

**RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL.** Please note: This film contains graphic scenes of violence, including the killing of a species of Tibetan antelope, which may not be appropriate for younger students. Please see Teacher's Note on page 2 of this lesson guide.

## *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (2004, d. Lu Chuan)

“Poverty turns them into slaughterers, killing the antelopes for only one reason – their own survival.” --Lu Chuan, director, *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*

Kekexili is a wild and remote region in Tibet’s Northern Plateau. The high altitude and harsh climate make living here very difficult for humans. And yet the region is home to many different species of wildlife, including the *chiru*, or Tibetan antelope. This film by director Lu Chuan transports students to this barren but majestically beautiful location where a band of volunteers have sworn to protect the endangered chiru from poachers who slaughter and skin the animals for their soft fur, called *shatoosh*. Based on real events and characters, *Mountain Patrol* is a riveting story of survival—man against man, man against nature.

The story begins with the murder of a patrol volunteer. A young photojournalist named Ga Yu travels from Beijing to the camp of the mountain patrol to investigate the story. Ri Tai, the captain of the patrol, reluctantly agrees to allow the reporter to join him and his men on a journey into the mountains of Kekexili in pursuit of the poachers. The journey quickly becomes much more than another news story for Ga Yu as he experiences firsthand the life and death struggle between the poachers, the patrol, and the land itself.

Based on real events and characters and shot on location in Tibet, this award-winning 2004 National Geographic World Film is a cautionary tale of justice and cultural identity. The film introduces students not only to the Tibetan landscape and the plight of the endangered chiru but also to basic Buddhist beliefs. The lessons that follow focus on the film’s narrative structure as well as the cultural and historical context of the film. In completing these lessons, students will also explore how film language and elements of style shape the film’s meaning and how the film itself expresses a unique aspect of China’s culture.

Lesson	Activity	Activity
<b>1: Into the Mountains—Establishing Characters, Setting and Conflict</b>	The Poachers and the Patrol	The Journey Begins
<b>2: Rising Action and Complications</b>	Conflict on the Cumar River	<i>Enrichment</i> —Survival
<b>3: The Bigger Picture—Themes to Discuss and Debate</b>	Humans vs. Nature	<i>Enrichment</i> —“Backstory and Beyond: Researching the Wild Yak Brigade and the Endangered Chiru”

# Lesson 1: Into the Mountains—Establishing Character, Setting and Conflict

## Activity A: The Poachers and the Patrol

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**Teacher’s Note:** The opening scenes include a real animal being shot and killed. The filmmakers did not shoot any endangered chirus but used a species of gazelle and costumed the animal with antelope antlers. Nevertheless, the image is real and graphic and students may find it disturbing.

Teachers should view the opening scenes to determine if they wish to address this issue and perhaps use it as a discussion point *once the entire film has been screened*. Questions may include: *Why would the filmmakers reenact the killing of an animal in their film? What purpose does this serve? Are these scenes necessary? How would your reaction to the characters and the conflict have differed if this scene were not included?* Some students may believe the graphic realism emphasizes the plight of the endangered chiru and the need for government protection. Others, however, may not agree. Some may find the scene disturbing and question why live animals were killed in a film about men who have vowed to protect Tibet’s wildlife.

- Introduce the setting for the story, providing a geographical context for students. Distribute **Handout 1: Mapping Kekexili**. Read the passage and discuss. Guided discussion questions follow.

### Guided Discussion

1. The Kekexili region is located approximately 16,000 feet (about three miles) above sea level. What physical effects do high elevations trigger in humans? *Answers will vary but should focus on the fact that as altitude increases, air pressure decreases. Lower air pressure results in less oxygen molecules in the air. Emphasize this key point: the human body requires oxygen to maintain physical stamina and mental alertness. At approximately 10,000 feet the amount of oxygen molecules decreases to the point where a person may struggle to walk or stay conscious.*
2. What is quicksand and why is it a risk to human and animal survival? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that the sand becomes so saturated with water that it cannot support weight. Emphasize that being caught in quicksand need not be a death sentence. However, panicking and struggling to free oneself can result in the person actually digging himself/herself deeper into the sand, and the deeper a person sinks—to the knees, to the waist—the more difficult it is to escape. Students should note that under certain conditions, quicksand can occur in many locations around the world and not just in the mountains of Kekexili.*
3. Why has the government of China begun a mapping project of Kekexili? *The land is so remote and harsh to human habitation that it has remained relatively unexplored. The government’s mapping project will determine which natural resources (minerals or fuel) may be found. The mapping project will also investigate environmental factors that affect the wildlife.*
4. *Mountain Patrol* is based on a true-life story of volunteers who banded together in the 1990s to protect the endangered Tibetan antelope from poachers. The film was made in 2004. The Chinese mapping expedition, however, did not begin until 2006. What conclusions can you make about the volunteers’ knowledge of the territory at the time they were patrolling Kekexili? *Their knowledge was limited. There were no maps for them to follow. There were few roads and those would not have been paved or maintained by a government. They would have traveled over the*

