

FIELD REPORT

China Exploration & Research Society

FR11.16 by Wong How Man (Dunhuang, Gansu – July 7, 2011)

CRISIS AVERSION AT ANTELOPE WATERSHED

20 years of involvement at the Arjin Mountain Nature Reserve

Though this is my eighth trip into the nature reserve and the fourth time to the calving ground, the logistics are no simple matter. Didn't we just abort our expedition last summer due to unrelenting weather? Entering a remote nature reserve larger in size than Taiwan with only two resident families and a handful of gold mines is no joking matter. We literally brought in our own gas station, in the form of a four-wheel-drive truck hauling eleven large drums of diesel, gasoline and other supplies. On top of that, my team had just survived the first phase of an expedition in search of the source of the Salween River, and barely recovered from that harrowing experience.

Our first encounter with the Arjin Mountain in 1991 was much simpler, just a chance happening when the expedition I led came across it. Never had I thought we would become a long term supporter in research and conservation in this distant land. But then much of what CERS did and committed to was not planned for. Things happen not because of a sudden surge in interest or impulsive choice, but as a matter of course once we discover or touch upon important natural or cultural heritage that require help and stewardship. Guided by simple intuition, we entered into twenty years of involvement at the reserve, in this case because of the unusually large herds of endangered wildlife of the Tibetan plateau.



Karl and Wellington on the watch



CCTV team interview CERS filmmaker Chris

Two members left our team because of the close call with death and serious illness during the first phase of the expedition. Two new members joined as my guests, Karl and Wellington, a bit innocent of what to expect. I explained the rather real danger always looming at high altitude. Mountain sickness drug Diamox, oxygen tanks, Air-concentrator, compression chamber, we had them all. So my caution was just that, a caution, regarding when to alert myself to apply one or all of the named devices. Worse come to worst, we are accustomed to evacuating people to lower elevation. We have done it several times over the years, most recently last year.

PART ONE June 29 evening

“How Man, I am afraid what we have been worrying about is now happening,” said Karl with a stern and serious face. Karl had just hung up on the satellite phone after calling home. Home is Germany where his 98-year-old father was. Karl, whom I have visited and stayed with many times, lives in Salzburg Austria. Karl is my very special guest - a royal guest, von Habsburg, known in certain circle as the Archduke of Austria. His father Otto was the last Crown Prince of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and for twenty years was an important member of the European parliament.

“The news is no good. My father is in a coma and the doctor expects the worst, within the next couple days, I am terribly sorry,” continued Karl. “No worries, give me a few moments and we would have our plan worked out,” I reassured Karl. Karl kept apologizing as it took us five days of driving, with several hiccups among the vehicles and supply chain, to get to the Antelope calving ground. We had just arrived a couple hours ago and

FIELD REPORT

China Exploration & Research Society

FR11.16/2

settled down to have dinner as the light outside was dimming. The sun sets after 830pm Beijing time at this far-flung western corner of China.

“We’ve been expecting this to happen anytime over the last two years since my father had an accidental fall. I was afraid all along that it would happen during this expedition,” Karl reiterated. “I fully understand, honestly I do,” I tried to put on a pacifying tone. “This is nothing disruptive, let me discuss with my team and get right back to you”, I reassured Karl once again.

We were at the farthest and highest corner, almost 5000 meters in elevation, at the border of Xinjiang with Qinghai and Tibet in western China and I had a situation at hand whereby I must get someone, a dear friend, evacuated as quickly as possible for a family emergency. The objective is quite simple. Karl is the oldest son and head of the House of Habsburg. His father is dying and he has to get home by the fastest and safest way possible. Both of us are avid reader on aviation history. In fact by coincidence both brought along the latest Air & Space magazine for leisure reading. What irony that in this particular moment, flight is closest to our mind, but furthest from our reality.



