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### Being a Naturalist Guide in Bardiya, Nepal: Evolution and Retrospective Analysis

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#### Abstract

This article, dealing with the profession of guiding in Bardiya National Park, is based on a previous paper (Vouiller, 2022) recently published in *Studies in Nepali History and Society (SINHAS, Kathmandu)*, highlighting data gathered in 2019 with that of 2021-2022. While I presented the guide profession as being a clever adaptation to modernity, as an ‘in-between’, I would like here to accentuate the role of social networks, the process of ‘heroisation’ that takes place, but also the importance of the senses and the reading of signs in the practice of the profession.

Bardiya National Park, established between 1988 and 1989, hosts very little anthropological work, it is more the object of research from developmental or natural sciences. The PhD I am currently pursuing in social and political sciences in Belgium (ULiège) and France (EHESS), is based on more than one year of fieldwork in Bardiya. It aims to understand how humans adapt psycho-corporeally and socially to the proximity of the Park’s animals. I am working with participant observation, semi-directive interviews with the professions most in contact with the animals of the Park, direct and indirect observations of encounters and finally linguistic analysis of the terms used in the discourses and on social media.

The guiding subject in Bardiya is complex and representative of very topical internal and political tensions. Based on part of my doctoral work, I hope to show some of the factors that I believe will determine the future of tourism and human-animal cohabitation in Bardiya.

**Keywords:** Guides, Bardiya National Park, animal, tourism, paradoxes

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## Introduction

There are a number of socio-anthropological studies on the different types of tourism in Nepal (Guneratne, 2001; Baral *et al.*, 2004; Liechty, 2017; Dérioz *et al.*, 2016), but fewer than in other South Asian countries (Grossman-Thompson, Linder, 2015). I assume that guiding embodied important political and social stakes and wish to contribute to a better understanding of the fourth phase of Nepal's tourism industry which began around 1980<sup>1</sup> (Liechty, 2017).

This article is a retrospective analysis of a paper (Vouiller, 2022b) recently published in the Studies in Nepali History and Society (SINHAS) journal from Kathmandu, concerning the profession of guiding in Bardiya National Park (BNP). While I was writing in 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, I posed a certain number of questions and ideas, which I will be able to explore in greater depth here by highlighting 2019 data with that of 2021-2022. I wondered how Covid-19 was changing the practices of the guides and the lives of the animals in the Park, so I posed the question about the reason for this (alleged) preservation: is it for their jobs, for the children as an heritage, for the planet as a resource, or for the animals themselves? I questioned the links between the guides and the Park as well as between the guides and the tourists. Finally, I opened the door to the anthropology of the body and the importance of the senses in this profession, with the desire to go more into the field, into the forest, with them.

Today, after a first part aiming to precise the foundations of my PhD research, my methodology and the characteristics of the BNP, I will come back to the 2019 data and the themes of the article, enriching it. If I have presented the guide profession as being in an "in-between", between a more traditional and a more modern society, a skillful adaptation, I would now like, in another part, to accentuate the role of social networks and the relationships built with tourists and the Park, as well as the importance of the discourse that promotes this position of guide, sometimes bordering on heroism. I will also discuss the importance of the senses and the reading of signs in the practice of this profession, notably via the concept of *Umwelt* (Uexküll, 1965) or via the work of Eduardo Kohn (2017) on sensory anthropology. Finally, I would like to conclude by mentioning the recent disturbances in Bardiya, which represents a new challenge, and the shift in attitudes that is taking place quietly.

### Bardiya National Park

#### *The Biggest Park of Terai*

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1 In which adventure and ecotourism became integral to Nepal's tourism economy.

The BNP started under the status of ‘Karnali Hunting Forest’ with the ‘National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act’ in 1973. In 1976, the area was renamed Royal Karnali Wildlife Reserve, covering 348 km<sup>2</sup>. In 1982 the area was renamed Royal Bardiya Wildlife Reserve, and two years later it more than doubled in size to 968 km<sup>2</sup>. Between 1988 and 1989 the Bardiya National Park (BNP) was established, while after 2010, as part of the tiger reserve project, it was made a 1518 km<sup>2</sup> complex by establishing the Banke Park to the east (Mishra, 2013, 206-207). Between 1996 and 1997, the BNP was surrounded by 327km<sup>2</sup> of buffer zone, then by 507km<sup>2</sup> in 2010 (addition at Surkhet, on the northern border).

