

## **Political Bird: Elite Falconry, Power Politics and Conservation in Pakistan**

In August 2015, the Supreme Court of Pakistan banned the hunting of the Houbara bustard (BBC, Sept 2015), locally called Taloor, as the population of bird was dwindling mainly as a result of loss of habitat and hunting by dignitaries from Middle Eastern states. The court's decision created a commotion among government institutions and ministries in Pakistan, therefore, the government filed a petition, appealing the court to review the ban because it was damaging the relations with Gulf states (Reuters, Jan 2016). Later, the Supreme Court revoked its earlier decision on the grounds of an "apparent error on the face of record." (Dawn, Jan 2016). Bird enthusiasts and conservationists decried the new decision and criticized the government's logic that a ban may affect Pakistan relations with Arab countries (Dunya News, March 2016); however, conservation organizations, such as WWF-Pakistan, called for 'sustainable hunting' of the Taloor in a statement uploaded to the website.

Aided by falcons, Middle Eastern elites have been hunting Taloor from ancient times (Mian, 1986). With huge expenses and money required, falconry is considered 'sport of the kings' (Pace, 1984) and hunting is an esteemed and treasured tradition in the Middle East (Aljazeera, Jan 2021). Therefore, with the Taloor's purported aphrodisiac qualities (Jerusalem Post, 2014), the hunters with falcons pursue the birds into their overwintering grounds in Pakistan. Listed in the IUCN's Red List as a 'vulnerable' species, the Taloor migrates from central Asia to South Asia, including Pakistan. It is there, in my home country, that outside elites with power, prestige and trained falcons spend more than three months hunting and defying national and international regulations of the sovereign state of Pakistan.

This ethnographic study proposes to investigate power dynamics in nature conservation through a case study of Taloor. It examines how a migratory bird and elite power challenge wildlife laws, conservation policies and practices and redefine institutional politics for nature conservation. The production of knowledge about nature is not only about certain historical views of nature and its transformation, but it is tied to issues of control, influence, money and or political economy (Robbins, 2012). Such a power-discourse nexus also relates to the material and structural dimensions of the conservation politics and conflicts, as well as to their implicit symbolic and discursive aspects (Escobar 1996; Nygren 2004; Thing et. al 2017). This research intends to study how the cultural traditions of elite from one state pose threat to the wildlife and conflict with sovereignty and democratic norms of another state.

Last year in 2021, with support of American Ethnological Society (AES), I did preliminary study which focused on socio-ecological aspects, population trends, conservation and management issues about this migratory bird. Now, with funding from AIPS, I plan to conduct a study that help collect data about wildlife laws and regulations, and revised wildlife acts related to falconry and Taloor hunting in Pakistan. I will conduct research from 1 June to 15 August 2022 in Karachi, Pakistan, using semi-structured interviews and archival research doing content analysis focusing on wildlife laws. I will conduct 8 interviews of participants including legal experts, ornithologists, officials of provincial wildlife departments and relevant experts at conservation organizations, asking them about their stance on legal aspects of Taloor hunting and revisions in wildlife laws and rules. This will provide me initial results in order to develop my dissertation research on this topic, with a plan to start in January 2023. My long-term goal is to provide wildlife policy recommendations, strategic guidance, and develop an on-ground conservation and management plan about Taloor bird in Pakistan.

This ethnographic study about Taloor will provide insight about institutional politics and will help understand how national and international elite tend to challenge state's laws. The study will produce new insights on power dynamics that constitute politicized environment in species conservation and their habitats and population abundance. Lastly, the study will contribute towards raising awareness about threatened species, and will assist in informed decision making and conservation planning at local, regional and international level.

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