*land without knowing for certain where hazards like quicksand might be or where access to fresh water or game might be.*

- Explain to students that a basic understanding of Buddhist beliefs will help them better understand the characters and the conflicts expressed in the film they are about to watch. Share this information with students:

*Buddhism is a system of beliefs based on the teachings of Buddha, who lived in the fifth century BC in India. In Buddhism, the purpose of life is to end suffering. The Buddha taught that humans suffer because we continually strive after things that do not give lasting happiness. The Buddha also taught that the way to eliminate suffering begins with understanding the true nature of the world. People in countries around the world have practiced Buddhist beliefs, customs and traditions for more than 2,500 years. In Tibet, a large percentage of the population is Buddhist.*

- Distribute **Screening Sheet A—Sky Burial**. Complete the pre-screening activity, discussing the key points indicated on each “note.” Additional information on these important cultural and historical points is provided below.

#### Tibetan Prayer Wheel

*Mani* is the Tibetan word for the prayer wheel. Printed on rolls of thin paper inside the cylinder is the mantra, or prayer, *Om Mani Padme Hum*. The six syllables have no one single translation but refer in general to the connection between the self (or individual) and the universe.

#### Stupa

The stupa is a religious architectural form that usually has three parts: a foundation or base (often whitewashed) that represents the Buddha’s lotus throne, a cylinder, and a steeple. The size and style of the stupa range from very large structures to miniatures which an individual may carry. According to [travelchinaguide.com](http://travelchinaguide.com), “Building a stupa and any other work done on it are considered work of the highest purity and merit. Buddhists always show their devotion by circling the stupa clockwise. Doing this can also accumulate merit.”

#### Sky Burial

Emphasize that while Americans may view the funeral rite known as sky burial as rather gruesome, this is not how it is viewed by Tibetans. The rite is sacred. Students should keep in mind that Tibetans believe a person’s spirit departs the physical body at the moment of death. Tibetans also regard the vulture with respect. They believe that vultures will carry the individual’s spirit into the heavens. By witnessing a sky burial, Tibetans openly face death and accept it. Only the funeral party is present at the burial. Tibetans strongly object to visits by the merely curious and photography is strictly forbidden.

- **View chapters 1 - 4 on the DVD.** Allow time for students to record their observations in part 2, then discuss.

#### Answer Key for Screening Sheet A—Sky Burial

1. What is the first image shown in this film? *A man with his head on the steering wheel of a vehicle. Encourage students to discuss the image and what they thought had happened. Was he asleep? Was he dead?*