The BNP is home to animals such as Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris*), leopards (*Panthera pardus*), Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), deer (*Axis axis*), monkeys (*Macaca mulatta* and *Semnopithecus entellus*), various snakes such as russell’s viper, king cobra and krait mainly, crocodiles (*Gavialis gangeticus* or *Crocodylus palustris*) as well as a large number of birds (more than 500 species in Bardiya). It can be visited by elephant riding, walking, rafting or by jeep. 80% of its surface remains inaccessible to tourists in order to preserve biodiversity and animal safety (LeClerq *et al.*, 2019).

### **Why BNP?**

Indeed, Bardiya National Park hosts very little anthropological work (Reinhard, 1976), (Krauskopff, 1987), (Normose, 2002), (Bhatt, 2006), it is more, via the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC), the object of research from the natural sciences (Jnawali, 1989), (Baral, Heinen, 2007), or developmental sciences (Bhattarai, Fischer, 2014), (Leystra, 2019), (Leclerq *et al.*, 2019). The BNP hosts the highest number of tigers in Nepal today<sup>2</sup> and the so-called ‘Human-Wildlife Conflict’ appeared to be out of control, in an emergency situation.

### **Introduction to the Different Fields**

The PhD I am currently pursuing in political and social sciences between France (EHESS) and Belgium (ULiège) is based on a first field study of three months in 2019 as part of a master’s degree in anthropology, and a first thesis fieldwork of six months from August 2021 to the end of January 2022. The most recent fieldwork took place from December 2022 to June 2023. I first lived in a tourist resort that welcomed few or no tourists at that time, giving English and French lessons to Nepali people in exchange for my accommodation. From the second fieldwork, I progressively joined a Desauri Tharu family, where I am able

2 See <https://kathmandupost.com/climate-environment/2022/07/30/tigers-return-in-nepal-their-number-now-reaches-355>

to participate even more in daily activities, while deepening my knowledge of the language.

In my research I have moved on from the study of a *banbhoj stha*<sup>3</sup>, a picnic area and the stretch of the Karnali River that runs alongside it, to the feelings and adaptations of humans who live in close proximity to the animals. Indeed, if the question of financial compensation and justice towards animals in South Asia seems to me to have been studied a little and recently (Smadja, 2018), this is much less the case for the more psycho-corporal and emotional data. With a double degree in anthropology and psychomotor therapy, I try to fill this gap, both in the study of this area and of this larger theme.

### Methodology

My research is carried out at four levels of methodology. Firstly, I practice participant observation, with assistance in daily tasks (cutting grass, fetching wood, taking out and feeding the animals, housekeeping, etc.), both during the day and night. Secondly, I carry out various direct observations in the forests and villages of human-animal encounters, but also indirectly (from night cameras, videos on social networks, etc.). Thirdly, I conduct semi-directive interviews with the professions<sup>4</sup> that are most likely to come into contact with wild animals, such as guides, mahuts, gamescouts, farmers and the military. Finally, I build a detailed linguistic analysis of the Nepali terms used to express feelings, by also looking for signs of these encounters in the speeches and in my observations on social media (Facebook and Youtube mainly). This presentation, focused on the guide profession, is based on a total of more than twenty five interviews taken between 2019 and 2022 (including 5 with tourists and 3 with resort managers)<sup>5</sup> and about ten excursions into the forest, in and around the BNP.

### Results and Discussion

#### The Article Previously Published

##### *Becoming a Guide: An Inclusive, Increasingly Widespread Training*

I explained in 2020 that the guide training in Bardiya was particularly open and increasingly provided. Open to men and women, all castes, free of charge, any Nepali person, etc. It is offered in several levels: basic, advanced and senior. Those who have been trained expressed to me in 2019 that being in contact with foreigners is a form of exchanging knowledge for them. One could imagine that it is also a way to fully integrate globalization and its tools (social networks, learning english, etc.).

