

**P**olice in Nepal seized a total of over 1.5 t of shahtoosh (wool derived from the Tibetan Antelope *Pantholops hodgsonii*) in January 2013 in just two seizures, one of which amounted to more than 1.1 t. This is probably the biggest ever such seizure made in Nepal, both in size and monetary value. Together, these amounts represent around 10 000 dead Tibetan Antelopes or Chiru.

The Chiru is fully protected under the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 of Nepal and under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 of India. The species is classified on the IUCN Red List as Endangered and is also listed in Appendix I of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), meaning that international trade is not permitted in Chiru or its products.



A lorry loaded with 1000 kg of shahtoosh (wool from the Tibetan Antelope), seized in January 2013. This consignment is probably the largest ever in Nepal, both in terms of size and monetary value.

## MASSIVE SEIZURE OF TIBETAN ANTELOPE WOOL IN NEPAL

Formerly found across the whole Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in China, the range and population of Chiru have decreased massively and the species is now absent from all or most of the eastern plateau. Although much reduced, hunting on a commercial scale in the late 1980s and 1990s was once the major threat to the Chiru that resulted in the severe decline in numbers. Current estimates put the global population in the region of 100 000 to 120 000 animals.

The 1.1 t seizure of shahtoosh, found stuffed into 46 sacks, was said by police to be en route from the Tibetan Autonomous Region through Nepal into India, where the specialized looms and shawl-making skills have traditionally been available in Srinagar in Kashmir. However, intelligence reports suggest that shahtoosh weaving may have shifted to the Punjab (S.K. Niraj, Head, TRAFFIC India, *in litt.*, 2013). The wool was confiscated from a house in northern Gorkha district, about 160 km west of Kathmandu. It was said to have been smuggled across the Ngula Dhojang pass into Nepal, then transported to Soti Khola after passing through several villages on the Manaslu circuit trekking route. Two suspects have been arrested and further investigations are under way to identify others involved in the smuggling ring. Anyone convicted of shahtoosh smuggling in Nepal could be fined up to NPR75 000 (USD860) and/or face up to 10 years' imprisonment.

These two shahtoosh seizures formed part of Operation Cobra, a month-long initiative that brought together international Customs officials and other law enforcement bodies from across range, transit and consumer countries in Asia, Africa and the USA, in an effort to track and dismantle wildlife criminal networks. The operation, which took place between 6 January and 5 February 2013, also yielded a large haul of other wildlife items in the countries taking part, including 42 t of Red Sanders *Pterocarpus santalinus*, 6.5 t ivory, 800 kg of pangolin scales, 22 rhinoceros horns, and led to hundreds of arrests.

TRAFFIC has previously highlighted the dangers posed by the shahtoosh trade to the survival of the Chiru

and has collaborated with the Wildlife Institute of India in producing a simple manual for quick identification of shahtoosh hair by enforcement officials.

Operation Cobra was proposed by China's National Inter-Agency CITES Enforcement Coordination Group and ASEAN-Wildlife Enforcement Network in 2012, and organized by China, South Africa and USA in co-operation with ASEAN-WEN, South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network (SAWEN) and Lusaka Agreement Task Force (LATF) with the assistance of the World Customs Organization (WCO), the CITES Secretariat and INTERPOL (see: [www.wcoomd.org/en/media/newsroom/2013/february/asia-and-africa-join-hands.aspx](http://www.wcoomd.org/en/media/newsroom/2013/february/asia-and-africa-join-hands.aspx) and [wwfnepal.org/?207229](http://wwfnepal.org/?207229)/Biggest-ever-seizure-of-Shahtoosh-in-Nepal).

*Richard Thomas, Communications Co-ordinator, TRAFFIC*



Shahtoosh is the fine underwool of the Tibetan Antelope or Chiru *Pantholops hodgsonii* that is highly prized for its use in the manufacture of luxury shawls. To obtain the wool, the animals are illegally killed and shaved; each Chiru yields approximately 150 g of wool. The total of 1.5 t of shahtoosh seized in Nepal during Operation Cobra represents around 10 000 dead Chiru.