2. Why do you think the director started the movie with shots of poachers killing the antelope? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea of establishing from the onset a conflict. The patrol volunteers, bound with ropes, struggle to prevent the men from shooting the animals. Again, ask students to comment on the opening shots. Did they find these disturbing? That was likely the director's purpose. The opening is also quite compelling. The viewer wants to know what is happening and why, and so interest is aroused.*
3. On the day Ga Yu arrives a funeral is taking place. What is the significance of this funeral? What does this scene suggest about Tibetan burial customs? *This is the volunteer killed in the opening scenes. He is mourned by the mountain patrol. The scene also introduces one of the main characters, Ri Tai. Students' responses will vary as to what the scene suggests about Tibetan burial customs. Direct their discussion to the reverence the mourners display, their solemn postures and expressions. Direct student attention also to the director's choice of visuals – wind, vultures – suggesting that death is a natural part of life.*
4. Why has Ga Yu come to the camp of the Kekexili Mountain Patrol? What does he want? *As a reporter from a large city newspaper, he is investigating the disappearance and death of a member of the volunteer patrol. He wants to interview Ri Tai and get a story. Emphasize that he has not come to protect the antelope.*
5. Who is Ri Tai, and what does he want? *Ri Tai is the leader of the mountain patrol, although this is not stated directly. This is implicit information suggested by his stance – the other men stand behind him and follow his orders. Ri Tai does not state directly what he wants but when Ga Yu states that he can help Ri Tai have the land declared a nature preserve, Ri Tai agrees to take him in.*
6. In film as well as in literature, one way to reveal the character traits of an individual is through behavior. What does Ga Yu's behavior during the burial ceremony suggest about him? *He removes his hat and this suggests reverence. He understands the solemn nature of the ceremony. He turns away as the monk begins to dismember the body (although the dismembering is not seen, it is suggested). This behavior reveals that he likely is uncomfortable or perhaps upset. Emphasize that Ga Yu is not shocked. Likely he has heard of sky burials but also likely he has not witnessed one prior to this.*
7. Another way to reveal character traits in film is through the reactions or opinions of others. How do the children react to Ga Yu? How do they react when they hear Ri Tai's name? What do these reactions suggest about both men? *The children follow Ga Yu and clown for his camera. When he mentions Ri Tai's name, they run away. Although Ga Yu is a stranger, they are not afraid of him. Ri Tai is known by all in the village and perhaps a little feared.*
8. In these opening scenes, some of the men carry guns. What does this suggest? *Upon screening the film for the first time, the viewer must piece together the images to determine what is happening. Which men are the patrol volunteers and which are the poachers? Both carry guns. In the village, an armed man walks along a rooftop, suggesting that the men of the mountain patrol face danger even in their homes.*
9. As Ga Yu enters the courtyard of Ri Tai's home, what does he see? *He sees dozens of animal pelts spread over the ground.*
10. Alone in his room, Ga Yu reviews some "documents." What are these documents and why might he have them? *They are photographs of the patrol, including Ri Tai, but also*

*photographs of murdered patrol volunteers. These images are the reason Ga Yu has come to this place, they are part of the research for his story.*

11. Who is telling the story? How do you know? *Ga Yu is the narrator who, in a voice-over, states that his newspaper sent him to the camp. Emphasize this key point: Reading the subtitles is necessary to understanding that Ga Yu is the narrator.*
12. "Tibetans always point knives at themselves," Ri Tai tells Ga Yu over dinner. Discuss this statement. What do you think it means? What does it tell you about Ga Yu? *Ri Tai is correcting the way Ga Yu is holding his knife, pointing it outward toward others. Ga Yu responds by changing his grip and pointing the knife inward. This suggests that Ga Yu, although an outsider, takes no offense and is willing to live as the patrol lives. As for what the phrase means, answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that pointing a knife at yourself can be dangerous should you lose your grip.*

- Conclude this activity by sharing, then discussing with students this quote from the film's director, Lu Chuan:

*I needed a journalist to use as a mirror, to reflect the events. But his observations are from an outsider's perspective; I wished for him to express my own reactions. When I went to Kekexili, it was a very affecting experience -- seeing all the antelope carcasses, vultures circling around -- but we're mostly viewing the situation from an outsider's perspective.*

Ask:

1. Is Lu Chuan from Kekexili? *No. Students must infer from this statement that Lu Chuan, like the character Ga Yu, had come to this special place.*
2. What does the director mean by the phrase "affecting experience?" *Affect means to influence. The director is saying that going on location to Kekexili to tell this story was an emotional experience.*

## **Activity B: The Journey Begins**

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- Distribute **Handout 2: Chiru!** Read and discuss each passage separately. Guided discussion questions follow.

Guided Discussion

Part 1: Captain Rawling's Sighting, 1903

1. How many doe antelope did Captain Rawling and the others see while camped on the Northern Plateau in Tibet? *No one could accurately estimate as there were so many thousands. The chiru were moving westward and as they did so, more came into view. Rawling's best guess was 15,000 – 20,000 in sight at one time, suggesting there were in fact thousands more still out of sight.*

Part 2: Report from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2006

2. How many years have passed since Rawling's sighting of the chiru (passage 1) and the official report presented here (passage 2)? *About one century, or 103 years*
  3. How has the chiru population changed during this period? *There has been a drastic reduction in the population, reports the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, perhaps as much as 85 percent.*
  4. How has development of this once remote land contributed to the endangered status of the chiru? *Roads have been built and people have greater access to automobiles and so can travel over land that is the chiru's habitat. This makes it easier for poachers to find the animals and transport the skins out of the area.*
  5. What is shahtoosh? *Antelope fur or wool, considered to be among the very best wool in the world*
  6. How is shahtoosh used in other countries? *The wool is illegally transported to other countries, including the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir where the wool is woven into scarves and shawls.*
- Distribute **Screening Sheet B—Shahtoosh**.
  - **View chapters 5 - 8 on the DVD.** Allow time for students to record their observations, then discuss. Recommend answers are below.