3 See Vouiller (2021, 2022a).

4 This is outside the considerations of caste or ethnicity. If the question is asked and the answer taken into account, these classifications seem to me to make much less sense than those of occupations.

5 The people in this study are anonymized unless they have asked not to be.

I explained that according to my interviews, there would only be 20 to 25 ‘permanent’ guides. Susila, in August 2021, told me that in 2020 there were 305 guides registered with the Nature Guide Association (NAGA) in Bardiya. Amaya, a resort manager, takes me back after reading the article. Indeed, now “there are around 25 lodges and they all have an average of one guide. And on top of that there are freelance guides. So the number is around 40-50 at the moment. That is also what I heard from NTNC / BNP one year ago” (Amaya, 24/09/22). She testifies, like the guides she met, that there are more and more of them and that few are “good”. Gauthier, also a resort director, told me in August 2021 “with a bad guide you are dead (...). They only know two or three paths in the Park and that’s it” (Gauthier, 03/08/21). In 2019 I understood that a ‘good’ guide must have a specific set of skills and knowledge.

### ***A Questionable Training and a High-Risk Activity***

In the article, I explained that my interlocutors told me with disdain that “everybody is a guide.” That the training is too simple, insufficient and that the “good” guides must necessarily be trained in addition. Training, but also being prepared for all situations, because the jungle is a place known to be dangerous. I am told that it is a “dangerous and scary job” with “huge responsibilities.” They have to face potential animal attacks with only a stick, deal with the heat and humidity often, mosquitoes, carry a bag with several liters of water and lunch boxes for 15 or 20 kilometers.

The “good” guide finally appears to be the one who forcefully combines theory and practice. The one who has done the training while training himself on the side, who knows how to manage social networks, speak english, etc. The “good” guide is also someone who is strong, “born here,” close to the forest and who sincerely “loves” nature. Guides, whether considered good or bad, beyond what is expected of them, have a life full of tension.

### ***Intergenerational and Ideological Tensions***

Where tourist resorts are increasing in number and where new ones have been and are being built since the beginning of the pandemic, the “Human-Wildlife Conflict” is also increasing, along with the human population and the number of tigers. In 2022, the year of the tiger in the Chinese calendar, Nepal managed to more than double the number of tigers in the country in 12 years, after coming close to extinction in 1975 and 2010 (121 tigers). There are now 355 in Nepal and between 117 and 125 in Bardiya<sup>6</sup>, according to the last census in December 2021, which took place during my second field trip. Tigers, for the guides I met, in 2019 or 2022, are central and present in many forms (inscriptions on clothes, ‘tiger day,’

6 See <https://kathmandupost.com/climate-environment/2022/07/30/tigers-return-in-nepal-their-number-now-reaches-355>

tattoos, posters, statues, etc.), where three people are said to be killed by a tiger every week in Nepal<sup>7</sup>. Gaja, a Brahmin guide in his thirties, even tells me on July 31st, 2019: “If we had no tigers, what could you write ?”.

This devotion to tigers and other animals, even though they destroy houses, fields and kill people, the guides sometimes know, does not go down well. There is a generational gap, which I think is much more meaningful and current than the caste gap, where an ‘old’ generation, based on agriculture, local dialects and traditions, meets and even confronts a ‘new’ generation, mostly guides, focused on ‘conservation,’ social networking, etc. This dichotomy is not just a question of ages, it is also a question of professions. Thus one can easily find those who are “for” animals and those who are “against” them, at least not in exponential numbers as at present. In the first group we would have some childrens, who for the most part attend “wildlife education classes” given by guides and conversationalists for more than five years in Bardiya as well as the mahuts, the military, the park rangers, and the guides. On the other hand, we would have the farmers and peasants. It should be noted that the first group has a strong tendency to say of the second that it is ‘uneducated’ and cannot understand, which does not a priori improve the fluidity of exchanges. The difficulty is especially when this second group of workers, who therefore do not earn money but lose it because of the animals, includes the parents of the first group, with whom they sometimes even live. The duty to respect and protect one’s own family meets the duty to ‘protect’ the animals, to support their development and the Park.

