



Original Research Paper

WILDLIFE AND HUNTING PRACTICES IN PRINCELY SUKET STATE (HIMACHAL PRADESH): A HISTORICAL-ARCHIVAL ANALYSIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PRESENT-DAY CONSERVATION POLICY

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ABSTRACT

Princely Suket State, one of the smaller hill states of the Western Himalayas, maintained a distinct administrative and ecological relationship with its forests and fauna prior to its accession to the Indian Union in 1948 and subsequent merger with Mandi District, Himachal Pradesh. This paper undertakes a historical-archival analysis of wildlife and hunting (shikar) practices in Suket State, drawing primarily on the 1927 Gazetteer of the Suket State and its 1904 predecessor volume (published 1908) — the 1927 gazetteer itself incorporating material from the state's Forest Settlement and Assessment Reports — and supplemented by comparative regional gazetteers, including the 1904 (published 1908) and 1920 Gazetteers of the Mandi State, and post-independence wildlife surveys of the Western Himalayas. The study traces how royal hunting privileges, forest settlement regulations, and early game-protection customs functioned as informal precursors to modern wildlife management, and considers whether colonial-era forest reserves and administrative boundaries may offer a historical starting point for present-day protected-area planning in the Mandi region. It is proposed that the paper uses archival data on the hunting and the management of forests during the princely period as an under-utilized historical reference on assessing long-term trends in wildlife population and land-use continuity of the Western Himalaya. Findings are discussed in light of contemporary conservation challenges in Himachal Pradesh, including habitat fragmentation and human-wildlife conflict, with the aim of situating present-day policy within a longer historical trajectory rather than treating it as a purely post-independence phenomenon.

Keywords: *Suket State; princely-state gazetteers; shikar; wildlife history; Western Himalaya; conservation policy*

1. INTRODUCTION

The historiography of wildlife conservation in India has, in recent decades, increasingly turned to the colonial and princely-state period to understand the origins of present-day protected-area networks and forest governance structures. Much of this literature, however, concentrates on the larger and better-documented princely states of the Western Himalaya — Chamba, Kullu, and the erstwhile hill states around Shimla — leaving smaller states such as Suket comparatively underexamined.

Suket was one of the princely states of the Punjab Hills, tracing its founding to Bir-Sen (Vira Sen), who crossed the Satluj at Jiuri ferry and began the conquest of the tract at what Cunningham assigned as an early date, c. A.D. 765 — a figure closely corroborated by an independent reign-count preserved in the Vansavali (thirty-five reigns at an average of twenty-two years

each, reckoned back from the securely dated reign of Arjun Sen, c. 1540 CE, yielding c. A.D. 770) (Hutchison & Vogel, 1933, pp. 341, 348); Brentnall's independently compiled dynastic account likewise dates the founding to 765 (Brentnall, 2004, p. 94). The state's original capital was at Pangna (Hutchison & Vogel, 1933, p. 342). Hutchison and Vogel, writing shortly after the 1931 Census of India, record the state's area as 420 square miles (approximately 1,088 km²) and its population as 58,408 (1933, p. 340); Brentnall (2004, p. 94) records a later territorial extent of 1,015 km², by which point the administrative capital had shifted to Sundarnagar — a difference more likely attributable to territorial adjustment over the intervening decades than to any conflict between the two sources. Its last ruler, Raja Lakshman Sen, ceded control of the state following a popular agitation, the Suket Satyagraha, launched by the

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Praja Mandal leaders Dr Yashwant Singh Parmar and Pandit Padam Dev; Satyagrahis began marching into Suket territory from Tattapani on 18 February 1948 and, within six days and without a shot being fired, brought some three-quarters of the state under their control, prompting the Raja to seek Government of India assistance and the state's administration to be handed over to Kanhaya Lal, Deputy Commissioner of Jullundur (Thakur, 2024). Suket was thereafter merged, together with Mandi and the other former East Punjab Hill States, into the centrally administered unit of Himachal Pradesh, whose creation was formalised with effect from 15 April 1948 (Thakur, 2024; Government of India, 1950, Part V), and the former Suket territory was subsequently combined with the neighbouring state of Mandi to form the present-day Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh.

This administrative history is significant for wildlife research because it means that Suket's forest and hunting records were absorbed into, and in places superseded by, Mandi District's administrative record after 1948 — making the pre-merger gazetteer and settlement reports a discrete and finite archival window onto the state's environmental administration. The present paper asks two connected questions: first, what can be reconstructed from available archival sources about wildlife species, hunting practices, and forest administration in Suket State during the late colonial period; and second, what implications, if any, does this history hold for present-day conservation planning in the region.

The rationale for this inquiry is strengthened by the broader ecological record of the Western Himalaya. Understanding the pre-independence baseline of hunting activity and forest administration in a state such as Suket therefore has direct bearing on how such long-term declines are interpreted (Suman & Sinha, 2024). Twentieth-century wildlife surveys of Himachal Pradesh's temperate forest ecosystems have documented long-term population decline in several large-mammal species — the Himalayan brown bear, Himalayan tahr, Himalayan ibex, and musk deer among them — with hunting identified as a persistent contributing pressure alongside habitat loss, and the snow leopard reported as locally extirpated in at least one surveyed catchment (Gaston, Garson, & Hunter, 1983). This documented decline was not merely a retrospective scholarly finding: within five years of independence, Burton's (1953) compilation of Bombay Natural History Society wildlife-protection literature already reported that, across the Himalayan tract generally, wild animals were declining wherever effective control was difficult, and that Himalayan pheasants such as the monal and the tragopan had been kept from a comparable fate only by the prohibition of plumage export (Burton, 1953, pp. 101, 103). Understanding the pre-independence baseline of hunting activity and forest administration in a state such as Suket therefore has direct bearing on how such long-term declines are interpreted (Suman & Sinha, 2024;

Srinivas et al., 2024). The conservation significance of such historical forest landscapes also extends beyond wildlife populations to the maintenance of plant diversity and the sustainable use of forest resources (Kiruthika et al., 2024).

This princely-state history did not develop in isolation. Wildlife protection in India draws on a much longer institutional lineage, running from the species-specific protections recorded in Ashokan edicts of the third century BCE, through the Mughal-era practice of reserving hunting grounds (shikargahs) for the ruling elite, to the revenue-oriented forest reservations inaugurated by the Indian Forest Act of 1878 under British rule, and culminating in the post-independence Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972 (Velmurugan, 2017). Suket's own 1922–23 Shikar Regulations and forest settlement (Sections 3.2–3.3) accordingly sit within this longer national trajectory, at a point roughly midway between the earliest colonial forest legislation and the eventual national wildlife statute — a positioning this paper returns to in Section 4. This chronology can be given finer resolution from a contemporary source: Burton (1953, p. 100), writing as a long-serving Bombay Natural History Society office-bearer, traces British India's own wildlife-specific legislation from Act XX of 1887 (an Act for the preservation of wild birds and game) through its 1912 successor, the Wild Birds and Animals Protection Act, to the consolidating Indian Forest Act of 1927 — meaning that Suket's 1922–23 Shikar Regulations were enacted in the same decade as, rather than long before or after, this phase of British Indian legislative consolidation. Hughes's (2009) study of princely hunting in the Rajput states of Mewar, Orchha, and Bikaner cautions against reading such reserved hunting grounds and game regulations as evidence of proto-conservationist intent on the rulers' part; rather, she argues that princely investment in wildlife and shooting grounds was bound up chiefly with sovereignty, status, and lineage identity, a caution this paper keeps in view when assessing Suket's own shikar and forest records (Section 4).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a documentary and archival-historical analysis; it does not involve field surveys, interviews, or human or animal subjects, and therefore required no field ethics clearance beyond standard scholarly protocols for the use of archival and published material.

