

Vishal Ahuja's conservation journey - a loopy tale



During the IUCN Primates Red List Assessment in 2010 it came to notice that there was very little data on the endemic Chamba Sacred Langur *Semnopithecus ajax*. In order to collect more data and of this species Wildlife Information Liaison Development (WILD) launched the 'The Himalayan Langur Project' in 2012.

The project was kickstarted by Martina Anandam, Tariq Ahmad, and Vishal Ahuja with the guidance of Dr. Sanjay Molur. Vishal Ahuja has a background in Botany and Zoology, and he is native to the town of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh. Chamba is located at an altitude of 1,006 m above mean sea level on the banks of the Ravi River, at its confluence with the Sal River. The terrain is rugged and hilly, and it receives snowfall in winters.

Over the years, 90% of Chamba Valley's oak, pine, and broad-leaved forests have been replaced by a mosaic of terrace agriculture. Only a negligible fragment of ~17 km² of protected forest is left at the Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary. Due to the fragmented forests and the conversion of forests to agricultural land there is not enough food plants in the home range for the Chamba Sacred Langurs, Rhesus Macaques, Black Bears, and the Himalayan Porcupine, making them use the land in between fragmented forests and thus, raid crops.

The objective in the first phase of 'The Himalayan Langur Project' was to understand the taxonomy of the Chamba Sacred Langur, its distribution range, mapping of conflict zones and the threats to conservation. This was done through field surveys and community interviews. Of the 244 sites surveyed, the team found out that the Chamba Sacred Langur was found in 124 sites. Of these 124 sites, 76 reported conflicts with Langurs due to crop raiding. During this phase the long-standing taxonomic ambiguity about the Himalayan Langurs, *Semnopithecus ajax* and *Semnopithecus hector* were resolved on morphological basis.

Vishal and his colleagues from WILD also began conducting education and outreach programs and workshops in schools and communities. A book called ACHAMBA was created by Brenda de Groot and the WILD team.

The communities were educated about Gaula, which is the local name for the Chamba Sacred Langur. Up until the workshop the locals did not know that Gaula was endemic to their region, but once they knew there were small changes in the way they viewed Gaula and there was a

sense of pride around it. Once there was a pride around Gaula they worked towards coexistence.

Vishal and the team at WILD also collaborated with the forest department in Chamba to educate the tourist guides about plant identification and equipped and empowered them to share scientific information regarding their identification and importance with tourists. Vishal also takes under trainee forest officers in and around Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary for botany tours.

In the second phase of the project Vishal surveyed 51 villages to find out the crop yield lost due to crop raiding. During the study 100% of the respondents claimed that Maize was the most vulnerable crop followed by Barley (43% respondents), 30% respondents responded that wheat was the least vulnerable to damage caused by animals. The results of the survey showed that on average 57% expected yield was lost due to crop raiding. This staggering number made it clear that the communities were severely impacted from crop raiding from the economic aspect. And it goes without saying that for conservation to be successful the support of the local community is required, the situation here was tricky because the community was directly impacted by the wildlife.

In order to mitigate the Human-Animal interaction, in the third phase of the project Vishal focused on understanding the plants the animals feed on. For this he sampled



the vegetation in Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary and other areas in Chamba. The total number of plants he sampled and identified to date are 247 species. His observation and records to date show that the langurs, bears, and macaques feed on 25 species of plants.

With the knowledge of what the animals feed on, the final phase of the project was to restore the native vegetation to mitigate the human-wildlife interactions. Another

goal was to improve the sustainability of livelihoods in Chamba.

To achieve both these goals Vishal has partnered with the local farmers to plant a few native trees in their farms. The idea behind this is that the animals are anyways coming to the farm to raid, but if they have their native foods, they will go for that over crops like maize.

In July 2020 the pilot project for restoration began. A total of 110 plants (6 species) were planted in a farm near Gujnui. In February 2021 more native plants were planted in three villages around Chamba. And in June 2021 over 300 native plants were planted around the Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary.

In June 2021 Vishal won the Mud on Boots Project by Sanctuary Nature Foundation. The Mud on Boots project has leaders who may not fit the mold, but are self-motivated, dedicated, knowledgeable, innovative, eager to learn, and are making a real difference on the ground, often against formidable odds. The research and restoration efforts achieved thus far by Vishal is no easy feat. The climatic conditions like extremely cold temperatures and snowfall allows him to do field work only in certain months. The terrain he works in is arduous and unforgiving. One of his allies and supporters in the journey of research and restoration is the Forest Department in Chamba.

Besides the research and restoration work Vishal does, Vishal is also a part of a band. He can play seven instruments. He is also

a fitness enthusiast and treks the mountains with his friends. In future he plans to have more education and outreach programs with the help of forest department in communities and schools surrounding Khajjiar-Kalatop WS to encourage and educate them to plant and nurture native food plants preferred by wildlife to reduce crop-raiding and to combat the climate crisis.

Vardhini Suresh
RHATC Fellow, 2021–22,
Zoo Outreach
Organization, Coimbatore,
Tamil Nadu, India.