**Answer Key for Screening Sheet B—Shahtoosh**

1. Describe the scene in which the men depart the village for their patrol through the mountain range. What are the men and their families feeling and how does the filmmaker suggest this? *The men depart rather quickly during the night. Families hug, kiss goodbye. The men seem genuinely determined to go on this mission but they understand that they may not return alive. Ri Tai's daughter, for example, cries. Another woman tells her man, "Come back alive."*
2. Why does the patrol set up a checkpoint on the road? What authority do they have over other travelers in the region? *They are looking for poachers or carriers, people who might smuggle the shahtoosh from the region. The patrol is rough with the travelers and will fine them but they have no authority to arrest them. The people traveling in the truck do not challenge the patrol and seem to recognize that the patrol has some authority to do road checks.*
3. Describe the behavior of the men as they arrive and camp for a time at the Budong Springs Conservation Station. *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that they are happy to see one another. The men hug and laugh and joke, and later sing and dance. But there is also sadness in learning of the death of a fellow patrol volunteer.*
4. In this sequence of scenes, how does the filmmaker capture the vastness of the Kekexili landscape? Cite specific images. *In many scenes, the director uses long shots to show the smallness of an individual or of the trucks against an expanse of mountains that seem to continue into an endless horizon. One specific image students may comment upon is when*

*the patrol leaves Budong Springs and the attendant stands alone and watches the vehicles becoming smaller and smaller.*

5. The fishermen are not poachers. Why does the patrol fine them? *They have no license for fishing.*
6. When the patrol comes across a field of hundreds of slaughtered antelope, they gather the carcasses and bury them. Why? What does this scene suggest about the relationship of the men to the animals, to nature? *When they bury/burn the carcasses, they are showing respect for the animal. Emphasize that as the flame burns, the men circle the fire counterclockwise, their right shoulder to the memorial, also a sign of respect. They chant. Some students may note, however, that Ga Yu does not participate in this. He is the outsider, the “city boy” who is learning the customs of these Tibetan people.*

- Conclude this lesson by sharing with students this information about the mountain patrol and the illegal shahtoosh trade:

*According to an August 2000 article that appeared in the Los Angeles Times, poachers were paid a little less than \$100 per pelt. For most, this amount is “a small fortune.” In general, the skins of three animals are needed to make a scarf of shahtoosh. The scarf may sell for a minimum of \$1,400 and often much more, in western countries.*

*The mountain patrol portrayed in this film is based on a real organization of volunteers called the Wild Yak Brigade. The character of Ri Tai is also based on a real person known as Suonandajie. In 1992 when he arrived in Kekexili, the estimated population of chiru was about 200,000. By the time the L.A. Times article was published, the population had dropped to about 50,000.*

Ask:

1. Does knowing that the film is based on a true story make it more—or less—interesting? Why or why not? *Answers will vary. Accept all reasonable responses.*
2. What challenges might a director face when telling a fictional story based on real people and real events? *Answers will vary. Emphasize this key point: Just because a film is based on a true story does not mean the story is an accurate retelling of what happened. Many artists, both writers and filmmakers, use real events and characters as the basis for fictional stories. However, they do not always stick to the facts. In particular, writers and filmmakers interpret those events and often create fictional scenes and even characteristics to help explain why an event happened or progressed the way it did.*

## Lesson 2: Rising Action and Complications

### Activity C: Conflict on the Cumar River

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- Introduce the next screening sheet by distributing and discussing **Handout 3: Kekexili Diary**. Recommended discussion questions are below.

#### Guided Discussion

1. What risks did Director Lu Chuan take by shooting this particular scene on location in the Kekexili Mountains? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that the inclement weather and high altitude endangered the actors and the crew.*
  2. Why did the director make this decision if it were so risky? *Answers will vary. Most will infer from the diary entries that the director wanted to capture the real Kekexili on film, giving the story authenticity.*
- Distribute **Screening Sheet C—Conflict on the Cumar River**. Explain that these next scenes will reintroduce them to the poachers. In the opening scene of the film, they saw the poachers killing the antelope. These next scenes, however, paint a different portrait of the men and provide some explanation as to why they break the law.
  - **View chapters 9 - 15 on the DVD.** Allow time for students to record their observations, then discuss. Recommended answers are below.