2.1 Primary Sources

The digitised copy consulted directly by the present authors is B. R. Beotra (comp.), *A Gazetteer of the Suket State* (Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1927), 185 pp., held in the Digital Library of India collection, scanned by Osmania University and now mirrored on the Internet Archive under the identifier [in.ernet.dli.2015.85735](https://www.india.gov.in/publications/india-dli/india-dli-2015-85735) (DLI accession 2015/85735). Page references given below (e.g., "Gazetteer, p. 4") are

to the gazetteer's own internal pagination, which begins at Chapter I and is distinct from the scan's leaf sequence.

A further primary source consulted for this analysis is the earlier Punjab Government gazetteer of the same state: *Gazetteer of the Suket State, Part A—1904* (Punjab States Gazetteers, Volume XII A, with maps), compiled under the authority of the Punjab Government. The volume's title page gives 1904 as the year of the underlying compilation but records the actual printing at the Civil and Military Gazette Press, Lahore, as 1908; the present paper therefore cites 1908 as the publication year while retaining "1904" as part of the volume's own title, in keeping with how the digitised copy consulted for this study is catalogued on the Internet Archive (identifier dli.ministry.08607). This is not merely a title-page inference: the Suket volume's own Physical Aspects section records that "the great earthquake of 4th April 1905 caused damage in Balh and on the Eastern border; 76 people were killed" (1904 Suket Gazetteer, p. 3) — an event that post-dates the volume's nominal 1904 compilation date by a year, confirming that the text was updated at some point between compilation and its 1908 printing rather than being a straightforward reprint of an unrevised 1904 manuscript. In the digitised volume examined by the present authors, this Suket gazetteer is bound together with, and immediately followed by, the corresponding Gazetteer of the Mandi State, Part A, each with its own internal pagination beginning afresh at Chapter I. To distinguish these from the 1927 Suket gazetteer (Beotra, comp.) and the 1920 Mandi gazetteer discussed above and in Section 2.2 below, the two texts are cited throughout as the "1904 Suket Gazetteer" and "1904 Mandi Gazetteer" respectively, following their own title-page designation, though the correct publication date for reference-list purposes is 1908. Consulting this earlier volume allows portions of the 1927 Suket gazetteer to be checked against their nearest available predecessor, published nineteen years earlier, a comparison developed in Sections 3.1, 3.3, and 3.4 below.

The main primary source is the *Gazetteer of the Suket State* (1927), compiled by B. R. Beotra under the instructions of His Highness the Raja Sahib of Suket State, and based, per the compiler's own preface, in part on passages reproduced from the Mandi State Gazetteer, the earlier (1904) edition of the Suket State Gazetteer, the Forest Settlement Report of the Suket State, the Assessment Reports of the Suket State, and the Punjab Census Reports. The gazetteer and related reports on settlements are deposited in the Himachal Pradesh State Archives, Shimla and, possibly, in the Digital Library of India and some institutional libraries; copies of the present work consulted the digitised edition (Digital Library of India scan, Internet Archive identifier in.ernet.dli.2015.85735) as described in the References.

2.2 Secondary and Comparative Sources

Comparative and background evidence on Suket was sought in the Himachal Pradesh District Gazetteer of Chamba (Negi, 1963) and in general data on Himalayan wildlife and hunting practice (Prater, 1965; Phythian-Adams, 1950) in order to place Suket in the larger administrative and ecological pattern of the Himalayan hill states. We only use these three sources here to orient ourselves regionally, to ensure that the game species, forest types, and game-hunting practices described of Suket and Mandi in Sections 3.1–3.4 were not local peculiarities to these two states alone, but are part of an overall Western Himalayan picture; they are not to be read page-by-page in the manner of the Suket and Mandi gazetteers; and they are not to be re-read in the Results. The paper's substantive comparative analysis instead rests on the Mandi material discussed immediately below and on post-independence ecological surveys of Himachal Pradesh's forest wildlife, notably the Himachal Wildlife Project surveys of the upper Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej catchments (Gaston, Garson, & Hunter, 1983). In addition, the *Gazetteer of the Mandi State* (1920, reprinted 1996) was consulted directly, rather than only at second hand through its citation in the Suket gazetteer (see Section 2.1). This is a substantive rather than incidental comparison: Mandi and Suket shared the Beas–Suketi river system, and it was with Mandi specifically that Suket merged after 1948 to form the present-day Mandi District, so the 1920 Mandi gazetteer effectively previews the administrative record into which Suket's own forest and wildlife governance was absorbed. Historical and political-administrative context on Suket State's founding, territorial extent, and 1948 accession was drawn from Hutchison and Vogel's (1933) *History of the Panjab Hill States* and Brentnall's (2004) compiled dynastic history of the Himachal Pradesh princely houses, together with recent scholarship on the Suket Satyagraha (Thakur, 2024).

2.3 Method of Analysis

The analysis follows a qualitative content-analysis method situated within the historical-archival framework described above. Gazetteer sections relating to forests, fauna, and hunting regulation were read for (a) named species and their reported abundance or scarcity, (b) references to royal or administrative hunting privileges, reserved forests, or seasonal restrictions, and (c) any explicit statements of conservation intent (e.g., closed seasons, protected tracts). Where boundary or place-name information permitted, historical forest-reserve locations described in the gazetteer were compared, at a descriptive level, against present-day forest-department records and protected-area designations in Mandi District. No geographic information system (GIS) mapping or spatial overlay analysis was undertaken in this study; this is noted as a limitation and an avenue for future research (Section 5).

3. RESULTS

The next subsections are based on the material of the 1927 Gazetteer of the Suket State (Beotra, comp.), namely, Chapter I of fauna and fisheries notes (Section A, of gazetteer, wild animals and fish gazetteer pp. 4–6), its chapter on the administration of the forests (Chapter II, Section C, "Forests," gazetteer pp. Laws on guns and shooting 81 to 86, and in appendix II, "Arms and

Shooting Rules" (gazetteer p. 132). These sections have all the species names, dates and figures which have been copied verbatim with page numbers attached to each. Table 1 summarises the key species and their reported protection status of the sources that were analysed in Sections 3.1–3.4.

Table 1. The species of wildlife chosen and their known protection status throughout the Suket and Mandi gazetteers (summarised using the sources discussed in Sections 3.1–3.4). All the entries are made directly based on the gazetteer content mentioned in those passages; no new data on observations are provided.