Karl bids us good-bye



Scene of Muztagh Ata

In quick time, two of my newest Land Rovers were dispatched, both with brand new winches. In the event one car got stuck or mired in mud, the other could quickly help. Berry volunteered to escort Karl all the way to Dunhuang where he would board a plane for the first of multiple legs to get home. Zhang Huibin, our only guide and long-time collaborator with CERS at the Arjin Mountain Nature Reserve, would lead the way. Will, our youngest and strongest individual was also sent along. He is also our expert on GPS so any possibilities of being lost can be quickly corrected with his real-time satellite tracking and guidance. Karl is also very capable on the use of GPS, being an ex-Air Force pilot. During our trip, he impressed me with his pocket GPS.

To make a long story short, through a quickly arranged multiple car relay with change of drivers, we got Karl back to Dunhuang within 28 hours, with day-and-night driving. He got home within 48 hours, in time to be by his father’s bed side. His father passed away peacefully on July 4. When I read the many obituaries on world media including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and BBC, etc, I felt relieved that the reports stated that “all his seven children were nearby”, and Karl was the one who made the defining statement about his father being “a towering person”, and his passing “a great loss to Europe”. One near-crisis averted, with us obviously setting a record time going from a secret wilderness enclave in Central Asia back to civilization. I vaguely remember a corollary in history that described a Mongol prince Batu Khan plundering Europe in the 13th Century. He withdrew his army from their winning position in Hungary and rushed home upon hearing news of the death of the Great Ogedei Khan, then ruler of China. I wondered how many months it took him to get home in the year 1241 A.D.

FIELD REPORT

China Exploration & Research Society

FR11.16/3

***PART TWO** June 30 to July 4 at calving ground and Antelope crisis*

While waiting for our only guide and two cars to return, which took two days, I instructed that no car (we had a total of five cars and one truck) was to leave camp. It was not so much for fear of being lost than the huge effort that might incur if one or more cars were mired in the mud, and all tracks somehow lead to mud-infested terrain. Anyone leaving camp now could only go on foot and in pairs. I made an exception for Chris who was filming wildlife, as it is best he searches ahead stealthily, alone. Nonetheless I cautioned him about not straying too far or for too long. I have had quite enough excitement on this trip and need no more spice to life.

We are here at the Tibetan Antelope calving ground to observe the birthing process of huge herds of antelope which migrate here yearly during this particular season. At its height, numbers exceed ten thousand females, with a high fraction of them pregnant and ready to give birth. Most non-pregnant ones are juveniles, perhaps learning the migration pattern and route, scientists surmise. It happens every year after mid June to early July. Lately it seems the calving season has a tendency of coming a bit late, perhaps due to climate change. Last year we failed on numerous attempts to gain the calving ground due to unusually heavy rainfall that turned the access "road" into mud streams.

Visits like this one have become more or less routine for CERS biologists and our collaborators at the Arjin Mountain ever since 1998 when we discovered and noted the first-authenticated calving ground of the Tibetan Antelope. The locations of such hidden sites had evaded scientists, explorers and fortune seekers for over a hundred years prior to our discovery. Why fortune seekers? The very fine fur of the antelope provides material for the most high-priced shawl in the world, called shahtoosh, or "king of wool". Early British explorers and trade pioneers from a couple hundred years ago already noted in their writings the exemplary quality of this wool and detailed their futile search for the source of such valuable fiber.

The fashion world in the latter part of the last century embraced, then rejected, this luxurious item following our disclosure on world media of the wholesale massacre that the poachers had brought to the calving ground, with images of mutilated pregnant female antelope and full-term fetuses and dead infants left on the open field to rot. That effort became a yearly vigil for us and our partners to protect the sacred Tibetan Antelope calving ground in subsequent years. With this type of targeted publicity, CERS helped to end a crisis for a valuable and endangered species. Today that illegal trade has largely died down and the antelope are returning to much healthier numbers.