#### Answer Key for Screening Sheet C—Conflict on the Cumar River

1. The patrol finds an abandoned jeep. How do they know it belongs to the poachers? *Ri Tai finds a piece of antelope fur on the seat.*
2. Why does the patrol burn the jeep before moving on? *Students must infer that destroying the poachers' property is one way to limit their ability to move across the chiru's habitat.*
3. Why does the patrol remove their pants before crossing the river? *Again students must infer that the climate is such that the clothing would freeze, and as the scenes thus far have shown no wooded areas (to provide a source of fuel for heating), they remove their clothing to keep it dry.*
4. Ga Yu has no gun. This is not his fight. Why then does he, too, remove his pants and cross the river? *As a photojournalist, Ga Yu has come on this journey in order to document the situation. To get compelling photographs, he must go where the poachers and the patrol go.*
5. The wounded poacher dies. How does Ri Tai react and what does this tell you about Ri Tai? *Initially, he questions the young man, asking his name and age and if he killed any antelope. When the poacher dies, Ri Tai prays for him. Student response on what this scene suggests about Ri Tai's character will vary, but should focus on the main idea that he is a spiritual (some students may use the word "religious") man. His prayers reflect his reverence for the young man even though the man is a poacher.*

6. Why do you think the director included this scene with the dying poacher? What might the director want us, the viewers, to know—or to feel? *Answers will vary. Some students may suggest that the scene helps the viewer to see the poacher as a real person, someone young who does not want to die. Others may indicate that the scene shows Ri Tai as formidable, someone who is willing to risk a great deal for his cause, and that this conflict is one of life and death for both the poachers and the patrol. Emphasize that Ri Tai did not intentionally let the young man die. Because the bullet hit an artery, there was no way they could stop the bleeding.*
7. Among the poachers is an old man, whose name is Ma Zhanlin. Do you recall seeing this old man earlier in the film? If so, in what scene? *Very observant students may recall that Ma Zhanlin was one of the poachers who, in the opening scene, was looking through the car window at the patrol volunteer asleep at the wheel.*
8. The poachers have no guns and no pelts. Why does the patrol handcuff them? *Students must infer that the patrol has captured them in order to bring them to justice.*
9. What does this sequence of scenes reveal about Ma Zhanlin? *Ri Tai knows him by name and has apparently encountered him before as he asks the old man what he has to say “this time.” Later, in the truck, the old man tells the reporter that he is the fastest skinner in the region and that his sons are also skinners. He also reveals why he skins the animals—he does it to survive. He had herded cattle and other animals before, but the grasslands have turned to desert.*
10. Ri Tai has captured the skinners but not the gunmen. He also has one volunteer who is wounded. Why does he not turn back with his prisoners? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that Ri Tai believes he is close to capturing the gunmen.*
11. What does the scene where the truck is stuck in the ice reveal about Kekexili? About the patrol? About the poachers? *The scene reveals still another aspect of the hostile environment, the difficulty and danger of traveling long distances across this region. The scene also reveals that the patrol are a brotherhood, a team that works together to solve problems. The poachers, even Ma Zhanlin, although forced to assist in pushing/pulling the truck free, actually seem to get some satisfaction from the task.*
12. This sequence of scenes ends at camp at night with two patrol volunteers staring up at the sky. Describe the mood of this scene. What do you think the director wants you to notice or pay attention to and to feel? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea of the grandness and peacefulness of the Kekexili wilderness. The patrol men’s statements—they long for home but also long for the stark beauty of Kekexili, unmarred by humans—is one of the themes of this film.*

- Share with students the following lines, the subtitled translation of the song the men sing in camp at night. They sing this while passing among themselves a cup, sharing it.

*Like flowing water  
 Oh, dear mother  
 No matter how far I travel  
 I shall return  
 No matter how far I travel  
 Clouds of brilliant white  
 Please deliver my message*

*I long for home.*

Ask:

What do you think the director wishes the viewer to realize about Kekexili and the mountain patrol? *Answers will vary but should focus on the themes of melancholy and/or brotherhood. Visually, sharing the cup—each man drinking from the same cup—symbolizes their unity. Students should note, for example, that while the patrol shares its food with the prisoners, this scene—with four patrol volunteers within the same frame—emphasizes their personal bond. The soundtrack, i.e., their singing, likewise signifies a common cause and desire.*

- Write these words on the chalkboard: *vigilante, hero, martyr, bully*. Ask students which word (or words) they would use to describe the character of Ri Tai. *Answers will vary but encourage students to explore Ri Tai's motives as well as his behavior. What are his strengths? What are his flaws? Some students may suggest other words. If so, add these to the list. Remind students that they will learn more about Ri Tai's character as the story progresses and that they may alter their judgment of him.*
- Conclude the activity by asking the students to predict what will happen next. Will Ri Tai capture the gunmen? Will Ma Zhanlin and his sons be punished? What sort of story will Ga Yu write about the poachers and the mountain patrol? Will he side with one or the other? Will the endangered chiru be saved?