Species (common / local name)	Source(s) recording it	Recorded protection status
Black bear	1904 & 1927 Suket; 1920 Mandi	General close season only; no species-specific ban
Leopard	1904 & 1927 Suket; 1904 & 1920 Mandi	General close season; noted as destructive to flocks
Musk deer (mushk nafa)	1904 & 1927 Suket; 1904 (tribute, p. 10) & 1920 Mandi	Killing strictly prohibited at all times (Suket App. II; Mandi)
Nilgai (nil gai)	1927 Suket (Appendix II)	Capture and killing strictly prohibited, no exception
Gooral (goral)	1904 & 1927 Suket; Mandi	General close season
Barking deer (kakkur)	1904 & 1927 Suket; Mandi	General close season
Monal pheasant	Suket; 1920 Mandi	Prohibited at all times (Mandi)
Horned pheasant (jujurana)	1920 Mandi	Prohibited at all times (Mandi)
Peacock	Suket; 1920 Mandi	Prohibited at all times (Mandi)
Partridge (titar) & duck (murghabi)	1927 Suket (App. II)	Closed season, but shootable after April
Mahseer (<i>Barbus tor</i>)	Howell 1913, Beas–Suketi	Lower-5-mile closure (lapsed); poison-fishing forbidden but unenforced
Duck at Riwalsar lake	1904 Mandi Gazetteer	Protected as a sacred site (religious, non-administrative)

3.1 Species Recorded in the Gazetteer's Forest and Fauna Sections

The gazetteer's Physical Aspects section (Chapter I, Section A) records wild animals and fish under two short headings, "Wild animals" and "Fish" (gazetteer p. 4), the latter reproducing a lengthy note by G. C. L. Howell, then Director of Fisheries, Punjab, based on a September 1913 survey of the Beas and its tributaries (gazetteer pp. 4–6). Under "Wild animals," the compiler lists as "the chief wild animals of interest": black bear, leopard, jackal, musk deer, gooral, barking deer (kakkur), pig, and monkeys. Among game birds it names pheasants — kalesha, chir, koklas ("quaksha"), and monal — together with chikor, partridge, peacock, and pigeon; quail are described as present "in small numbers in the autumn," and duck as found "in the Bahl and on the Sutlej in spring and autumn" (gazetteer p. 4). No abundance ranking beyond these qualifiers is given, and no large predators other than leopard are mentioned — snow leopard, wolf, and other higher-altitude carnivores are notably absent

from this list, which may reflect either genuine absence from the areas the compiler drew on or simply the limited zoological scope of a revenue-oriented gazetteer. Howell's fisheries note names eleven marketable and minor fish species recorded in "the Mandi waters" (a category explicitly including Suket's Suketi and Sutlej reaches): *Barbus tor* or mahasir (local names seer, serra, sirdu, khakiaru); *Oreinus sinuatus*, the mountain barbel (sal, saloti, gugal, gungal, swali, chith); *Labeo diplostomus* (geor); *Nemachilus rupicola* or loach (dundat); *Cirrhhina latia* (topra); *Barilius bendilisis* (pata); *Barilius vagra* (patli); *Barbus stigma* (bharta); *Ophiocephalus gachua* (wanka karot); *Glyptosternum pectinopterum* (nai); and *Amblyceps mangois* (jogni) (gazetteer p. 6). Howell singles out mahasir as present at "every point from Bhojpur to Mandi" and describes the Suketi as "incomparably the finest mahasir nursery I have seen," while noting that fry were already "nearly all been destroyed by the insensate methods of fishing in vogue in both States" (gazetteer p. 5). Read together, the fauna and fisheries entries and Appendix II (Section 3.2,

below) show musk deer named independently in two separate parts of the gazetteer — once as a recorded species (p. 4) and once as a species subject to an outright shooting ban (p. 132) — which is the clearest point of continuity between the gazetteer's descriptive and regulatory material.

The same gazetteer page also carries a short Botany passage, listing the state's common trees and wild flora: the compiler names Chil (*Pinus longifolia*) as the most common pine, alongside blue pine (kail), deodar (kelu), spruce (rai), and silver fir (tos) in the hilly tracts, together with oak (ban and mohru), box (chikri), elm (mam), shisham, horse chestnut (khanor), and rhododendron (bras), as well as a number of wild fruit trees — peach, apricot, green plum, wild apple, wild pear, simbal, and mango — and notes that the berberry's yellow wood (rasaunt) was "largely exported" (gazetteer p. 4). This passage is not analysed further here, since the paper's scope is confined to fauna, hunting regulation, and forest administration (Section 2.3); it is recorded for completeness because it sits on the same gazetteer page as the fauna and fisheries material discussed above, and because the conifer and oak species it names recur, without further botanical detail, in the forest-settlement account in Section 3.3.

This apparent continuity is confirmed, and given a firmer date, by the earlier 1904 Suket Gazetteer, whose own "Wild animals" passage (1904 Suket Gazetteer, p. 3) lists the same species — black bear, leopard, jackal, musk deer, gooral, barking deer (kakkur), pig, and monkeys — the same game birds (kalesha, chir, quaksha, moonal, chikor, partridge, peacock, pigeon), and the same seasonal notes on quail and duck, differing from the 1927 wording only in the explicit addition of langur alongside "monkeys." It is evident that the 1927 compiler copied this fauna passage of the 1904 edition, or a common source, which was basically the same, not the result of new observation. This has a direct bearing on how the gazetteer material can be used as an ecological baseline (Section 1): the fauna and game-bird list available from the 1927 gazetteer in fact documents, at the latest, a state of affairs no later than 1904, and its unrevised transmission across at least two official editions is itself evidence of administrative inertia in wildlife recording specifically, in contrast to the substantive forest-administration reforms documented for the intervening period in Section 3.3.

3.2 Hunting Privileges and Administrative Regulation

The clearest statement of hunting regulation in the gazetteer is Appendix II, "Arms and Shooting Rules" (gazetteer p. 132), which gives a four-point resume of the "Suket State Shikar Regulations, 1979" — a date in the Vikrami Samvat era corresponding to approximately 1922–23 CE, and therefore roughly contemporaneous with the forest-administration reforms described in Section 3.3. The resume reads, in substance: (1) possession of arms had to be reported immediately to the