Base Camp at calving ground



Morning after snow

Near our base camp at 4900 meters, we set up eleven tents for sleeping and several large tents for day use. The latter became a god-send to shelter us from both the heat and the cold. The weather beat down on us relentlessly, changing from scorching sun one minute to heavy wind and snow just minutes later. Our dress code, likewise, went through several rotations within the same morning or afternoon. Sun, rain, hail and snow have decided to play musical chair with us minions of the lowly world, with hell taking a beating from heaven. The pinnacle

FIELD REPORT

China Exploration & Research Society

FR11.16/4

peak of nearby Muztagh Ata looked down upon us sternly and with little mercy. The 6973- meter mountain defines the border of Xinjiang and the Changtang of Tibet.

Two mornings we woke up to an entire world of white in snow and frost, like Christmas came early in July. I kept joking with Will that I asked him to come from Wisconsin, but did not ask him to bring along a Wisconsin winter. I usually like to buy my down jackets on the short, just waist-length, so as not to impede my body movements. Here I wanted my down jacket lower down and then further down, as I found myself always pulling my multiple layers of down jacket and vest lower and lower, hoping it would insulate also my lower body.

We returned to the calving ground both to celebrate the success of a CERS conservation project as well as to put on film the spectacular scene of the place and moment. Chris, being a wildlife filmmaker, found the story and filming opportunity unmatched. CCTV came along to document our twenty years of involvement with the reserve. In an unusual sign of its importance, senior producer Kung Xiaoning, now in senior management within the station, came out of the comfort of her office, and took up the reigns in directing this series of film on CERS. She brought along two cameramen, again a very unusual feat for a CCTV documentary team.

PART THREE Calving and migration theory

Scientists have been baffled by the migration of the antelope. They (Dr. Bill Bleisch and Dr. Paul Buzzard of CERS included) had put forth different theories of why the pregnant female migrated such long distances, sometimes upward of 600 kilometers, to the remotest and highest calving ground where weather is brutal and pasture scant. Avoiding predators and replenishing magnesium-based diet have been hypothesized. I however have my own little theory.

Tibetan Antelope have been famously known to host tiny larvae of parasites on their next-to-skin fur, that very same tender fleece that provided the world with the most luxuriant shawl. Escaping to elevation over 5000 meters with winter-like extreme weather may provide sanctuary for the antelope, newborn babies included, saving them from the infestation of such irritating pests. After all, from long distance observations using high power spotting scope, I did not see the Antelope performing their usual ritual of scratching and rubbing their skin and body.

My other theory is even simpler, though maybe a bit philosophical rather than scientific. Life starts with birth. The calving ground, though used for short period, is the natural home of the Tibetan Antelope, mother and child. They migrate out and away from home so as to meet their mate, and to reproduce. They return each year in June to their home and spring of life, at the calving ground. After all, the female rendezvous only once a year with their male counterparts, in the depth of winter in December. Mating battles among the male ensue. The winner will not take just one, but all - usually a harem of up to twelve female - at his disposal and as trophies, so to speak.



Car mired in mud ocean



Bulldozer to our rescue

FIELD REPORT

China Exploration & Research Society

FR11.16/5

Antelopes, both Tibetan type and gazelles, both in Africa and Asia, have been known to occasionally abandon their newborn, for reason still unknown to scientists. We have seen that on our previous trips and had collected such orphans. Reserve staff had more such encounters. On this trip we picked up a newborn dead carcass and Zhang Huibin planned to make it into a specimen. They have also planned to begin, with support from CERS, an experiment in the domestication, and ultimate farming, of the Tibetan Antelope.

I am often baffled at the inadequacy of understanding of this superb and beautiful animal by the world at large. Having gotten world attention through its plight and even becoming one of the charmed mascots of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the Tibetan Antelope has yet remained to be exhibited in zoos in China, let alone the rest of the world. Long after the panda has become an international icon and ambassador, no zoos, in China or abroad, have successfully raised any Tibetan Antelope. Several attempts had been made, but all failed. Zhang Huibin is both adamant and confident that his experience of over two decades at the reserve with long years of observation and dealing with the Tibetan Antelope would provide him with insight to make this next effort a success. I tend to concur.