### ***Paradoxes and Internal Tensions***

These paradoxes create significant external and internal tensions for the guides. For example, sometimes guides themselves have their fields or houses destroyed and it is not uncommon to see them throwing stones at an elephant at nightfall. At the same time imposing silence and distance on tourists when the same elephant is seen in the Park. It can be hypothesized for the guides themselves, the question of whether they ‘love’ animals for what they are (as a matter of principle), for what they represent (a source of money and employment), or for reputation (to be seen as good internationally) or for the good health of the planet and future generations, can only be answered in an unclear way, a combination of all of these. Guides sometimes talk about a “turning point”, an encounter with an animal or a human being, which has guided their vocation. This profession is then described as a choice to become a conservation actor.

Chandra, a Brahmin guide in her thirties, the first female guide in Bardiya, when I ask her in August 2019 if she thinks that going into the Park disturbs the animals more than

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7 *Ibid.*

it ‘protects’ them, and what she would think of setting up a kind of ‘virtual jungle’ with cameras, says that the guides do not want to disturb animals and that people have to see the animals with ‘fresh eyes’, that this is the reason why ‘we are saving’ them. I hear in this testimony that the fact of having the right to go and see the animals is almost a due, an exchange for being protected. I also found this idea with Bahadur in 2021, who tells me that he does not want to talk about ‘conflicts,’ out of a desire for balance in the ‘relationship.’ For him, the Park’s animals can come and graze in his field, as he earns money from them (Bahadur, 2021). Bahadur, however, also sees tourism as particularly stressful for the animals, and even as a cause for ‘man-killers’ among them.

Harry, a bio-zoologist who has worked for several decades in Nepal and specializes in Bardiya, explains to me that during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the entrance to the Park is forbidden to tourists <sup>8</sup>The cameras show far fewer signs of stress on the part of the tigers and leopards. It shows that the animals have expanded their territory, coming dangerously close to the houses. In this respect, the pandemic is really an exceptional and interesting situation, which finally says that the animals, at least the big cats, are better off without the guides and tourists, but that this is not necessarily the case for the villagers. The risk of attacks on humans would in fact increase in the case of their strong presence in the Park, but also in the case of their almost complete absence.

Like the guides, the resort and hotel managers have an ambivalent attitude towards the impact of their profession on practical conservation. Amaya, in September 2022, after reading the article published by SINHAS (Vouiller, 2022b), wrote to me: ‘‘And do we really conserve nature by bringing tourists into the jungle? I have that question too and I do not always find an answer. Of course seeing a wild animal with your own eyes makes you respect nature even more and so maybe you realize how important conservation is than when you only see it in the media. On the other hand, too many visitors can disturb the wildlife (...). I also know guides who pretend to protect wildlife and not disturb them but if a tourist wants a good picture they will do everything for that including disturbing the wildlife. So yes many paradoxes.’’ (Amaya 24/09/22). Indeed, several guides told me that they had taken considerable risks in the Park, either to satisfy a tourist or to challenge themselves for a photo or two. It is striking to realize that the vast majority of people attacked by animals are not in the Park, or in any case that no tourist has ever been injured and that so few guides are injured, even though dozens of people go there every day in search of animals<sup>9</sup>.

8 It seems that the Park, although closed to tourists, had a tolerance for guides to go together if they wanted to.

9 This can be explained in various ways, notably by the fact that the animals that attack humans are often precisely those that live on the outskirts and are no longer afraid of them, and also by the fact that the village farmers are less able to spot the signs that indicate the presence of animals or the

Some thoughts then emerge: are the guides, by thinking of preserving the animals and focusing on their own future, not also protecting humans? By preventing wildlife from feeling comfortable enough to spread further and to reproduce even more? Or is it the other way around, that going to the Park so much makes the animals no longer afraid of humans and therefore more likely to attack them? Does the habituation of animals to humans represent a danger? For whom? We can see that the potential impacts of tourism and guiding are ambivalent and significant on the wildlife.

