

Vishal Ahuja's local - vocal conservation action

Vishal Ahuja is a conservationist who is leading the Chamba Sacred Langur project in the Chamba valley of Himachal Pradesh. Being an awardee of the 'Mud on boots' project by the Sanctuary Nature Foundation, he's working on the restoration of land for the conservation of Himalayan Langur, also known as Chamba Sacred Langur (*Semnopithecus ajax*) at Wildlife Information Liaison Development (WILD) and Zoo Outreach Organisation (Zooreach). On 9 November 2022, we, the RHATC 2022–23 Fellows had an opportunity to interact with Vishal and learn about his conservation journey.

Vishal grew up in the Chamba valley of Himachal Pradesh. Chamba is a threatened landscape that's located near the Ravi river in confluence with the Sal river. The main vegetation found here consists of oak, pine, and broadleaved forests. Vishal was 14 years old when he started hiking around the mountains of Chamba. Thus he was familiar with the landscape of Chamba from a very early age. During his bachelor's study, he met Dr. Vipin C. Rathore, a science educator. It was Dr. Rathore, who later informed Vishal about the opportunity to work on the project by WILD and Vishal happily took it.

The Chamba Sacred Langur project had a holistic approach as Vishal knew that local communities were also a part of the solution. The main issue to resolve was the negative interaction between the people

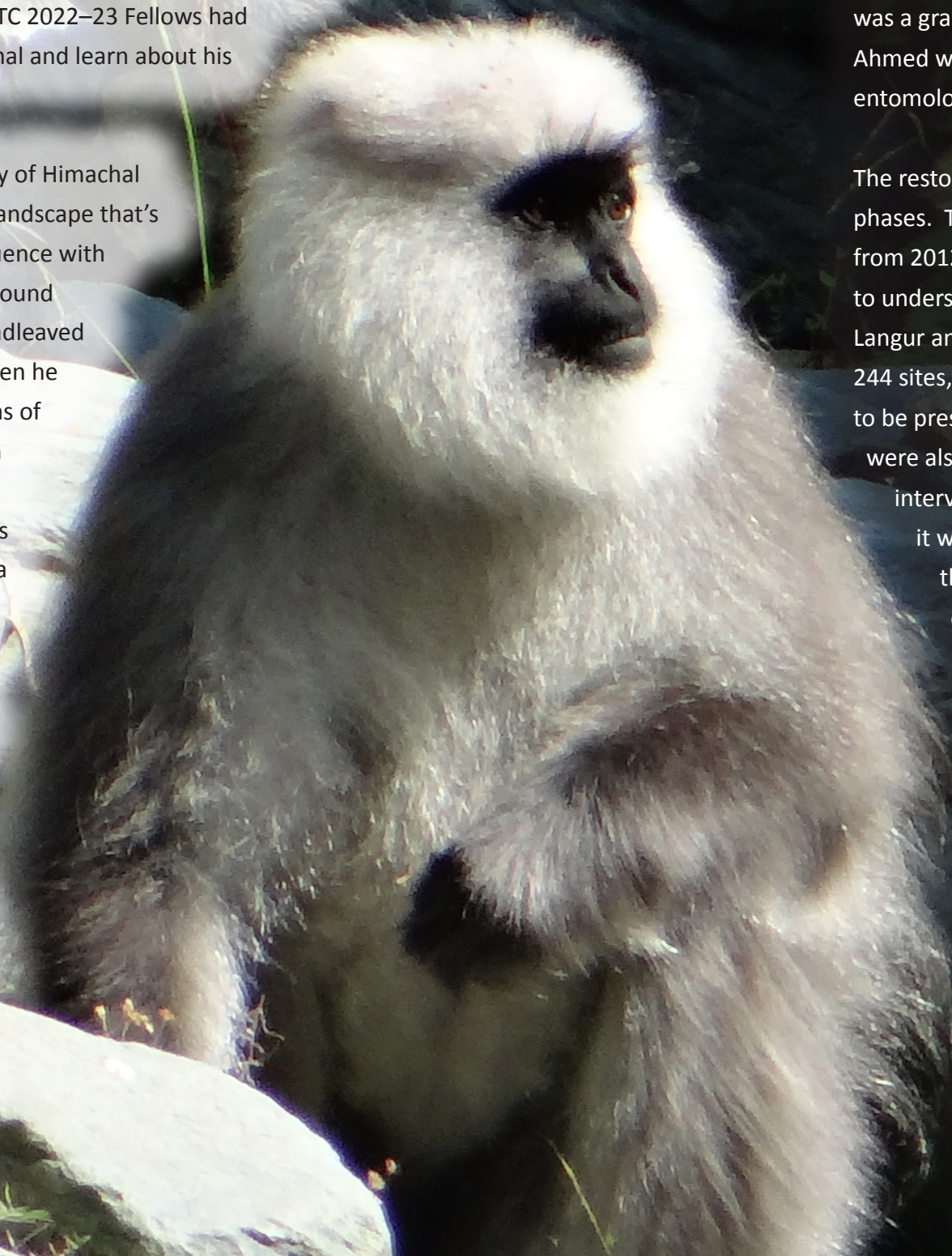
and animals like the langur, porcupines, and the Himalayan Black Bear that raided the crops as there were no fruit-yielding trees in the area. It was also necessary to make people realize the importance and the endemism of the Himalayan langur, which the local communities otherwise called 'Gaula'. Thus, having a purpose in mind, the project took its initial steps in 2012 with Vishal Ahuja, Martina Anandam, and Tariq Ahmed under the guidance of Dr. Sanjay Molur. While Martina Anandam was a graduate in primate conservation, Tariq Ahmed was a graduate in zoology and a trained entomologist.