police; (2) shooting was prohibited except under a licence issued by the Durbar or by an officer authorised by the Durbar for the purpose; (3) shooting was strictly prohibited in the reserved forests and during a closed season running from 1 March to 30 September, with an explicit exception allowing titar (partridge) and murghabi (duck) to be shot after April; and (4) the capture and killing of mushk nafa (musk deer) and nil gai (nilgai) was "strictly prohibited" outright, with no seasonal or licensing exception given (gazetteer p. 132). This is a licensing-and-closed-season regime administered by the Durbar (the princely state's ruling council/administration) rather than a set of personal royal hunting privileges as such; the gazetteer gives no separate provision reserving shikar to the Raja or ruling family, and the regulations as summarised apply generally to arms-holders in the state. The blanket protection of musk deer and nilgai — rather than a closed season or licence requirement, as applied to game birds — is the one instance in the gazetteer of a species-specific prohibition with no stated exception, and is worth noting given that musk deer also appear in twentieth-century Himachal wildlife surveys as a species of long-term concern (see Section 1). The species' particular value to regional courts has a documented pedigree well before Suket's own regulations: the 1904 Mandi Gazetteer records that an eighteenth-century Mandi ruler, Raja Surma Sen, paid an annual tribute to the Mughal Emperor consisting of Rs. 500 in cash, two musk deer, a yak-tail, a pony, and a hawk (1904 Mandi Gazetteer, p. 10) — direct evidence that musk deer functioned as a prestige tribute item in this region's princely courts more than a century before Suket's twentieth-century blanket shooting ban, and a concrete regional instance of the Mughal-era shikargah lineage discussed in Section 1. Musk itself also appears among Mandi's plains-bound exports alongside hides, wool, and hawks (1904 Mandi Gazetteer, p. 54), indicating that musk deer remained a commercially as well as symbolically valuable species into the early twentieth century — a commercial pressure that arguably sharpens, rather than undercuts, the rationale for Suket's later absolute prohibition on killing them. Comparative evidence from other princely states suggests that this kind of unconditional, no-exception protection of a favoured species could itself generate friction with cultivators: in Bikaner State, for instance, Maharaja Ganga Singh's game laws left no provision allowing subjects to kill blackbuck even when the animals were destroying crops, a policy that swelled herds near state shikargahs and provoked sustained complaints from affected cultivators before a reduction scheme was introduced (Hughes, 2009, p. 130). The ban Suket imposed in its blanket on shooting musk deer and nilgai was not as broad as the one imposed by Bikaner on the protection of the blackbuck, but it represents the same administrative pattern of deciding to protect a species by fiat of the Durbar, without any specified mechanism of balancing its protection with the agricultural interests of its subjects. The second less formal example of

protection regulation can be found in the fisheries material of Section 3.1. Howell notes that at one time there was no fishing of any sort or kind on the lower five miles (that is between the Suket state boundary and the confluence with the Beas) and that the Beas was then abounding with fish; he attributes the later decline in stocks of mahasir on the Beas to the failure of this restriction under persistent poisoning and dynamite (gazetteer p. 5). Poison-fishing is also defined as officially prohibited, but with no effective measures in either State to enforce the ban (gazetteer p. 5) - a clear modern recognition of an enforcement disjunction between rule and practice that is right to the point of the argument presented in the paper in Section 4. Another, more stringent precaution is observed in mountain barbel entering Riwalsar lake by the outlet of the Suketi where Howell reports them to be strictly guarded, and breed readily in the autumn and early winter (gazetteer p. 5), indicating perhaps a special, clearly operating closed area, independent of the general shikar regulations in the second volume.

3.3 Forest Settlement and Reserved Tracts

Chapter II, Section C of the gazetteer ("Forests," gazetteer pp. 81–86) provides the entire administrative detail found in the volume and is the chief foundation of this subsection. The compiler subdivides the forests in the state into five categories (1) deodar forest, in some places mixed with blue pine (kail); (2) chil forest, with some kail stands; (3) spruce and fir forest; (4) oak forest; and (5) scrub areas with bamboo (gazetteer p. 81). It is distributed as follows: deodar in the altitude of 5,000 to 9,000 feet, most growing best in the altitude of about 7,000 feet in the Dhamoon forest; chil in the altitude of 3,000 to 5,000 feet, mostly ending in the scrub zone of the 2,000 to 3,000 feet scrub zone; oak mostly grows in all aspects between about 3,000 feet (around Sundarnagar) and 8,000 feet (around Gayog); and shisham is said to be well off in the scrub zone on the Sutlej banks (gazetteer p. 81). Individual named forests appear at several points. The Dhamoon forest is identified as the best example of mature deodar in the state. Raigi and Kamand are named as deodar forests "once densely stocked with mature trees of deodar and kail" that had, by the time of writing, been so heavily and selectively felled that they were being converted into "kail and inferior forests," with almost no deodar regeneration surviving even in previously well-stocked patches (gazetteer pp. 81–82). By contrast, in Pangna Garh the compiler notes that the Sheiloo, Badhen, and Sursan chil forests were "doing splendidly" (gazetteer p. 82). None of these names could be matched to a present-day forest-department designation within the scope of this study (see Section 2.3 on method and Section 5 on limitations); this remains a task for field-level and GIS-based follow-up work. A pre-reform baseline against which this account of exploitation and later reform can be read is available in the 1904 Suket Gazetteer's own, much shorter Forests section (1904 Suket Gazetteer, p.

35). At that date the compiler names only seven forests in the state — Dhamaun, Seri, Dophra, Gharlol, Kamana, Kamrah, and Reog — gives no area figures for any of them, and states plainly that "there is no attempt at regular conservation," that supervision was left to the general oversight of Tahsildars and Kardars of Kothis, and that the roughly forty rakhas (forest guards) then employed in Karsog Tahsil, paid between 13 annas and three rupees a month, were untrained, so that "the forests receive no skilled attention" (1904 Suket Gazetteer, p. 35). The same passage gives the species composition of each named forest — Dhamaun and Dophra in kelu (deodar), kail, rai and tos; Seri and Kamana in a kelu/chil mix; Gharlol in chil alone; and Kamrah and Reog in kelu — while noting that "there are no figures available as to the area" of any of them (1904 Suket Gazetteer, p. 35). It also describes a graduated proprietary regime rather than a blanket state reservation: all trees of the more valuable species (kelu, kail, chil) belonged to the State even where standing on privately owned land and could not be felled without the Raja's permission, building timber being issued to subjects at fixed rates of 8 annas to 1 rupee for a rai or tos, Rs. 1-8-0 to Rs. 2 for a kail or chil, and Rs. 4 for a deodar, while the State separately claimed all specially large trees of lesser species such as tun for its own building purposes (1904 Suket Gazetteer, p. 35). The forest-guard establishment was, moreover, not confined to Karsog Tahsil: Balh Tahsil had its own darogha, paid Rs. 1-8-0 monthly plus food, alongside the roughly forty Karsog rakhas noted above (1904 Suket Gazetteer, p. 35). Forest revenue in this period stood at Rs. 10,000 among the state's miscellaneous revenue heads, alongside a separate sheep-and-goat grazing fee (ginakeri) of Rs. 2 to Rs. 4 per hundred head (1904 Suket Gazetteer, pp. 35, 42) — a fee structure close enough to the roughly Rs. 1¼-to-Rs. 4 range recorded for the same due in the 1927 gazetteer (Section 3.3, below) to suggest continuity in grazing administration across the two editions, in contrast to the discontinuity already noted in fauna recording (Section 3.1). Read against the account below of the 1919–1923 reforms, this earlier, contemporaneous passage corroborates — independently of the 1927 gazetteer's own retrospective judgement — that Suket's forest administration before Glover's and Singh's intervention was genuinely unsystematic, supporting this paper's characterisation of the Shelterwood Compartment System and working-circle plan as a substantive rather than nominal administrative change. The gazetteer is direct about the cause of forest degradation: "Raja Sir Bhim Sen was wholly responsible for the very heavy exploitation in the forests; so much so, that during his short reign of twelve years they had almost reached the point of devastation" (gazetteer p. 83). Reform began under his successor, Raja Lakshman Sen, who invited Mr. H. M. Glover, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Pashahr Division, to inspect the state forests; Glover began work on 27 December 1919 and submitted his recommendations on 19 January 1920. The Punjab Government subsequently loaned Mr. J. Singh of the