#### **Activity D: Enrichment—Survival**

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- Before viewing the remainder of the film (running time is approximately 40:00), share with students this observation, written by movie critic Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times*:

*Mountain Patrol comes off . . . like a Chinese version of an old Hollywood western, complete with emotional goodbyes to loved ones as the patrol heads out into the unknown like a John Ford cavalry unit.*

- Explain that John Ford is a famous American film director who made many classic westerns, some of which starred John Wayne in a grizzled, swaggering hero's role.

Ask:

1. Do you agree or disagree with Turan that this film is similar to a classic American western? If so, why? If not, why not? *Answers will vary. Some students may comment on the land itself being a sort of unsettled frontier where poachers break the law and the patrol takes the law into its own hands, like a vigilante group.*
  2. Is Ri Tai a swaggering John Wayne-like hero? *Again answers will vary – dependent, of course, on students' knowledge of Hollywood westerns and the roles portrayed by actor Wayne. Certainly Ri Tai believes he is justified in doing what he does, and even risks the lives of his patrol in order to complete his mission.*
- Introduce the final screening activity. In these final scenes, students will learn the outcome of Ri Tai's determination to capture the gunmen. After viewing the scenes, students should be prepared to discuss

whether Ri Tai's actions are noble or foolhardy. They should also be able to make a connection between Ma Zhanlin, the old man, and the fate of both Ri Tai and Ga Yu.

- **Screen the DVD, chapters 16 – 28.** Teachers, please note: There is no screening sheet for this activity. Instead, guided discussion questions are provided below.

### Guided Discussion, Part 1: What Happens?

1. Why does Ri Tai let the prisoners go? *He has not enough food to feed them and he is running out of fuel. More importantly, he is more interested in capturing the leader of the poachers and not those who work for him.*
2. When the old man, Ma Zhanlin, tells Ri Tai that he cannot survive if he is abandoned in the barren land, Ri Tai tells him he can but if he does not, then it is “his fate.” What does this tell you about Ri Tai's sense of justice? *Answers will vary. Some students may argue that he is leaving the poacher's fate up to nature. Others may argue that he would have been more humane to shoot him rather than let him suffer. Emphasize this point—when Ga Yu asks Ri Tai (later, in the truck) if Ma Zhanlin can make it out alive, Ri Tai does not answer. This is intentional. No one knows anyone's fate. But as the movie progresses, students will see that Ri Tai's fate is linked to the old man's.*
3. What are some of the obstacles the mountain patrol faces? *Answers should include one or more of the following: the land itself is rugged, so high in elevation that it strains the body because oxygen is minimal; the men lack vehicles and supplies, including gasoline and radios to communicate, and those supplies they do have often break; they are outnumbered – a patrol of just two dozen men against a legion of poachers.*
4. When Ri Tai and Ga Yu finally confront “the boss,” who is also there? *Ma Zhanlin. Although outnumbered—he is alone with only Ga Yu and is surrounded by the poachers who train their rifles on him – Ri Tai refuses to barter with the boss.*
5. What does the boss offer to give Ri Tai in exchange for the captain leaving him alone? Do you believe him? How does Ri Tai respond? *This is a critical scene in the film. The boss (interestingly, he has no name; in a sense, he is a nobody, not worth naming) offers Ri Tai cars and a house – in short, wealth. This reveals the motive behind the poaching—wealth from selling the pelts; it also reveals why the Tibetans who work for the boss do so – as Ma Zhanlin says, he is kind and wealthy. Whether the boss actually intends to keep this bargain, however, is questionable. He is smiling derisively as he makes the offer. Ri Tai responds by demanding that the boss and his men surrender their guns and come with him. It is an outlandish suggestion, given that Ri Tai at this moment is unarmed and completely vulnerable. Still, it underscores his sense of justice.*
6. When the boss jokes that he and his men will join the captain's mountain patrol, Ri Tai also laughs, then punches the boss. This is when the fatal shot is fired. After the boss shoots Ri Tai (who is wounded but not yet dead), he and the others walk away. Only one of the poachers remains to stare at the body. Who remains behind, and why do you think the filmmaker shot the scene this way? *Ma Zhanlin. This particular scene is certainly open to interpretation. Perhaps he feels regret or sorrow. He did show respect for Ri Tai when he was alive and Ri Tai had spared his life, or at least had given him a chance to survive, earlier in the film. Even when he begins to walk away, he*