Our several excursions to the higher and deeper reaches of the calving ground were exhausting and futile. We were, time and again, defeated by soft ground which mired multiple vehicles in deep mud. Fortunately a bulldozer called upon from a nearby gold mining camp came to the rescue. For a moment, even the bulldozer was stuck in mud and took much effort in freeing itself, before attending to assist us. We resorted to making observations with binoculars and spotting scopes. On some occasions, some members of my party were able to get to within two or three hundred meters of the antelopes. Obviously the animals are no longer as nervous about human presence as in the past, thanks to better managed conservation measures.

I used a 600mm lens attached to a 2X extender, providing my camera with a 24-times magnifying power telephoto to capture the animals from faraway. Some of these images offered unmatched opportunity to count the ratio of adult and newborn. The initial observations are very promising, indicating extremely high frequency of birth rate, though survival rate would be a more complicated matter to survey. On two separate occasions and images, I deduced through simple count that among 48 females, there were 34 infants, and 41 to 29 respectively, quite a phenomenal and encouraging proportion.



Antelope with calves



Antelope with calves

On a particular cold morning, we dispatched one car to the nearby gold mine in order to borrow some charcoal for warming our camp. The entire world and terrain around us was enveloped in white, some area quite deep with the white fluffy stuff accumulated from the overnight non-stop snow fall. Two kilometers from our destination, the car got hopelessly stuck in the snow. While Losar our Tibetan driver was trying to jack up the car and fill in stones to unstuck the vehicle, Xiao Cao my assistant and Will began to hike through the snow to fetch help from the gold mine.

FIELD REPORT

China Exploration & Research Society

FR11.16/6

Momentarily just a hundred meters away from the car, I heard Cao yell out loudly that there was a newborn Antelope in the distance. I quickly rushed over and looked into the white horizon. There, some three to four hundred meters away from us, was a tiny black dot in the midst of an entire terrain of snow. It was barely noticeable except to trained eyes, but Cao had been with me to the calving ground in past years and was a veteran at sighting infant antelope.



Cao after black dot in snow



Our newborn Antelope

It was indeed a newborn antelope, enveloped in snow. But where was the mother? It was nowhere to be seen. Nothing was moving within sight of our vicinity as we combed our eyes left and right into the distant horizon. Cao raced over as the little animal tried to rise to its feet, but collapsed right after. Within a few minutes, it was against Cao's chest as he brought the baby calf to my arms. I quickly cradled it inside my three layers of down jackets while it gave out a small cry "Ney, ney". We have again saved a newborn orphan.

Meanwhile, Losar got his car unstuck after several attempts. We decided to forget about the charcoal and returned to camp as quickly as possible. As expected, the entire camp was suddenly filled with joy and "warmth" with a new member added to our team. "She", as Zhang Huibin identified the gender, became the most cared-for individual for the remaining time of the expedition. We all took turns nursing Ms Yang (yang meaning sheep) with the milk and bottle that Zhang Huibin had brought along for just such an eventuality. She was to be left to the care of the reserve station as we exited the nature reserve. It would be a most appropriate mascot for the Arjin Mountain Nature Reserve.

PART FOUR *Altitude sickness crisis*

By now we were into our fourth day and approaching a fifth night at base camp and the calving ground. All three members from the CCTV crew were not feeling well and began acting up with various signs of altitude sickness. Xiao Du had been hiding inside the tent most of two days, nursing his progressively more intense headache. Xiao Ding was seen less and less with his camera and tripod out. Producer Kung was coughing and vomited several times by the fourth day. In brief, I was seeing less and less of the three of them. All three were chain smokers, but now seen without a cigarette most of the day. The air-sep oxygen concentrator became their more constant companion. I had intended to stay as long as possible, and if condition allowed, swing our entire team toward the southernmost fringes of the nature reserve bordering Qinghai. But it was not to be.

