘from here you can go.’ At that time I felt so much panic [...]. Slowly, I got the experience.” It may be the fact of having been confronted with wildlife which counts, more than the fact of having been born there. We see here that the elders have a particular importance in provoking this encounter—or, at least, in letting it happen—as in the case of Jagat or Ashnik.

<sup>13</sup> The issues involved in crossing a river on this fieldwork are the subject of another article (Vouiller 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication with Ashnik, August 9, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication with Bishnu, August 16, 2019.

What Chandra, Rajendra, Ashnik, Bishnu, and Jagat express here underlines the importance of constant adaptation to a dangerous and changing environment. Similarly, the imperative of taking the best possible care of tourists—who have neither the same knowledge, the same habits, nor the same sensory acuity, and on whom the guides depend financially—is central. Even if it means taking risks with one’s life, as in the case of Ashnik. For tourists and guides, this “co-presence” (Delaplace, Schut and Baron 2020) also means a vital co-dependence.

Training allows a certain amount of theoretical and, to a lesser extent, practical knowledge to be acquired. However, it is available to everyone and is also not enough. One must be born in Bardiya<sup>16</sup> or, in any case, have been in the forest from a very young age. One must perhaps love it and be constantly trained through lived experience. The importance of intergenerationality is already apparent in Bishnu’s statements. The parents of these guides also know (and probably frequent) the forest, but they have a different vision of how to coexist with it and its animals. Indeed, we shall see that beyond the theoretical and practical dimensions of the profession, the work is also trapped between two poles, generally called tradition and modernity. Thus the profession is fraught with interpersonal and perhaps intrapersonal tensions.

### **Intergenerational and Ideological Tensions**

Namal’s opening words in this article illustrate his desire to preserve wildlife, where he describes the multiple factors that shaped his view of animals and the Park. In particular, he notes the importance of education, of learning about nature in school and thereby being inculcated with a different sort of appreciation for it. Since childhood, guides have been warned of the issues in the environment they live in. But this discourse for future generations is in tension with that of previous generations. Some of the animals that tourists eagerly seek in the Park go to the villages, destroy crops and houses, and even kill villagers (see Image 2). This is known as the “human wildlife conflict” (HWC).

Baje, a 76-year-old Brahman peasant farmer, tells me that, before the creation of the current Park, it was possible to kill elephants. Whereas in 1967 elephants came in herds to the fields without being dangerous, in 1987

<sup>16</sup> We have seen that it is actually possible to come from elsewhere to do the training, but it is also possible to do it in a Park close to the Tarai (e.g., Shuklaphanta, Chitwan) and obtain a form of equivalence by practice, in order to work there.

solitary and “crazy” elephants (in the words of the interviewees) came to the village after being chased out of their group. This old man, who had two of his buffaloes and three of his cows killed by tigers, a calf killed by a crocodile in the Karnali river, his house destroyed three times, and who lost his nephew to an elephant six years ago, regrets the current situation.<sup>17</sup> By now, elephants and other so-called wild animals seem to have gotten used to the screams and are more numerous.



*Image 2: A kitchen destroyed by an elephant in the middle of the night (Photo by the author, 2019).*

Until 1969, the area that is now the Park was a hunting reserve for the royal family (Wegge and Studsrød 1995: 133). King Mahendra is said to have been the last one to play this “sport.”<sup>18</sup> It is only since 2006, at the end

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication with Baje, August 2, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> “Already in the 1920s the Ranas had started making money off of Nepal’s wildlife but by the 1930s the seeds of the idea that hunting itself could be a moneymaker for Nepali elites seem to have been planted. [...] Like his Rana

of the civil war, that anti-poaching controls—more and more frequent—have succeeded in drastically reducing the practice. The hunters became poachers; the animals reproduced and moved closer to the villages. On the one hand, there is a group of people who take advantage of these animals and declare that they want to protect them (e.g., mahouts, guides, soldiers and rangers, park staff, children). On the other hand, those who suffer from the damage animals cause to livestock, homes and crops (e.g., farmers, peasants) are less accommodating to the wildlife.

The generational aspect of animal treatment comes to the fore in September 2019, when I attend one of the “wildlife education classes” organized by two Chhetri female guides and an Australian bio-zoologist named Harry. This class is held several times a week in schools around the Park. The children (aged seven to 14) tell me together that their parents sometimes do not like to protect wild animals because they kill their farm animals or destroy their fields. These young people tell me that they try to teach their parents to respect animals and that little by little it works. They also say that they are very sad when their parents kill a snake and tell them that the children are too young to understand. Young people’s attraction to these animals (especially elephants and leopards) is strong. The children like their anthropomorphic aspects, but they also know that it is important to stay away from them and that the animals often fear humans as well. For Harry, the emphasis must be on this “new generation” of hopefuls, as the older generation does not speak English and does not understand the issues of species conservation.