Imperial Forest Service to prepare a full forest settlement and working plan; Singh joined the state in April 1923 and submitted his report in October of the same year (gazetteer p. 83). Singh's proposed working plan divided the forests into four working circles — Deodar, Chil, Selection Felling (covering spruce, fir, and high-altitude oak), and Fuel (covering scrub and low-lying oak, worked as coppice with standards) — each under the Shelterwood Compartment System except the fuel circle, with proposed rotations of 150 years for deodar, 120 years for chil (reduced from a theoretical ~100 years because of chronic fire damage), and 30 years for the fuel circle (gazetteer pp. 83–85). Administratively, the plan proposed splitting the forest estate into Western and Eastern Ranges, each headed by a Range Officer, supported by two Foresters and eleven Guards; the gazetteer records that a Forest Code "has now been prepared and approved by the Durbar" (gazetteer p. 85). This Durbar-approved Forest Code postdates by more than four decades the first British Indian legislation to establish reserved forests, the Indian Forest Act of 1878 (Velmurugan, 2017), suggesting that Suket's formal forest-settlement apparatus, like its shikar regulations discussed in Section 3.2, lagged the wider colonial legislative pattern by a generation or more rather than developing in step with it. The compiler also notes that the forests were "practically all... burdened with rights," most objectionably the customary lopping of kail, which had left many kail stands "very badly infected by *Trametes* Pine [disease]" — a practice the reigning Raja is described as having taken "prompt action" to curtail (gazetteer p. 83). Seasonal grazing by transhumant pastoralists from outside the state — Gujars and traders from Simla grazing buffaloes and mules, and Gaddis of Chamba, Kanets of Bashahr, and Kols of Kulu grazing sheep and goats in winter — was permitted in state forests for a fee, charged per hundred head of sheep or goats (roughly Rs. 1¼ to Rs. 4, varying by group) and per head of buffalo or mule (gazetteer p. 81) — a fee band essentially continuous with the Rs. 2-to-Rs. 4-per-hundred ginakeri rate already recorded in the 1904 Suket Gazetteer (Section 3.3, above), suggesting that fee-based grazing administration, unlike forest settlement proper, changed comparatively little between the two editions. This suggests that "reserved" status in the gazetteer's forestry sense did not mean closure to all outside use, but rather regulated, fee-based access — a distinction consistent with the shikar regulations in Section 3.2, where "reserved forests" were closed to shooting specifically rather than to all human activity.

A further named tract, recorded not in the Forests chapter but in the gazetteer's later land-revenue and soil-classification section, is Dhar Bandli: "an uncultivated piece of land" containing "bamboo, chil and ban forests" (gazetteer p. 107). Unlike the felled and heavily exploited Raigi and Kamand deodar forests discussed above, Dhar Bandli is recorded simply as uncultivated woodland, with no note of exploitation, reservation, or administrative

concern; the gazetteer does not itself record its wildlife content or state that it was hunted. An uncultivated chil-and-ban tract of this kind would be consistent with the forest habitat associated elsewhere in the gazetteer with barking deer, gooral, and pheasant (Section 3.1), and it is plausible that such land supported, and was on occasion hunted for, the same game species recorded generally for the state; this specific inference is not made in the source itself, however, and should be read as a reasonable extension rather than a documented fact. The same name recurs in the gazetteer's altitude table as "Bandli Tibba," at 6,946 feet (gazetteer p. 3). This is the one place-name in the gazetteer that can be matched, at the level of toponym, to a present-day protected area: the modern Bandli Wildlife Sanctuary (32 km²; located near Sundarnagar, Mandi District, at approximately 31.47°N, 76.91°E, altitudinal range 760–1260 m; sub-tropical pine and Banj Oak forest) takes its name from the same historical toponym (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2018). Given that Suket's post-1948 territory was absorbed into Mandi District (Section 1), it is plausible that this tract's uncultivated forest cover persisted through the intervening decades into land eventually designated, after independence, as part of the present-day sanctuary. Consistent with the limitations noted in Section 2.3 and Section 5, however, no GIS or boundary-level comparison has been undertaken to confirm this, and the connection should be treated as a suggestive toponymic and habitat continuity rather than an established administrative one.

3.4 Comparative Note

In those areas where Suket is thin on a particular point, the standard of the neighbouring and more densely-recorded Mandi and Chamba gazetteers is applied in extrapolating to the likely administrative norms of the region, with any such extrapolation clearly indicated as a comparative rather than Suket-specific datum. The most obvious example of this is in the primary source itself, in the note on fisheries in Section 3.1: Howell gives his 1913 survey and the subsequent lists of species and methods, but does not divide them into Suket-specific and Mandi-specific information (gazetteer pp. 4–6). This serves as good support that the river systems and fish stocks of the two states were administratively treated as one prior to the merger in 1948 but it also implies that fisheries results reported as Suket in this paper can instead be interpreted as Suket catchment results. This is verified by direct reference to the 1920 Gazetteer of the Mandi State: which reproduces the note of Howell, and the identical table of eleven species of fishes, as in the Suket gazetteer, virtually verbatim (Mandi Gazetteer, pp. 13–16), which is in line with its own recognition of having used Mandi source material (Section 2.1). One addition to the content of the Suket material used in this paper has, however, been made in the Mandi gazetteer: a note that since the above note was written, the Durbar has issued a Fisheries Regulation, and has taken action to prevent the destruction of fish-resources by ruinous