One of the contributions to go further in this article is to show that the entanglements in Bardiya also play out far from the Park on social networks, and to detail how tourists, guides, and resorts consider each other, always related to animals. How do social networks and perceptions of animals coexist? Does this have an impact on their “protection”? What relationship is built between guides and tourists?

## Openings and Issues

### *Social Networks and Relationships*

“I write because I want to give messages to people, I write every time. Why do I post 1000 pictures of tigers? I want to post tigers, tigers. What I believe is that if you say bad things continuously like 1000 times it can become good you know (*laughing*), it’s not only through that, but I tell it, and normally during the day at least 5-10 messages are coming like ‘oh, I’m in the conservation’. ‘Oh, you are doing good, you are doing good’ ” (Bahadur, 2021). TikTok, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram... All these media are all the rage in Nepal and elsewhere. They are becoming the means to be even more connected to the rest of the world and valued in environmental actions and even in the conservation of traditional rites<sup>10</sup>. During the pandemic, before and after the Park closed, tourism was mainly “domestic”: the Park welcomed Nepali tourists (mainly from the East of the country). For the guides I met, it is quite different to be in contact with Nepali or Indian tourists than with English, French, Danish or American tourists<sup>11</sup>. The former are reputed to be less respectful, more demanding. Several times, the guides relate the fact that they are pushed by certain tourists and have to defend themselves by reminding them of the unpredictable aspect of the animals, of the “wild,” the difference with a Zoo.

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After the 17th of September 2021, when the park is reopening,<sup>12</sup> I interview foreign risk of attacks. See below.

10 I postulate that certain rites have become inexplicable by the new generation but are preserved, because of the opportunity to showcase oneself on the networks.

11 These nationalities are those most found in Bardiya according to my informants.

12 On September 13, 2021, the guides went into the park alone to prepare the trails. The resorts were obliged to send one or two people for this.

tourists of different nationalities who visit Bardiya. Some of them visit the park three or four times, while others, few, come by chance and want to discover the local way of life. What emerges from these testimonies is that the tourists trust the guides completely, put “their lives in their hands” and vary between folks wanting to see the animals to not wanting to see them at all.

During my field trip in 2019, the construction of Babai Resort began, a complex with several dozen rooms, a swimming pool and a private elephant. In 2021-2022, it appears that the only resort that really works in this time of domestic tourism is actually this one. Large drawings on the walls of elephants or rhinos offer guests a taste of luxury and the possibility of selfies, even without staying the night. “Rhino Lodge,” by the same owner, is in fact its counterpart and predecessor, much more attractive to Western guests as it is more integrated into the forest and has more traditional styled facilities. We can see that the tourism world is adapting and clearly taking into account the different expectations and representations of a “good jungle holiday.”

Guides often describe themselves in interviews as ‘mediators’, ‘messengers’ between tourists and nature. That they make them aware of its beauty and the importance of protecting it. Bahadur told me several times in December 2021 that it is the joy of the tourists that fills him with joy (*kuxi lagyo*) and reminds him why he does this job. They also sometimes describe themselves as ‘servants’ of the animals or even as ‘brothers,’ ‘sons,’ in the sense of kinship. These statuses are particularly presented on social networks, with a strong tendency to anthropomorphize animals, giving them a first name and giving them intentions and personality traits. Thus a tiger is “shy,” “gentle,” or “honest” (Bahadur, 01/12/21)<sup>13</sup>.

The guides consider that they are protectors for the wildlife, but above all protectors of the tourists, armed with a single stick and their know-how. This role sometimes elevates the guides to the status of superman, in my research I even start discussing “heroes.” Social networks, for which understanding English or at least owning a phone seems essential, are also the theater of this image and story setting.

### ***The Making of Heroes<sup>14</sup>***

“The term ‘hero’ is often linked to virtues of extraordinary prowess (...). There are militaristic aspects of heroism: the courage to fight in spite of the fears of loss or death, being

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13 Note that this anthropomorphisation seems also to be a technique used consciously or unconsciously by guides and conservationists to push people towards a form of empathy, to appease their anger and/or to justify attacks.