*hesitates, turns and looks again at Ri Tai's body. Finally, he tells Ga Yu how to find his way out of the mountains to the highway.*

7. Why is Ga Yu not killed? *He is not one of Ri Tai's men.*
  8. The final scene is another burial. How does this scene differ from the one that opened the film? *Ri Tai's daughter sits beside her father's body and cries softly as the monks prepare the body for burial. The audience does not see the final act of burial – that is, whether he, too, will be placed on the hillside, face down. This scene, however, is darker and dimly lit, as opposed to the opening scene on the hillside.*
- Extend the discussion of the film. The guided discussion questions below focus not on what happened, but rather what the story means and the film's themes.

### Guided Discussion, Part 2: What Is the Story About?

7. Ri Tai is a retired military officer. In your opinion, why has he chosen to devote his life now to fighting a poacher of the Tibetan antelopes in the Kekexili mountain range? *Answers will vary. As someone with military experience, he is using skills he has already honed. His military past gives him status with the others who continue to call him "captain."*
8. Do you think Ga Yu understood the dangers of the journey he was about to take with Ri Tai? If he had, would he have gone? Explain why you do or do not think so. *Answers will vary. He states as the film begins that his newspaper sent him on this assignment, suggesting he is simply doing his job. But later in the film he reveals that he and his girlfriend broke up just before he came on this trip.*
9. How has the journey into the mountains of Kekexili changed Ga Yu? *Stress this important detail about Ga Yu: he is an outsider. He says his father was Tibetan but he has lived in the city. The scene in which the men correct him in how he carves his meat (knife pointing outward rather than inward) and the scene in which the men skin, chop, and then eat the rabbit both illustrate the difference between Ga Yu and the other members of the patrol. By the end of the film, Ga Yu is no longer an outsider. He has an understanding of the Tibetan people that he didn't have before the journey began.*
10. Ri Tai's daughter dresses in traditional Tibetan clothing and wears her hair in tightly woven braids, which is also a Tibetan custom for women. Compare her appearance to those of the other women in the film. How do they differ and what does this difference tell you about modern Tibet? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that both traditional and modern ways are mingling in modern-day China and Tibet. The difference in attire illustrates also a difference in behavior. Ri Tai's daughter respectfully serves her father and his men. The girl "in the fishnets," on the other hand, sings and plays a drinking game in a bar.*
11. Is Ri Tai's death tragic? Provide a reason why you do or do not think so. *Answers will vary. Some students may suggest that he died as he lived, true to his beliefs, and so his death was not a tragedy. He knew the dangers of his mission and never wavered. Others may state that because he*

died, he helped to generate awareness of the plight of the antelope and the need for land preservation in Tibet.

- Conclude this activity by asking students to comment on the following statement: *A good film does more than tell a compelling story. It also gets the viewer thinking. What questions does this film leave you with? What specifically do you want to know more about?*

## Lesson 3: The Bigger Picture—Themes to Discuss and Debate

### Activity E: Humans vs. Nature

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- Tap students' knowledge of conflict, specifically humans vs. nature, by asking them to suggest some stories or films they have read or seen that explore this. Students may recall reading Jack London's short story *To Build a Fire*, Gary Paulsen's novel *Hatchet*, or the film *Into the Wild* (2007, d. Sean Penn) are some examples. Emphasize that in *Kekexili*, nature is integral to the story.