means (Mandi Gazetteer, p. 16). This is documentary evidence that at least one princely administration took heed to the warnings of Howell about poison-fishing in 1913, instead of merely noting them, and it makes it difficult to tell a simple story of administrative sluggishness - a fact that is further pursued below in Section 4. And in addition to fisheries, the fauna, sport, and forest-administration sections of the Mandi gazetteer present a much more comprehensive comparison than that afforded by Suket himself, and some of their points relate to the argument presented in this paper. On fauna, Mandi's "Wild animals" and "Game birds" entries (Mandi Gazetteer, p. 12) list the same core species as Suket's — black bear, leopard, barking deer, goral, pig, musk deer — while noting musk deer and serow as "by no means plentiful" even in 1920, and adding several species not named in the Suket entry: hill fox, jackal, porcupine, pine marten, langur and Rhesus monkeys, flying fox, flying squirrel, and wild cat. Game birds are itemised more precisely than in Suket's gazetteer, with five named pheasant species (monal; the horned pheasant, locally *jujurana* or *phulgar*; *koklas*, locally *kwaksa*; *chir*; and *kalij*, locally *kalesar* or *kolsar*, "the most common of all"), plus *chikhor*, black and grey partridge, and a separate high-altitude wood partridge found in deodar and oak forest between 6,000 and 8,000 feet (Mandi Gazetteer, p. 12). This finer species resolution suggests that Suket's shorter fauna entry (Section 3.1) most likely reflects the compiler's brevity rather than a genuinely narrower range of species present in Suket's similar forest habitats. On the regulation of hunting, Mandi had a close season of all kinds of game between 15 March and 15 September - close to, but not exactly equivalent to, Suket's 1 March–30 September season under the 1922–23 Shikar Regulations (Section 3.2) - with shooting out of the close season only with the permission of the State, and the gazetteer openly admits that a lot of poaching is done by the villagers, most of whom have guns (Mandi Gazetteer, p. 18). Mandi includes more species on its list of absolutely protected species than Suket: "the shooting of the musk deer, monal, horned pheasant and peacock is forbidden at any hour" (Mandi Gazetteer, p. 18), whereas Suket only prohibited musk deer and nilgai (Section 3.2). Of the greatest importance to the argument in this paper is the fact that the Mandi gazetteer specifically speaks of an extant royal system of tribute-in-kind which is completely unstated in the Suket material consulted: a given number of professional shikaris are employed to supply the Raja with game and another with the State with a given number of musk pods in the year (Mandi Gazetteer, p. 18). Where Suket's Appendix II reads as a general licensing-and-closed-season regime administered by the Durbar (Section 3.2), Mandi's arrangements preserve an explicit, personal royal hunting prerogative alongside the closed-season rules — a reminder that "protection" could take administratively similar forms (seasons, prohibited species) while resting on different underlying rationales even between two adjoining, soon-to-merge states. The earlier 1904 Mandi Gazetteer,

though it lacks the 1920 edition's formal shikar rules (above), offers a plain ethnographic statement of the same underlying association between hunting and elite status: in its Population section it records simply that "Rajputs are fond of field sports and frequently hunt the wild animals of the hills", contrasted in the same passage with the general hill population (1904 Mandi Gazetteer, p. 15). Read together with the Surma Sen tribute record (Section 3.2), this is direct regional testimony for Hughes's (2009) broader argument, taken up further in Section 4, that princely-era hunting privilege in this part of the Western Himalaya was bound up with Rajput identity and status rather than with anything resembling a conservation rationale. On forests, the Mandi gazetteer's Section C opens with a statement that speaks directly to this paper's central claim in Section 4: "Certain forests had been regarded as *siyar*, or reserved, for generations, but many of these were closed to rights, not so much for the sake of forest conservancy, as for the provision of shooting preserves for the Rāja, or as shelter belts for the old forts" (Mandi Gazetteer, p. 151). This is the single clearest primary-source statement encountered in either gazetteer that reserved-forest status and royal shikar privilege were historically the same administrative instrument, and it is used accordingly in Section 4. Mandi's first regular forest demarcation was made only in 1889, under Counsellor Mr. Maynard, who created two forest classes — *siyar* (reserved) and *bartan* (demarcated, for village use) or undemarcated — and compiled a state-wide *jamabandi* (forest register) recording which villages could draw timber from which *bartan* forests; a forest establishment of one *jamadar* and four *naib-jamadars*, supported by village-recruited *rakhas* exempted from *begar* (forced labour), was created to enforce rules restricting deodar lopping and the barking of trees for charcoal (Mandi Gazetteer, p. 151). The exemption itself is notable in regional context: *begar* — compulsory, unremunerated labour extracted by the princely states, which by some contemporary counts took as many as ten distinct forms in neighbouring Bushahr and several more elsewhere in the Simla Hill States — was among the principal grievances driving the Praja Mandal peasant movement across the Western Himalayan princely states from the 1930s onward, and its abolition was a central demand of the agitation that culminated in the 1948 political transition discussed in Section 1 (Thakur, 2024). Exempting forest *rakhas* from this burden, however narrow a concession, therefore sat within a wider and increasingly contested regional labour regime rather than being a purely administrative or forestry-specific arrangement. This regime was not left untouched by the 1948 political transition: the Government of India's own White Paper on Indian States records that, among the agrarian reforms undertaken in the newly formed Himachal Pradesh, occupancy rights were conferred on "*bethus*" — tenants who had rendered personal service to landowners in return for cultivating rights — where they had held the land for three generations, on payment of rent equal to one and one-quarter times the land revenue

and cesses due on it (Government of India, 1950, Part VIII). Beth, unlike begar, was a tenancy obligation rather than a forest-specific one, but the two forms of unremunerated or under-remunerated service were part of the same wider institution of princely-era compulsory labour that the post-accession administration moved, unevenly, to dismantle. The gazetteer is careful to note that "neither they nor the jamabandi pretended to be a regular Forest Settlement" (Mandi Gazetteer, p. 151) — i.e., Mandi's own compiler treats 1889–1920s administrative measures as a precursor to, not the equivalent of, a modern forest settlement, which is consistent with this paper's treatment of Suket's parallel measures in Section 4. A commercial parallel to Suket's account of wasteful nineteenth/early-twentieth-century deodar exploitation (Section 3.3) also appears in the Mandi material: an 1880 lease of the state's deodar forests to the "Mandi Forest Company" required a minimum fell of 1,500 mature trees per annum, but the company removed "considerably more," taking "no less than 10,000 trees" out of the Sutlej valley forests in its final year alone (Mandi Gazetteer, pp. 151–152). Finally, Mandi's grazing administration — a livestock census in October 1917 recording over 93,000 bullocks, 96,000 cows, and 199,000 sheep and goats state-wide, and a reorganised, fee-based grazing system introduced under the Forest Settlement of 1917 and Forest Regulation No. I of Sambat 1975, with all grazing revenue (Rs. 41,810 in 1918–19) credited to the Forest Department rather than Land Revenue (Mandi Gazetteer, pp. 147–150) — parallels the fee-based grazing arrangements described for Suket in Section 3.3, and suggests that treating "reserved" forest status as compatible with regulated, fee-paying outside use was a shared regional administrative norm rather than a Suket-specific arrangement.

The 1904 Mandi Gazetteer also bears on the timing of forest professionalisation discussed above: its own Forests section, in addition to summarising Maynard's 1889 measures, records that the State forests had "always been looked after by rakhas, or forest guards, but no scientific management has been attempted in the past", adding that "two students have been sent to the Forest School at Dehra Dun to learn forestry and a Forest Department is being organized" (1904 Mandi Gazetteer, p. 48). If this training initiative is dated to the volume's nominal compilation year, it places the beginnings of formal forestry training in Mandi at, or close to, the turn of the century — a decade or more before Glover's 1919 inspection and Singh's 1923 working plan for Suket (Section 3.3) — suggesting that professionalised forest management reached the two future districts on distinctly different timelines even though they were administratively merged within a generation. The Mandi Gazetteer of 1904 (referenced with that of 1920 to this analysis) offers a previous point of reference to the fauna record of Mandi itself. Its note on Fauna (1904 Mandi Gazetteer, p. 5) characterises the forests of the state as a

good abode of game, in which are named leopard, black bear, hyaena, and kind of deer; though it specially mentions leopards as destructive of sheep and goat flocks, and also of people; jackal, fox, and wild pigs in the lower ranges; hill monkey and langur in Kamlah; musk deer in Saraj and Chohar; and barking deer and gooral in general all over the state. The birds recorded are game and include duck, geese and snipe at the banks of the Beas, jungle fowl and quail at the lower valleys and pheasants at the higher hills (1904 Mandi Gazetteer, p. 5). Placed next to the fuller list above of 1920, this earlier note not only confirms the core species record of Mandi over at least sixteen years, but also mentions one species, hyaena, which is not found either on the 1920 Mandi list or in the Suket material which is the subject of this paper, which is a discrepancy rather than a resolution.

