Who let the dogs out?

Tourism and the garbage it brings has allowed feral dogs to multiply rapidly in Ladakh, where they now threaten wildlife

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Some 12,000 ft. up a mountain in Ladakh, its coat camouflaged almost perfectly against an edifice of burnished rocks, a lone snow leopard found itself up against a pack of unlikely contenders — feral dogs. This was not quite the picture conservationist Narendra Patil expected to capture when he set out with his camera one morning this May to track this particular snow leopard that had just been radio-collared near Leh’s Saboo village. “I was driven by curiosity to see the animal. But what I saw was very unexpected,” says Patil. “The dogs were many, nearly half a dozen, they were furiously barking at the cat, clearly combative.” The canines were vying for a cattle kill the leopard had made the previous day. Patil watched as the cat climbed higher up the mountain, the dogs close at heel. At one point, the snow leopard mock-charged the pack and they dispersed briefly; later it found a perch where it rested, chin on paws, warily watching the dogs. By evening, both feline and canines had retreated out of sight. “But I could still hear the dogs barking. The chase must have lasted several minutes after I left, and the leopard was likely deprived of its kill,” says Patil. For Md. Sajid Sultan, Regional Wildlife Warden, Ladakh, this wasn’t the first account he had heard of feral dogs chasing or attacking a wild animal in Ladakh — he has heard of the endangered black-necked crane, urial, blue sheep, lynx, even a brown bear, attacked or hunted down by dogs. Last year, photographer and wildlife researcher Saurabh Sawant
There have been accounts of the endangered black-necked crane, urial, blue sheep, lynx, even a brown bear attacked by dogs captured a shot of a pack of dogs chasing a kiang across a river in eastern Ladakh. “For snow leopards, the biggest threats are no longer hunting and retaliatory killing, it is the feral dog,” confi rms Sultan. He estimates that no less than 3,000 dogs exist in the Changthang Wildlife Sanctuary in Leh district. “You wouldn’t think that dogs would thrive and multiply as they are doing in this rough, rugged terrain where temperatures plummet to -20° Celsius.” But over the decade, unregulated tourism and massive waste generation — more than the region can cope with — has contributed to the explosion in feral dog population, he says. Triggering fear And it is not just wildlife that is impacted by dogs in the Himalayas. Researchers have found that in Spiti, free-ranging dogs were responsible for far more livestock kills than snow leopards or wolves. Another study found that across the country, packs of dogs have attacked or killed as many as 80 species of wildlife, half of these in protected areas. According to this paper, published in the journal

Animal Conservation, dogs also transmit diseases and trigger ‘fearmediated behavioural changes’ in wildlife. But things are looking up for the snow leopard in other ways in Ladakh. Local people are far more tolerant of the animal, even in cases of cattle kills. This is in part because the Jammu & Kashmir Wildlife Protection Department has roped them into wildlife tourism initiatives and helped create homestays that have become popular with tourists. “So perceptions of the snow leopard have been gradually changing: it is now seen less as a source of confl ict and more as a revenue earner through tourism,” says Sultan. The wildlife department meanwhile has radio-collared fi ve snow leopards in Ladakh in the last six months as part of Project Snow Leopard under the central environment ministry, to assess population, movement and behaviour. The Saboo leopard is also being tracked through its satellite collar and appears to be doing well, says Sultan. “It is an eight-year-old male and moving in a range of about 40 sq.km.” Controlling the feral dog population in a region like Ladakh should be fairly simple, says co-author of the Animal Conservation paper, Abi Tamim Vanak, a wildlife scientist with the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment. “Ladakh has an advantage in its seasonal bottlenecks. The winter is harsh, there is no tourism or garbage generation. So essentially, we need to curb access to garbage in summer.” Sterilisation, on the other hand, is unlikely to be successful in a terrain like Ladakh where dogs would be nearly impossible to capture. In places where critical wildlife exists, such as Ladakh, says Vanak, wildlife departments should be authorised to eliminate dogs from the habitats by suitable mean