

Vishal Ahuja wins the Sanctuary Nature Foundation's Mud on Boots Project Award!

VISHAL AHUJA

LOCATION
Chamba Valley, Chamba district,
Himachal Pradesh

OCCUPATION
Project Assistant,
Wildlife Information Liaison
Development Society

NOMINATED BY
Payal B. Molur, Wildlife Educator

A resident of Chamba Valley, Vishal was hired by the Himalayan Grey Langur Project when it received the Conservation Leadership Award in 2012, and receives limited support from Wildlife Information Liaison Development Society. For the past eight years, he has been documenting the wild dietary preferences of the Himalayan grey



COURTESY: VISHAL AHUJA

langur, rhesus macaque and Himalayan black bear in the fragmented landscape around Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary. He has observed that the lack of adequate habitat has resulted in increased human-wildlife interactions, such as crop-raiding of agricultural fields and accidental attacks by bears.

With support from SNF, Vishal seeks to initiate a long-term habitat restoration project that will include setting up a native plant nursery, collecting and germinating wild native plants, and rewilding abandoned terraced farmlands with the consent and support of the landowners. Dedicated, passionate and diligent, Vishal is a wonderful community liaison. He believes his project will ultimately provide food and habitat to wild species, while reducing crop depredation. Vishal's work will be guided by Dr. Sanjay Molur, Executive Director, Zoo Outreach Organisation.

When I first met him with Martina Anandam and Tariq Ahmad in Chamba, Vishal, one of the three Conservation Leadership Program awardees to work on the Chamba Sacred Langur, had been introduced to us by his mentor Bipin Rathore of the Government College. Vishal had volunteered on several Brown Bear jaunts while also teaching part time at the college. It's wonderful to have youngsters working on wildlife and conservation issues wherever the interests and the opportunities lie, but to continue working in one's own backyard takes determination. Vishal, a resident of Chamba has been involved, since its inception, with the Himalayan Langur Project in 2012. He has, with his team, studied the distribution, threats, and the conservation status of 'Gaula', the Chamba Sacred Langur.

He went on to study the dietary preferences of the langur and has until date established up to 25 native species the langur's feed on in the wild. His botany background has helped him to document the plant species; he maintains a herbarium collection at home with more than 250 native species of Himalayan flora growing in the region in and around the Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary, one of the last refuges for the langur in the valley.

It's his interest and dedication that merited a nomination to the Sanctuary award, and it gives me great pleasure to announce his winning the award. Thank you, Sanctuary Asia, for recognizing Vishal and his work.

I look forward to the new areas of research and conservation action based on the eight years of baseline work, and Vishal has already made the right moves with one of his inherent skills of collaborations, working together with the forest department and the local farmers.

He is a great musician continuously honing his skills on playing different instruments like the guitar, flute, harmonium, and drums in his man cave at home. He is also part of the local music band of friends and performs at various occasions.

Great going Vishal, and Congratulations!