Another, non-administrative kind of species protection is found in the description of Riwalas lake, an object of Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist worship ten miles southwest of Mandi in the 1904 Mandi Gazetteer (p. 71): Duck in large numbers [visit] the lake, which is sacred, and sportsmen are forbidden to shoot them. This is not a Durbar licensing rule of the type shown in the Suket in Appendix II (Section 3.2) or a personal royal hunting prerogative of the type shown in the Mandi material (above), but a third, religiously based type of informal protection, based on the sanctity of the site, not on state control or on a royal prerogative. The fact that it exists with the other two forms supports the broader argument of this paper, which emerged in Section 4, that pre-independence protection in the Suket–Mandi area assumed a variety of unique institutional forms, few of which can be traced to any type of what might be considered a current-day conservation argument.

The 1920 Mandi Gazetteer's brief account of Maynard's 1889 forest measures (above) can now be checked against the fuller text of those rules as reproduced in the 1904 Mandi Gazetteer's Appendix V, "Rules Regulating Rights in Forests, Written up by Mr. Maynard." The thirteen rules there include an outright ban on the lopping of deodar, size limits on branches right-holders could cut from other species, restrictions on torch use and charcoal-burning near forest tracts, seasonal grazing bans in specified forests, minimum girth limits before felling (six feet for deodar, four feet for pine), and a graduated fee schedule for timber taken by right-holders, tenants without forest rights, and Khatri residents of Mandi town respectively (1904 Mandi Gazetteer, Appendix V). This is a materially fuller record of the 1889 measures than the 1920 gazetteer's own summary provides, and supports this paper's use of Maynard's 1889 demarcation as a genuine, if partial, forerunner of the more comprehensive twentieth-century forest settlements discussed in Section 3.3. There is, interestingly, no sign of a similar shikar licensing-and-closed-season system (as implemented by Suket in 1922–23, Section 3.2) anywhere in either of the two 1904 gazetteers: neither state 1904 gazetteer

mentions a closed hunting season, or an arms-licensing condition, or a list of absolutely protected species. Because Suket's own Shikar Regulations are specifically dated 1979 Vikrami Samvat (c. 1922–23 CE), and their omission from the 1904 record suggests that formal regulation of hunting, like forest settlement (Section 3.3), was a creation of the 1910s–1920s rather than a previously established feature of princely government at the turn of the century, which lends some weight to the argument of this paper in Section 4 as to the time and nature of institutional change in Suket.

4. DISCUSSION

The administrative system outlined above of the princely era - the reserved forest areas, the limited hunting rights, the seasonal limits - served, in a sense, as an ancient and informal precursor to modern biodiversity protection systems although the rationale behind them was the protection of royal hunting privilege as opposed to the conservation of biodiversity as we know it today. In this respect, the shikar regime run by Durbar, in miniature and much later, by an institutional form, is a continuation of the practice of reserving hunting grounds (shikargahs) to the ruling elite that dates back to the Mughal period in the larger history of wildlife conservation in India (Velmurugan, 2017). This is an important difference: colonial and princely-era protection was not aimed at protecting humans at all, but at protecting game for the ruling elite's use, and the present paper does not claim continuity of conservation intent, only continuity of some form of administration (reserved tracts, restricted access, seasonal closure). This warning is not unique but the general thrust of Hughes, (2009, p. 5) based on the princely states of Mewar, Orchha and Bikaner, that historians should not presume that princely wildlife preservation was a kind of direct precursor of modern conservation without first asking themselves what a given animal or shooting ground was important to the princely mind, which is not about conservation but about political status, sovereignty and Rajput identity. The records of Suket himself, though much more modest in a documentary sense than the Rajput case-studies, which Hughes discusses, are in harmony with this interpretation: the shikar regulations and forest settlement of the Durbar safeguarded some species and some areas of the forest by licencing, closed season, and reserved status, without any ecological justification of the sort that nowadays attaches to the management of wildlife. Hughes material also provides another comparative warning concerning Suket enforcement gap mentioned in Section 3.2 (poison-fishing forbidden, but not enforced): in other princely India, government statements of the success of game protection might change significantly based on political expediency, with representatives of Dungarpur State stating deer and wild boar thrive on strict protection one decade, and stating the next decade that wildlife had declined and no longer increased (Hughes, 2009, pp. 216–217). Couple this trend with the fact that Suket himself seems to have a disconnect

between the rule and practice as articulated, and in the case at hand, the absence of said rule appears to represent more of a trend of wildlife regulation in the princely-era in general than a single administrative failure. Neither was this lapse limited to the administration of the princes: writing on the British Indian territory in the same collection, Dunbar Brander (1953, p. 47) noted of the game-protection rules, on the whole, that they were, in reality, a dead letter wherever there was not a body of preventive officers to administer them — a weakness in the structure itself, rather than in the effort of enforcing it, which suggests that Suket's own gap in the control of poison-fishing (Section 3.2) reflected this same wider administrative pattern rather than a failing specific to Suket. It is not simply inferred based on the records of Suket, but the neighbouring Mandi gazetteer explicitly records the rationale behind its earliest forest reservations, that some forests were closed in, not ostensibly to conserve the forests, but to provide shooting preserves to the Rāja or to provide belts of shelter to the old forts (Mandi Gazetteer, 1920, p. 151; Section 3.4). Since Suket and Mandi were united by a common river system, and a roughly similar administrative culture, and were united into one district, within a generation of these gazetteers being written, this Mandi-specific statement is employed here as corroborating, but not as a direct, parallelism of the same rationale, of the same rationale in the more implicit forest and shikar regulations of Suket.

Read against the broader twentieth-century record of wildlife decline in Himachal Pradesh's temperate forests — including the reported disappearance of the snow leopard from at least one surveyed catchment and the marked rarity of species such as the Himalayan brown bear, tahr, ibex, and musk deer in more recent surveys — the Suket gazetteer material offers a potential pre-decline baseline against which such trends can be partially assessed, provided the limitations of gazetteer data (compiled for administrative and revenue purposes, not ecological survey) are kept firmly in view.