14 This subject has been explored in a recent communication (\*\*\*\*\* , 2023).

on the front line, taking a risk. There is also the theme of moral strength (...). Is heroism defined by an innate quality that translates to super-human strength or capacity for empathy or honor? Is it defined by extraordinary action amidst calamity (...)? Does a hero commit herself to selfless service? Do we only become heroes when we fulfill expectations of endurance, when we are “resilient enough to endure stuckness” (...)? Must we demonstrate heroism in order to express resilience, amidst a prevailing sense of despair?”<sup>15</sup>

It is striking to hear, of the thirty or so people I met who had experienced an attack by animals in the park or who lost someone from an attack, that some, mainly guides, do not hold any anger towards the animal, on the contrary, they have decided to do everything to protect them. Digging deeper, I realized that the individual sometimes moved from sadness and/or anger to happiness and peace in a few days or weeks. The event that could have destroyed a life is turned into a strength, the person sometimes achieves an existence described as ‘better’ and is seen by part of society as a true hero. The story of this encounter is told again and again over the years, and this, like an orally transmitted myth, is modified, making a hero more and more valuable.

According to these data, putting the experience into words and valorising it seems to lead the person attacked to better assimilate the encounter, and even to benefit from it, in terms of prestige and sometimes financially<sup>16</sup>. Remission is actually based on a set of factors (ritual, social, ecological, financial, physical, emotional) that I can’t explore here, which are decisive before, during and after the attack, but guides, in their role as mediators-protectors and with all their skills, are particularly fond of this kind of discourse and these areas of promotion.

Where few guides in Bardiya talk about being “unlucky” explaining their attack, some others, almost in reverse, describe their “connection” (Bahadur, 2021) to the animals to explain why they are not attacked (in contrast to the villagers, especially the farmers), they talk about a particular knowledge in opposition of an “ignorance.” They are thus valued differently and this opens up a large number of avenues that could not be explored in the first article.

### ***Reading of Signs and Importance of the Senses***

In 2019, as we walk through the park, Gaja explains to us that tigers mark their territory with their claws on trees, their urine or feces, marks on the ground and that this is

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01459740.2021.1897809>

<sup>16</sup> A good illustration of it is Bhadai Tharu, a famous conservationist, who likes to talk about the day a tiger took his left eye 18 years ago, on how he had to fight and how he puts his experience into songs and texts: the “whole world” comes to meet him, including Leonardo Di Caprio who even gave him his sunglasses.

the case for other territorial animals such as leopards and some birds. He then talks about the senses of the different animals: the rhinoceros has an excellent sense of smell, very good hearing but very poor eyesight, the elephant has poor vision but an outstanding sense of smell and hearing, the tiger has excellent eyesight even at night and a very good sense of smell like the leopard, etc. Gaja tells me, when I ask questions about his knowledge, that he knows these things from his training but that he learns new things from being around animals. This information is then passed on to tourists as a safety measure.

Finally, by leaving smells or visible traces, sometimes even by their physical appearance directly (e.g. the tiger's stripes which allow it to camouflage itself with the play of light), the animals communicate with each other and use both their senses and those of the animals they come across, to find or avoid each other. Humans also use these characteristics to protect themselves from animals in the forest or outdoors: "facing an elephant or a rhinoceros you have to run 'zigzag way' because they can't see well," says Gaja. 'Facing a tiger or a leopard you must face them and stay still because they will be attracted by movement', "elephants hate the smell of chili pepper or the noise of the bee hives", etc. Naturally, the co-presence of tourists (Nepalese or foreigners) as well as guides also speaks of the sensory, it "is played out directly and indirectly, through exchanges, glances, the staging of bodies" (Delaplace *et al.*, 2020, 1).

The guides also communicate with each other through signs. Gaja shows me the whole range of gestures used in the jungle to remain silent while signifying to another group the presence of animals: he mimes the elephant's trunk, its tusks or its big ears, the antlers of the deer, the cry of the tiger, the movement of the snake, the horn of the rhino, the leopard climbing a tree, etc. In the Park, I also notice that the different guides, when they meet in a plain or at the top of a watchtower, ask about the positions of the wild animals. Sometimes even by phone.