The generation that grows up with the Park also grows up with a discourse of wildlife preservation. As a result, the upcoming generation organizes itself to take advantage of BNP, helped by new technologies and social media through which it can disseminate a set of attractive photographs, a fortiori for Westerners. Resorts, guest houses, and restaurants are flourishing. The guiding profession, so popular with young people, now clashes with the practices of older people who make their living from farming and suffer from attacks and destruction by the Park’s animals. But when a person who takes advantage of animals also finds himself the owner of fields, the conflicts are also more and more internal. This situation reveals certain paradoxes and tensions among the guides themselves.

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predecessors, Mahendra mounted massive cool season hunting parties in the Tarai” (Liechty 2017: 104–109).

## Paradoxes and Internal Tensions

When comparing villagers' reactions to tiger attacks in India and Nepal, Harry tells me, "Here people are a little more understanding because they make money with animals."<sup>19</sup> He repeats several times that, in his eyes, the activity of guides is aimed at making money, but that guiding is not a profession that works for the conservation of wildlife: going into the jungle is precisely the way to disturb it. This is evidenced by the months of March and April 2020, when he writes on social media about how, in this period affected by COVID-19, the animals are doing better on his cameras and emit fewer signs of stress. They are expanding their territories. It is precisely during this period, as Jagat writes to me in a message, that it is very difficult for guides to find something to live on. He makes the link with the strong earthquakes of 2015 in Nepal, which similarly led to an absence of tourists and unemployment for the guides.

For Namal, Ashnik, and others, the guide profession is a mixture of financial stakes and passion. It is sometimes a family's sole source of income. Thus, to a large extent, this financial aspect seems to justify the tolerance of certain professions towards wild animals and their actions (i.e., attacks, destruction). When I talk to Chandra about this contradiction and about Harry's project to create a sort of "virtual jungle,"<sup>20</sup> she seems irked:

The guides do not want to disturb animals [...]. The wild is a very important thing nowadays. In our Park, we can see the animals with fresh eyes, we have this good thing [...]. We are saving the animals for the eyes, not for the cameras. Otherwise, it's like a movie. Cameras are good for the poacher, to control them, but not to see the animals. It's a bad thing.<sup>21</sup>

Chandra brings up the case of poachers, who, for her, are the ones who really disturb wildlife, whereas the guides obviously pay close attention to preservation. Chandra clearly rejects the idea that humans should stop going into the jungle. She emphasizes the importance of "seeing" with

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with Harry, June 30, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> The project is to use Harry's and the Park's cameras to show wild animals or make documentaries, perhaps even in real time.

<sup>21</sup> Personal communication with Chandra, August 29, 2019.

“fresh eyes,” which takes precedence over animal films or documentaries. When she says that mediated experiences of the Park—like Harry’s virtual jungle—are a “bad thing,” one wonders for whom. We can also question the fact that Chandra takes it for granted that guides and tourists do not disturb the animals. For her, being well-meaning in going to the Park (i.e., not being a poacher) is enough to take care of these animals. It is even a kind of exchange: if humans protect them, it means that they can continue to come and see the animals in real life (see Image 3). For Chandra, humans are not directly bad for animals, and coming to the Park is perhaps what helps her to bear all the problems that animals cause.



*Image 3: Observation of a wild elephant, one evening near the Karnali River (Photo by the author, 2019).*

This creates a paradox: the guides I met want to preserve the wildlife while continuing to observe it and take tourists with them. The Park’s rules aim to prevent villagers from going into the jungle and to prevent wild animals from entering the village. At the same time, the tourism economy constantly organizes safaris to go and look for these animals on their territories. Finally, those who express in interviews the will and duty to

save wild animals are also those who can throw stones, shout and scare an elephant with fire when it approaches the village: everyone wants to protect their fields, their resources. One wonders where the Park's administrators stand, caught between tourism, the imperatives of animal protection, and the livelihoods and safety of villagers. One might also ask how the guides are connected to the Park's operations. In fact, the guides, because of their certifications, are a kind of concessionary of the Park. They are not employed by it, but they work hand in hand with its rules and earn their living thanks to it.

Chandra, much like Namal in the extract that opens this article, takes it for granted that the coming of tourists and the profession of tour guiding support ecological goals. She is, in fact, following in the footsteps of King Birendra, who in the 1970s sought to link tourism, ecological discourse, and sustainable development. However, doing so is not necessarily beneficial to the animals. It is mainly a way of maintaining tourism while receiving various types of aid:

By turning its already world-famous mountain and jungle landscapes into national parks and “wildlife conservation” areas, Nepal could rebrand its nascent tourism in those regions as “ecotourism.” These parks were officially designed to protect endangered landscapes and animals but they also offered tourists the chance to visit relatively pristine areas and imagine that they were contributing to their conservation (through park fees, etc.). (Liechty 2017: 302)

Becoming a professional guide appears as a form of adaptation between globalization and customary society, a way of straddling divergent approaches to wildlife. As we have seen, the Park can be very harmful to other villagers through the animals it protects, and at the same time it can create links with an exo-group, the *videšís*, the foreign “guests.” If we argue that those different positions are reconcilable, these guides can be seen as “mediators,” in-betweeners. Here we have friction between different ways of engaging with the local and the global, a conflict of values and interests. Anna Tsing (2005) especially notes this kind of tension when she talks about nature-loving students, village leaders, and environmental activists in Indonesia. By virtue of their profession, guides in Bardiya illuminate how the Park puts three elements in tension: 1) respect for elders and an

eagerness to protect their own homes and sometimes fields; 2) the desire and the economic incentives to go to the Park with tourists; and 3) the wish to reduce the stress of the animals, which could then reproduce even more. One can, indeed, wonder how welcoming tourists and protecting the animals are compatible, and how guides will manage for the future, particularly after the current pandemic.