Ask:

How does *Kekexili* explore this theme of humans struggling to survive nature? Encourage students to cite specific scenes. *Answers will vary but many will cite the scene of the patrol member dying in the quicksand. Other examples include the members becoming lost in the snow, the freezing temperatures, and the lack of oxygen.*

Can nature be both beautiful and deadly at the same time? How does the filmmaker capture the beauty of *Kekexili*? *Answers will vary. Accept all reasonable responses.*

Can a landscape (or setting) be a character in a story? If so, how? If not, why not? *Answers will vary. Accept all reasonable responses.*

- Write on the chalkboard or overhead projector the term *human nature*. Then share this information with students:

*Human nature is the belief that all humans share common characteristics. These characteristics include behavior and thought processes and emotions. These characteristics are, in part, what make us human. Not everyone agrees, however, on what these characteristics are. For example, is it human nature to fall in love? To be jealous? To be self-centered? To be compassionate to others? Experts in human behavior and human psychology have studied and attempted to answer such questions.*

- Discuss the difference between *humans vs. nature* and *human nature*. Human nature will determine, in part, how an individual reacts in certain situations, including surviving in a remote setting like *Kekexili*.
- View **chapter 7 of *Kekexili*, “Day 3: Zhuonai Lake”**. The opening shots in this chapter provide insight to human nature, as least as interpreted by the filmmaker. Students should closely observe Ga

Yu's reaction as well as the reaction of the patrol members and Ri Tai when they discover the carcasses at the lake. A few minutes later in the scene, when Ri Tai strikes the boy, Ga Yu also reacts and students should observe this reaction shot closely, as well.

#### Guided Discussion

1. How does Ga Yu react when he sees the carcasses? *He stares. His expression is somber. Even when he begins walking, he continues to look around at the remains. What he is thinking is not clear, of course, but the camera's close-up on his face suggests that we—the audience—should note his reaction. The fact that he doesn't talk suggests he is still processing, or making sense, of what he is seeing.*
  2. How are the patrol members reacting? *They, too, stand and stare with solemn expressions. Emphasize that no one is smiling or inattentive. This is a serious situation that affects them.*
  3. How is Ri Tai's reaction somewhat different from the others? *While he, too, stares, he later curses the poachers who have done this.*
  4. How did you react during this scene, especially now that you are seeing it a second time? *Answers will vary. Many may say that they felt disgust, surprise, shock, or anger.*
  5. How did the soundtrack affect your response? *Answers will vary. Note that the soundtrack includes not only the musical score but also the very clearly heard snaps of the vultures' beaks and beating of wings.*
  6. When Ri Tai strikes the boy and says "Don't lie to us," the filmmaker shows us Ga Yu's reaction. Why? *Answers will vary. Perhaps the director wants the audience to note Ga Yu's surprise at Ri Tai's use of violence.*
  7. What does this scene suggest about human nature? *Answers will vary. Some may say that humans are compassionate and are upset by the brutal killing of animals. Others may argue that humans killed the animals and so this scene suggests that some humans, at least, are self-centered—killing the animals for their own gain or survival.*
- Rescreen, if time allows and discussion warrants, additional scenes that provide insight to human nature. In chapter 11 "Talk," for example, Ma Zhalin turns in the man who hired them. Is this human nature? In this scene also, the patrol threatens the man in order to make him talk. Is using violence to get what you want out of somebody also "human nature"?
  - Conclude this activity by asking students to debate whether Ri Tai's behavior is morally right or if it is self-centered. Ask students to think critically about Ri Tai's characteristics. Is he self-centered and egotistic or is he an idealist? Is it "normal" human nature to risk the lives of men in order to accomplish a greater good?

## Activity F: Extension Activity—Backstory and Beyond: Researching the Wild Yak Brigade and the Endangered Chiru

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- Define *backstory*, explaining the difference between a *backstory* in a fiction narrative and backstory in journalism. Share with students these key points:

### Fictional backstory

In fiction, the backstory is the background information about the characters or the events—things that happened prior to the start of the story. As the story progresses, elements of the backstory are revealed.

### Nonfiction backstory

In nonfiction, including journalism, backstory provides details on how the writer/reporter came to write the story, providing details on how the research and writing developed.

- Introduce the activity by distributing **Handout 4: Backstory and Beyond—Researching the Wild Yak Brigade and the Endangered Chiru**. Explain that this is a collaborative learning activity, meaning that students will work in a group of three or four to create a nonfiction backstory on the real events and people represented in the film *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*. Each person within the group will complete a section of the research assignment, then contribute their findings to the group. Each group will present their findings on an information wall.
- Allow time for students to complete their research and group reports.
- Post group reports on an information wall—a display that may include the groups’ photographs, quotations, Internet research sites, etc.
- Ask students to write an essay on how the information they researched on both the Wild Yak Brigade and the endangered chiru enhanced their understanding of the film *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol*. If time allows, you may consider re-screening the film or selected scenes.