



Houbara Bustard

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Context: Pakistan has given special permission to the Arab Royalties to hunt protected species Houbara Bustards.



Background: As per the report by the Pakistani news paper, at least seven new permits have been issued by the Pakistani government to Dubai Ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum and six other members of the ruling family to hunt the internationally protected bird houbara bustard during the upcoming hunting season.

The present Prime Minister of Pakistan, who had earlier opposed such permits for Arab royals, this time personally approved the special pass. The foreign ministry's deputy chief of protocol issued the documents after approval by the prime minister, the daily reported quoting sources. The permits were delivered to the UAE Embassy in Islamabad.

But this is not the first time royals from the Gulf and their wealthy friends have descended on the deserts of Pakistan to hunt the rare bird species. These secretive and controversial private hunting expeditions date back over four decades and have continued even after Pakistan's Supreme Court imposed a blanket ban on the killing of the houbara bustard in 2015. The order was later reversed.

Vulnerability of Houbara Bustard

Houbara bustard has been listed as Vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List since 2014. The bird is native to North Africa and southwestern Asia. In 2019, the International Fund for Houbara Conservation bred 484,351 Houbara and released more than 343,428 Houbara into the wild.

It is a large terrestrial bird found in parts of Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The North African houbara (*Chlamydotis undulata*) and the Asian houbara (*Chlamydotis macqueenii*) are separate species. The Asian houbara is related to the critically endangered great Indian bustard native to India.

After breeding in Central Asia during the spring, Asian houbara bustards migrate south to spend the winter in Pakistan, the Arabian peninsula and nearby Southwest Asia. Some Asian houbara bustards live and breed in the southern part of their ranges including parts of Iran, Pakistan and Turkmenistan.

According to the International Fund for Houbara Conservation (IFHC), roughly 42,000 Asian houbara bustards and over 22,000 of the North African houbara bustards remain today. The main reasons for the decline in the species' population are poaching, unregulated hunting and the degradation of its natural habitat, the IFHC website states.

Why The Arabs Are Interested In Hunting

According to a BBC from 2016, Arab princes would travel annually to Pakistan to hunt these endangered birds as a sport and because the meat is considered to be an aphrodisiac. In 2014, a controversy was stirred when a Saudi prince killed more than 2,000 birds in a 21-day hunting safari. Fahd bin Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, is said to have gunned down 1,977 birds on reserved and protected areas over 21 days in January 2014, while other members of his party killed another 123 birds, bringing the total to 2,100.

Similar expeditions took place across the border in Rajasthan, where Arab royalty ruthlessly hunted the great Indian bustard until the practice was banned in 1972 following widespread backlash.

In Pakistan, too, the Supreme Court imposed a ban on hunting the houbara bustard in 2015. Challenging the ban, the government argued that wealthy Arabs brought prosperity to underdeveloped areas surrounding the hunting fields and the ban would have a negative impact on Pakistan's relations with Middle East countries. The ban was lifted in 2016 and the government continued to issue special hunting permits to Arab royalty during the winter.

Pakistan: A Region of Hunting

Vast swathes of land in Pakistan are allocated in blocks to wealthy dignitaries from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, who arrive in the country to hunt the birds every year using hunting gear and falcons. They kill the bird for sport and also because its meat is supposed to have aphrodisiac qualities.

Conclusion

In 2014, a Saudi Arabian prince and his entourage allegedly shot down 2,100 houbara bustards during a three-week hunting safari, sparking nationwide outrage from conservationists. It was this backlash that culminated in the Supreme Court ban, but later was revoked.

Shooting is the most widespread practice for hunting in the Pakistan, allowed by law, However, nearby states are exceptions where complete hunting bans are in place.

When it comes to bird crime in particular, there are many reasons for the proliferation of this activity: the lack of expertise and commitment within the controlling authorities, the widespread corruption related to the management of hunting grounds and game animals, the lack of recognition of bird crime as a serious issue, but also the lack of knowledge and awareness on environmental law among public prosecutors and judges.

Sanctions should be imposed for wildlife offenses, particularly the sometimes derisory fines imposed, vary significantly from State to State. Environmental crime is regarded as less serious than traditional crime and judges have often insufficient sentencing experience in environmental crime cases.

Despite obligations under the international agreements at the national level, and despite the existence of national legislation, violations continue and enforcement of laws has become an increasingly difficult task due to lack of capacity and awareness of the potential impacts.

Connecting the Article

Question for Prelims : Consider the following statements regarding the houbara bustard :

1. It is listed in the IUCN list as vulnerable.
2. It is native to the north America.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct ?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Question for Mains : Illegal activities, such as poaching of wild animals, are common worldwide and threaten biological diversity. Over exploitation is one of the main drivers of bird extinctions globally, and is the second most significant threat (after habitat loss) to migratory birds. Discuss

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