## Conclusion

The guiding profession has opened up many avenues for reflection and seems to be, in itself, a form of adaptation to the creation of this Park and to globalization, the in-between of a “present population” (Terrier 2009). On the one hand, there is a generation that suffers from the animals, those who did not grow up with the Park but rather with a forest from which it was possible to take resources. The animals were defended against or even hunted. On the other hand, there are those who live off of these animals, those who have wanted to protect them (or at least to see them) since their early childhood. Guides are more likely to be in the second group, for financial reasons. They seek to open up to the rest of the world, to adapt to an exponential increase in tourists and animals, and to be included in an increasingly globalized world. Perhaps this is even a means to avoid a form of domination, a “domesticity of the natives” (Delaplace, Schut and Baron 2020: 2), on the part of guests, foreign or otherwise.<sup>22</sup> This also allows them to be less resentful towards the animals (to forgive?) when the latter kill or destroy them. This entails a certain ambivalence towards the animals, being able to show them to tourists with great joy and then chase them out of the fields at night with stones. We could actually consider three groups that are reminiscent of Anna Tsing’s work (2005), and which converge (and diverge) around the topic of wildlife: the village elders, those who make their living from the Park, and those who defend ecological imperatives. Animals can be seen as mediators between these groups, being the official object of conflict (Knight 2001). They could also be seen as something that brings these groups

<sup>22</sup> In its non-beneficial variant, the co-presence between locals and tourists “is played out directly and indirectly, through exchanges, glances, the staging of bodies, and is already inscribed in forms of domination (domesticity of natives)” (Delaplace, Schut and Baron 2020: 1–2).



together and allows them to work together.<sup>23</sup> This article shows in any case that the guides overlap with these different groups and feel concerned.

We can ask ourselves whether the tourists are victims of the hostility of the elders and/or the farmers. Are they considered responsible for the creation of the Park and thus ultimately for the increase in the number of animals and the destruction of crops? Will these inhabitants and travelers evolve in the future towards greater complementarity (Delaplace and Simon 2017)? Finally, even if the subject has already been addressed (Liechty 2010, 2017), it would be interesting to take a closer look at how locals view tourists or Westerners in general and to study the representations that tourists have of Nepal. Whether trekking in the mountains or walking in the jungle, tourism represents an interesting mediator between North and South, a point of contact that speaks volumes about globalization, one that can dangerously perpetuate colonial representations (Grossman-Thompson and Linder 2015). To understand this complexity, perhaps in a more innovative way, we might also look at the relationships forged directly between guides and tourists.

The competition to be one of the “good guides” is determined, beyond being born here and knowing the jungle and its animals, by a certain number of skills already mentioned: knowing other languages, understanding how to manage social media networks, being physically resistant, etc. A particularly important and less obvious ability is the corporeal capacity to read animal signs and to be aware of the environment through one’s senses. A real communication is surely established between the guides and the animals, where both locate each other and then choose to observe, avoid, or meet. We have here a particularly interesting field of study, which could concern multi-species ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) that draws together social and natural sciences, or even a more philosophical anthropology (Laplantine 2013; Kohn 2017).

To end this article, it should be mentioned that the guiding profession is suffering, like other sectors in Nepal, from the current pandemic. It is a situation that particularly reveals the paradox in which the misfortune of

<sup>23</sup> For example, with the help of NGOs and the management of the Park, some villagers have begun growing chamomile or mint to then make fairly lucrative essential oils, without attracting elephants or other mammals. In another example, guides can share their knowledge with villagers about how to defend oneself from tigers or how to scare an elephant away, as they do during some meetings organized by NTNC, the Park, or other institutions.

humans increases the well-being of animals, which the former claim they want to save. The Park is deserted by humans. The animals are gradually extending their territories and getting dangerously close to the villages. Those who used to dream of being tourists can now only consult photos on social media or view documentaries from a distance: Harry's "virtual jungle" may be taking shape by force. Will the *videósis* merely be able to come (back) one day without being "pointed out as being responsible for new outbreaks of contamination" (Marcotte *et al.* 2020: 3), stranger than ever? Will local tourism survive and suffice to sustain the tourism professions? It remains to be seen how the pandemic will impact these interpersonal, intergenerational, and inter-species relations in the long term, and how the guiding profession will reinvent itself if the situation continues. At the same time, we may also wonder what the consequences will be on humans and animals if a real post-pandemic tourism boom takes place. The inhabitants of Bardiya are suspicious of the neighboring Chitwan National Park, which is the second most popular tourist destination after Kathmandu, and which is described by some as a "tourist factory." For Bardiya, a post-pandemic influx of tourists would potentially multiply the number of training courses provided and make the coexistence of so many guides, and even resorts, explicitly conflictual.

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