The restoration project was unveiled in multiple phases. The first phase of the project was done from 2012 to 2014. In this phase, they tried to understand the taxonomy of the Himalayan Langur and their distribution. They surveyed 244 sites, out of which the langurs were found to be present in 124 sites. The conflict zones were also mapped based on the questionnaire interviews. Since Vishal was the local guy it was easier for him to interact with the local communities. It was also during this phase, the long-standing taxonomic uncertainty between the *Semnopethicus hector* and *Semnopethicus ajax* was resolved on the morphological basis. The team also conducted conservation education programs that included the Chamba workshop for children. The Himalayan langur conservation education program was conducted with the objective of fostering conservation sensitive behaviour and ecological awareness in schools.

Phase 2 of the project took place in 2014–16. Here, 51 villages were surveyed. The villagers said that 57% of the yield was lost due to crop raiding by the langurs and bears. While Black Bears and porcupines raided during the night, macaques and langurs raided during the day. The Black Bear and the macaques accounted for the highest percentage of crop damage done at 42% and 32%, respectively. The major crop raids were done on maize, barley and wheat. 30% of the villagers surveyed said wheat was least vulnerable to damage. This survey gave Vishal and his companions a clear picture of the situation that even the people are suffering, and hence they too are looking forward to a solution.

During phase 3 that took place from 2017 to 2019, vegetation sampling was done in Khajjiar-Kalatop wildlife sanctuary and other areas. Out of the 247 plant species that were identified to date, langurs, bears, and macaques were found to feed on 25 species. Since the land around consisted of monoculture plantations like paddy fields, tea, and coffee plantations, the team found that it was essential to restore the vegetation with native fruit-yielding trees. A list was also prepared on the native trees that would be planted.

With things in place, the Pilot project began in July 2020. 110 plants belonging to six species were planted during this time. The saplings were collected from the forest department nurseries. The winter plantation was done in February 2021. Of these saplings, 90% survived the winter. One of the things Vishal aimed for was to get an own nursery for the restoration project as getting the saplings from the forest department's nursery was a long journey and



time-consuming. The location for this was planned near a plantation around Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary. Once the saplings were planted, the main challenge was to prevent cattle grazing. This was crucial, because cattle grazing would mean all the efforts would be futile. To further strengthen conservation action, team activities were conducted by Zooreach in Chamba during April–May 2022. A book called ‘Achamba’ was created to educate the children about the Himalayan langur. The book was designed by Brenda de Groot. There were also awareness programs conducted with the female self-help groups, and different sessions were conducted with village heads and the wildlife forest guards. Vishal’s future plans mainly include education and outreach, and awareness on the importance of native species.

We the RHATC fellows got to learn a lot from Vishal’s talk. When Vishal said “restoration can take decades”, we understood that the spirit of conservation is patience and optimism. Without these two qualities, any conservation action would fail. The other thing we learnt from Vishal’s talk is that a conservation action needs to be planned in multiple phases. One simply cannot rush into action hoping that things would fall into place. It is also important that we take the local communities into trust, understand their share of problems, and work alongside them. Because if the local communities understand the cause for conservation, then they can serve as great allies.

We were greatly amazed when we got to know that Vishal is a multi-skilled person. He’s well



versed in playing seven musical instruments. Vishal is also skilled in identifying plants and owns a herbarium collection. People like Vishal are great examples of personalities one can look up to while pursuing a career in conservation.

Acknowledgement:

I’m grateful to Mr. Vishal Ahuja for sharing his journey and experiences in the conservation of Himalayan Grey Langurs in the landscapes of Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, and to RHATC Course 2022- 23, Zooreach Organization, for providing us an opportunity to interact with Vishal”.

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