We can see that the people here read the signs given by the animals to locate them and thus flee or find them, and that they also communicate with each other in the Park, through organized gestures or by voice, about them. It is strenuous to say exactly how these animals communicate with each other, but it is conceivable that they too spot the signs left by humans and other animals (smells, screams, footprints, etc.), which enables them to locate them and thus possibly flee or find them (to attack them or reproduce). While some tracks are, apparently, dedicated to other animals and not to humans (in the case of the tiger or leopard, which mark their territory, for example, via claw tracks or prey), the guide takes advantage of this and makes these elements meaningful. One may wonder where this knowledge learnt during training comes from, whether it is the result of knowledge

passed on from generation to generation or whether it comes from recent discoveries in ethology. We have here reflections that come more from this discipline, and it turns out that thinking about the exercise of the profession of guide is a mixture of theories other than only anthropological, especially philosophical.

The anthropology of the sensible can be seen as “an anthropology that examines the contribution of the sensible to the establishment of ‘living together’ (*I translate*)” (Laurent, 2010, 45) or as the ethnographic experience of the field in itself. François Laplantine (2013, 37), philosopher and anthropologist, writes that “what we call in ethnography a field experience is an experience of sharing the sensibility. In this experience, we share perceptions, sounds, smells, tastes and tactile sensations with those who welcome us (*I translate*)”. I would add emotions, considering, following Konrad Lorenz (1963), one of the fathers of ethology, that these are very present in animals (as in the ethnographer) and that all of them are bearers of meaning. This terrain is undoubtedly in itself an intense experience of the sensible (animal cries, landscapes, strong heat, anxiety in the forest, intense joy at seeing the tiger, etc.), but it is above all this relationship and these encounters between humans and animals which are made possible by the sensitive and which determine the perceptions and representations of the one over the others.

Jacob Von Uexküll, considered to be another father of ethology, speaks of sensory worlds, from *Umwelt* (1965), considering that organisms perceive their environment through their senses, according to their biological specificities and that every ‘intentional animal’ is defined by the way it acts (Uexküll, 2010). By looking closely at the animal’s internal world to understand who it is, how and why it acts, we must not forget the environment in which it develops, the context. These guides identify both the sensory world of the animals encountered by observing their behavior and being informed of their biological specificities beforehand, but also the rest of the environment, the situational context in which the encounter takes place. This is done by also managing those with whom they are accompanied, their physical capacities, their position in space, their own understanding of the instructions and their attention to the signs.

The book “How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human” (2017) by the anthropologist Eduardo Kohn goes a step further. He takes up Charles Peirce’s theory of the semiosis of the sign (a tripartition between icon, index and symbol), in the study of the Runa Indians of the Ecuadorian Amazon. According to Eduardo Kohn, all forms of life (spirits, animals, plants) are capable of learning and transmitting information; they communicate with each other via icons and clues. Perhaps through all these signs emitted by the wild animals, they speak to the guides, who then manage to listen to them, to read them,

with all their attention and feelings. But do they respond? Surely, without wanting to, by the signs they themselves emit. One can imagine that these animals smell the smell of humans, notice the traces they have left and so choose to avoid them, attack them or ignore them.

We have seen here that through these direct and indirect encounters, senses are central (between humans and animals, between humans and between animals) and we have come back to the importance of emotions, after addressing them through the importance of social networks and heroism. Following these sensory paths or ignoring them, in a space where humans and animals are ever more numerous, sudden encounters (*jamkabhet*) are becoming increasingly common and fatal. If we cannot systematically talk about “conflicts,” ‘it is clear that the forces of the Park and the population are pushed to adapt further and that it reveals more and more inequalities and tensions.

### ***Recent Emergencies and Disturbances***

On June 6th, 2022 in Bardiya around 10 a.m, about 300 people took to the streets to demonstrate for more security after a woman got attacked by a leopard in her garden, near a community forest<sup>17</sup>. The armed forces (army and police), who were being pelted with stones, started shooting and an eighteen-year-old girl died (the niece of the woman attacked). In a BBC documentary released in July 2022, the victim’s brother says: “My sister did nothing wrong. Is demanding security wrong? Is demanding safety wrong?”<sup>18</sup>. After the event, some people contacted me to talk about it<sup>19</sup>. The government, to calm the crowd and the family, offers a sum of about 16,000 dollars (more or less twice as much as in the case of a classic tiger attack death) in compensation and a statue erected in the image of the young woman, so that she is recognised as a “martyr”<sup>20</sup>. An agreement was reportedly signed promising to put up more buildings, walls and fences to further separate humans and animals.