By the evening of the fifth night, Kung, despite her usual strong will and manly demeanor, opted to use the oxygen tank we brought along. Her face was swelling quite noticeably. All three retired to their tent early. By night fall, I heard heavy coughing interspersed with the sound of vomit. It became more and more alarming. In the middle of the night at around 2:30am, I was awoken by very serious sound of utter and extreme cough, followed by very disturbing noise of acute vomiting. I put on all my warm clothes and crawled over to the tent of the CCTV crew. With an unnecessarily ceremonial cough, I ventured to ask how Kung was doing, and whether I needed to bring out our compression chamber, the save-all altitude device. "No I am fine," came a

FIELD REPORT

China Exploration & Research Society

FR11.16/7

somewhat calm and reassuring voice from Kung. “It was Ding who is not feeling well,” she continued with a somewhat dignified tone.

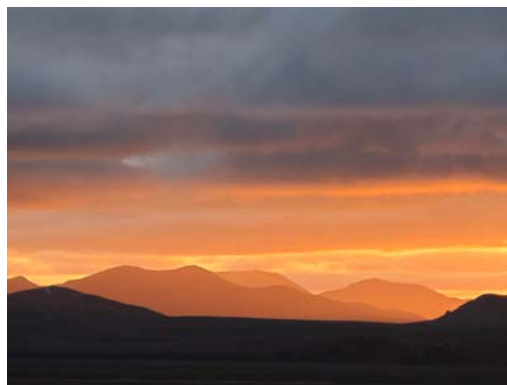
I knew it was time for us to make another evacuation, before the situation deteriorated any further. I certainly did not want to handle another crisis. By 3am, several of my drivers were up and started all our diesel Land Rovers to warm up the engine. We could not procure sub-zero diesel fuel during the summer and thus often had to resort to restarting and warming up our vehicles before the engine got too cold.

I gave the order that we would pull camp early next morning and head out of the reserve. It would be a long drive but we needed to get the three CCTV members down low. I cautioned everyone not to mention that along the way we needed to climb to above 5000 meters before finally descending. Let us give them the impression that once we leave camp, we would be constantly going down. Imagined or real, it should give them some peace of mind, until our latest crisis is averted. Several times, Kung shared with us that in her 28 years career as a producer, this was the only assignment that she wrote a will and left it with her husband before departing on the trip. Now I joked to her that her husband may have to be disappointed.

Epilogue

During our last night at the calving ground, we took out a very delicate wooden box Karl had left behind. It held the famous and delicious chocolate cake from Vienna, Sacher-Torte. It was cut up nicely and shared by all. By now we were sick and tired of gourmet packaged soup, or pre-cooked wonder meals from the UK or even the of freshly cooked food made by my staff. Even the aromatic coffee packages Wellington brought along started to lose their fizz. In the back of my car were many cans of Wang Louji, a popular Chinese herbal tea that Karl had grown addicted to within his short week with us. We bought two additional cases to satiate his thirst on this trip. Now I have no choice but to quench myself with this substance on the long journey home.

Over the phone to Hong Kong, I heard that my favorite fruit of the summer is on its last run in the market before fading out within a week. Not only that, three of the trees in my garden are all bearing this delicious fruit for the first time after over ten years. Shortening my expedition with such a romantic excuse certainly has a historical precedent. Like the famous Tang dynasty concubine Yang Guifei, I too cannot resist such attraction, or distraction, and can claim myself victim of seduction by my beloved Lychees. Unlike Yang, my smile however will never be recorded in history books and become the name of a species of the fruit.



Perfect sunset at calving ground

All Rights Reserved. Reprint with CERS permission.