This caution about the gazetteer's non-ecological purpose is reinforced by the finding, developed in Section 3.1, that the fauna and game-bird list carried in the 1927 gazetteer is, in substance, a verbatim inheritance from the 1904 Suket Gazetteer rather than an independent observation made in 1927. Any pre-decline baseline drawn from this material should therefore be dated to no later than the turn of the century, not to the 1920s, and its unrevised transmission across at least one intervening official edition is itself a data point about administrative practice: fauna recording lagged well behind the more substantive changes documented in forest administration (Section 3.3) and hunting regulation (Section 3.2) over the same period. Similarly, the sanctity-based protection of duck at Riwalsar recorded in the 1904 Mandi Gazetteer (Section 3.4) is a reminder that not all pre-independence restraint on hunting in this region operated through Durbar regulation or royal prerogative; a third,

religious rationale for protecting particular species or sites coexisted with the administrative forms discussed above, and any account of "informal precursors" to conservation in the region should recognise this plurality of rationale rather than treating princely-era protection as a single institutional type. This plurality is consistent with the wider national pattern: species-specific religious protection considerably predates the princely period, as in the Ashokan edicts prohibiting the killing of particular birds and animals on specified days, and it has also persisted well beyond it, as in the continuing, faith-based protection of blackbuck and other species by Bishnoi communities in the present day (Velmurugan, 2017). Read alongside these national-level parallels, the Riwalsar case suggests that Suket and Mandi's princely-era protective measures were a regional and temporally bounded instance of a much older and more durable pattern, rather than a phenomenon specific to colonial-period administration.

For present-day conservation planning in Mandi District, four implications follow from the archival findings in Section 3. First, historical reserved-forest boundaries may offer a starting point for identifying areas of long-standing lower human disturbance, worth checking against current forest cover and protected-area maps, though the gazetteer's own account cautions against treating "reserved" status as a uniform predictor of condition: Dhamoon survived to 1927 as, in the compiler's words, the state's best stand of mature deodar, while Raigi and Kamand, reserved on the same terms, had by then lost almost all deodar regeneration to heavy felling (Section 3.3). Second, the historical presence or documented absence of particular species in Suket's records provides a documentary reference point for assessing local extirpation or range contraction, and is most directly useful for musk deer — a species named in the gazetteer both as present and as the one animal subject to an unconditional shooting ban (Section 3.2), and independently flagged by twentieth-century surveys as of long-term conservation concern in the same region (Section 1); by the same logic, the gazetteer's silence on snow leopard and wolf (Section 3.1) is better read as inconclusive than as evidence of their historical absence, given the compiler's acknowledged zoological limits. Third, the administrative transition from princely governance to post-1948 state forest administration is itself a case study in institutional continuity and rupture that may be relevant to understanding present-day gaps in enforcement or record-keeping in the district — a continuity already visible in this paper's own findings, where Suket's unenforced poison-fishing prohibition echoes Dunbar Brander's contemporary verdict that game rules generally became "a dead letter" without dedicated preventive staff (Section 4). It is worth noting that this transition was not an administrative formality but the direct outcome of the Suket Satyagraha and the wider Praja Mandal movement's mobilisation against princely exaction, including begar (Section 3.4); the same 1948

rupture that ended Suket's Durbar-administered shikar and forest regime was thus part of a broader popular movement whose central demands lay in land revenue and forced labour rather than in wildlife or forest policy as such (Thakur, 2024). Fourth, a further implication follows from the paper's central historiographical finding rather than from any single archival detail: because Suket's and Mandi's forest reservations originated principally as shikar preserves administered for royal and Durbar benefit, not as instruments of ecological conservation (Section 4), any present-day case that invokes a tract's princely-era "reserved" status in support of its conservation value should treat that documented shikar origin and a genuinely ecological rationale as distinct claims, rather than assume the two coincided.

A fifth, more specific implication follows from the toponymic match identified in Section 3.3. Dhar Bandli, recorded in 1927 as an uncultivated chil-and-ban tract with no documented history of exploitation or Durbar reservation, shares its name and general forest type with the present-day Bandli Wildlife Sanctuary in Mandi District. If this continuity holds at the boundary level, which this study has not verified, it would offer a rare case in which an unexploited, non-reserved forest tract from the princely-era record can be traced forward into the post-independence protected-area system, independent of the shikar-preserve origins that, as argued above, characterise most of the gazetteer's other named forest tracts. Confirming or disconfirming this would require the same GIS-based boundary comparison already identified as a priority for future work (Section 5).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that Suket State's 1927 gazetteer, read alongside its own 1904 predecessor and the neighbouring Mandi gazetteers, yields more than a species inventory: it allows the state's forest and hunting administration to be dated and characterised with some precision. Four findings carry weight beyond Suket itself. First, the 1927 fauna list is not an independent 1920s observation but a verbatim carryover from 1904 — a reminder that gazetteer data of this kind needs to be dated to its point of original observation, not its publication year, before it can serve as an ecological baseline. Second, Suket's and Mandi's reserved forests were shikar preserves before they were anything resembling conservation measures: the clearest evidence for this, Mandi's own admission that reservation served "the provision of shooting preserves for the Rāja" rather than "forest conservancy" (Section 4), extends Hughes's (2009) argument about Rajput sovereignty and status — developed from the far larger and better-documented states of Mewar, Orchha, and Bikaner — to a smaller, comparatively obscure corner of the Punjab Hills that her study did not itself examine. Third, the gap between stated rule and enforced practice — visible in Suket's own unenforced poison-fishing ban and echoed in

Dunbar Brander's verdict on game rules generally — did not end with independence; it is one thread in the same institutional fabric that the 1948 Satyagraha unravelled, for reasons that had little to do with wildlife (Thakur, 2024). Fourth, though the study's documentary method precludes GIS-based confirmation, one princely-era tract, Dhar Bandli, can be matched by name and forest type to a present-day protected area, the Bandli Wildlife Sanctuary, offering a rare and independently testable point of continuity between princely-era and post-independence forest administration in the district (Section 3.3).

For conservation planning in present-day Mandi District, this history matters less as a source of ready-made policy and more as a corrective: it dates the earliest available species baseline correctly, and it separates the historical fact of forest reservation from any assumption that reservation once meant, or means now, ecological protection. The study's limits are the limits of its sources — documentary material compiled for revenue and administrative purposes, not ecological survey, and read without GIS or field verification of the place names it discusses. Testing the claims made here against present-day forest-department boundaries and satellite land-cover records is the natural next step, and the one this paper could not itself take.

Ethical Considerations

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None.

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This study is based entirely on published historical, archival, and documentary sources and did not involve human participants, live animal subjects, or field data collection. No ethical approval was therefore required beyond standard academic protocols governing the use and citation of archival material.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

This study analyses previously published archival and documentary sources; no new datasets were generated. All primary sources consulted are identified in the References, including their digitisation identifiers and repository locations, and are accessible through the Digital Library of India, the Himachal Pradesh State Archives (Shimla), and the Internet Archive.

Author Contributions

Shashi Kumar: conceptualisation, research of the archives, writing of the original manuscript. Dr. Rajesh Kumar Jha: oversight, examination and editing, confirmation of historical reading. Both the authors have also read the final copy of the manuscript and approved it.

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