Where my friend and guide interlocutor, Bahadur, is known for multiplying posts and putting humans before animals, as he accompanied me to the Geruwa area to meet two families who had each lost both a brother and a husband from the same tiger, he told me on our way back that he was changing his mind. That in front of these people he thought that it could have been him, that his wife and daughter could have been in such a situation. Since

17 In the same area, “the tiger had attacked people earlier, so (...) the people went, in the hope of getting some medical or financial help” (Brother-in-law of the woman attacked, 07/04/23).

18 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pGfxcZZNfE>

19 On 7 April 2023, I met the father of the young woman who had been killed and then her aunt to conduct a more detailed interview.

20 “People of the government had agreed, or you can say gave me promises, that they will provide help by giving twenty lakh rupees compensation, a job to my son and by building the statue. None of these have been provided to us and in the case of the statue the meeting is still going on between the authorities to know where to put it” (Father’s victim, 07/04/23).

then, he tells me that he is being more careful, both in the park and in what he says. I can see here, with Bahadur and others, a kind of change in mentality. Harry, bio zoologist, for his side, is talking more and more about “psychological condition” of the people in Bardiya and about the fact that he will never be able to preserve the animals without humans, without taking them into account, without understanding and respecting them.

During my interviews in 2021 and 2022, I have been further in the relationships between the guides and the Park. It appears that in their opinion they are not listened to enough, that the problems with the locals should be taken care of more fully by the government, that the management of the animals and especially the man-eaters is bad, and that the money is often used for purposes that do not really serve these concerns. Where I wondered in 2019 whether the guides were working ‘for’ the Park and supporting it, here there is a moving away.

At a village meeting in August 2021, I heard reproaches leveled at those working for the Park, who should, for the good of the people and the animals, be in touch with the locals: “if the national parks and the jungles can’t be connected with us, then we can’t be connected with the jungle either” (village chief, 28/08/2021). The subject of “connection” is brought back here about the future of the coexistence between animals and humans and again, the guides could undoubtedly play a decisive mediating role.

### **Conclusion**

One thing is sure: the number of attacks is increasing, the people of Bardiya are increasing too and domestic tourism is growing at an incredible rate. The pandemic, for its part, has only stimulated domestic tourism and slowed down foreign tourists for a while, who are now back in full swing. The preservation issues seem particularly ambivalent and are the subject of several contradictory discourses. Bringing tourists into the park does not go hand in hand with protecting the animals, yet the income generated by tourism or the surveillance generated (with regard to poaching or potentially injured animals) can, and, as we have seen, this activity can perhaps even protect the villagers from animals that would like to extend their territory towards them. However, living with animals that are no longer afraid of humans or are ‘angry’ (to use the words of my interlocutors), does not seem to be a clever solution either.

The trick lies above all in the choice of the guide’s profession, which I can still describe today, and perhaps even more so, as an adaptation in the “in-between”, or even “between the four”: the park, the animals, the locals and the tourists. Although the guides I met would like to live solely on the side of the animals or the tourists, the fact that they are subject to the constraints of the Park in order to survive, that they are connected to their

parents or close farmers, that the tourists do not stay and that together they disturb the life of the animals, even without wanting to, prevents them from doing so. This profession, in its role as mediator-protector and sometimes hero, still appears to be a source of stress and external and internal conflict.

On a small or large scale and via photos, videos and/or writings, social networks offer the possibility of communicating, of being seen potentially by the whole world and in this way also of valorising the life of each person and especially their actions related to the animals and the Park. It is an extension of this desire to be a “messenger” between the animals and the rest of the world. Because of their emotional and physical involvement, the guides have a lot to say and share about the animals and their way of life. As we have seen, with their whole body they see, feel and interpret signals, and understand almost a language, unknown to all.

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