

Of Sacred Langurs and Degraded Forests in Chamba - A Rewilding Journey

From a young age, I've been captivated by trees, wildlife, and the forests that enveloped my home in Chamba Valley, Himachal Pradesh. After obtaining my Master's Degree in Botany, I followed my passion for conservation. In 2012, having obtained the support from CLP along with a team of two others, Martina Anandam and Tariq Shah, we embarked on a study to gather baseline data on the distribution of the Himalayan Grey Langur, also known as the Chamba Sacred Langur under the mentorship of Dr. Sanjay Molur of WILD/ZOO. Our objective was to map human-wildlife interaction zones

and document conservation challenges in Chamba. This study marked the inception of our rewilding project, aimed at fostering human-animal coexistence in Chamba Valley.

Engaging in the Ground Work: The majority of communities living near the Kalatop-Khajjiar Wildlife Sanctuary are farmers. Over time, as farming areas expanded, uncontrolled cattle grazing, and unsustainable use of forest-based resources took a toll on the pine-oak mixed forests near villages, leading to severe degradation. In 2014, we conducted a follow-up study in 12 highly conflict-prone villages surrounding the wildlife sanctuary. This study helped us understand how local residents



Perception study about langurs in 2012.

perceived crop depredation and loss, and it allowed us to document potential ways to mitigate human-animal negative interactions based on local insights. Since 2016, I stayed on as the only core member of our group to continue working on the project with the support and guidance of Dr. Molur until date. In 2016, another study I conducted in 43 villages revealed that wildlife, including Himalayan Black Bears, Rhesus Macaques, Chamba Sacred Langurs, and Himalayan Porcupines, caused farmers to lose a significant portion (57.17%) of their expected yield due to depredation. This explained the presence of numerous

abandoned terraced farmlands in the region. During our questionnaire survey, my team and I also learned that encounters with Himalayan Black Bears had turned fatal for some locals, exacerbating fear and hostility towards certain wildlife species in the area.

Connecting the Dots: Empowered by these findings, we posed a fundamental question: Why do wild animals risk their lives to depredate when they have abundant food in the forests? Between 2017 and 2019, I compared the floral diversity and distribution



Crop damage assessment 2016.



Botanical exploration in 2018.

“I work at the nursery to raise saplings for plantations in degraded forests to create food resources for wildlife. I hope that eventually, our crops will be saved from degradation as wildlife will have access to their food”.
-- Shakti Pal, Farm owner and permanent staff at the nursery.

within the wildlife sanctuary to that of the fragmented forest patches around villages. Additionally, my documentation of the diet preferences of the Chamba Sacred Langur and other wildlife led to the understanding that: a) Wildlife ventured into farmlands in search of food resources. b) Degraded habitats within fragmented forests lacked sufficient native flora, which constituted the food base for wildlife. These findings underscored the critical role of native flora in maintaining a harmonious human-wildlife relationship in Chamba.



Crop damage assessment in Kakeda village 2016.



Planting in Gajnui 2020.

“At a time when locals were continuing to incur economic loss due to depredation and facing fatal attacks from wild animals, convincing them to save wild animals and forests was not easy. But with consistent efforts and outreach a lot of people are now understanding the root cause of the problem and are accepting rewilding as a possible solution”. – Vishal Ahuja.

Rewilding as a Social and Ecological Process:

Drawing from more than eight years of scientific studies, continuous interactions with locals, and numerous field visits, my team and I became convinced that restoring native flora within severely degraded and fragmented forest patches was one of the most crucial steps to mitigate negative human-wildlife interactions in Chamba. It intuitively made sense to approach the issue in a manner that mirrors nature’s gradual restoration process, slowly replenishing native flora for the region’s wildlife.



2022 Planting.



Shakti and his assistant sowing *Prunus cerasoides* seeds in the native plant nursery established in 2022.

At the outset of our project in 2020, I engaged in one-on-one conversations (while adhering to COVID-19 restrictions) with locals, sharing details about our rewilding project. However, most of my days were spent addressing people's hesitations and building acceptance for non-local volunteers who would eventually work on the project in the coming months. Two years into the project, I learned that saplings planted on privately-owned lands thrived and grew better compared to those planted on open forest lands, where they withered due to a lack of care and protection from livestock grazing. This emphasized the importance of community support, which also served as a buffer against additional costs for purchasing plant protectors/guards, significantly impacting the project's overall budget.

Additionally, forging a camaraderie with the Chamba Forest Department through active participation in department-led activities, such as annual bird counts, enabled me to advocate for a research-based approach to rewilding the degraded forests in the region. In October 2022, after two years of planning based on

field conditions and coordinating with the Forest Department, I led a 21-member team in conducting the first-of-its-kind census of the Chamba Sacred Langur. This census will inform the long-term conservation plans for the shy endemic primate and, in turn, impact the approaches of our rewilding project.

Rewilding Chamba - A Work in Progress:

Just as the process of rewilding is slow but deliberate, the journey to choose rewilding as the suitable conservation approach for a region should be intentional and gradual, based on sound science. I have firsthand

"What started as curiosity for me in 2003 to understand the status of the Chamba Sacred Langur, took shape on the ground in 2012 as the Himalayan Langur Project, and through the scientific works and interactions with the community in Chamba has seen a primate species conservation project grow organically into a stakeholder driven restoration and rewilding effort in the region". – Sanjay Molur, Executive Director, Zoo Outreach Organisation and Founder, WILD.



RHATC 2nd batch graduates and interns working with Shakti in the native plant nursery

experience that gaining the support and participation of the local community is the next most crucial factor that ultimately determines the impact and success of a long-term endeavor like rewilding. This entails adjusting plans based on field conditions, community sentiments, and the cooperation of the local Forest Department.

I've also focused on staying updated with the latest research and approaches to build a well-informed rewilding plan for my home valley. In June 2022, I spent 20 days working with and learning from experts at the Nature Conservation Foundation in Valparai, Tamil Nadu, as well as Pitchandikulam Forest in Puducherry and Nilgiri Biosphere Nature Park in Anaikatti. I learned techniques to restore degraded forests and aspects of raising nurseries of native plants.

Between 2020 and 2022, with support from Sanctuary's Mud on Boots Project and the participation of local farmers from Rathiyar Panchayat, I planted over 1,500 saplings of native trees on degraded forest and abandoned terrace farms. In January 2023, with generous

funding from Astral Foundation, I leased an area of 752 m² in Dugli Village, Rathiyar Panchayat, Chamba District, and realized my decade-long dream of establishing a nursery of native plants. Here, using my extensive knowledge of the local flora's ecologies, my team and I have successfully raised over 1,600 saplings from seeds and cuttings.

The Road Ahead: Since 2020, I've been single-handedly leading all aspects of the rewilding project in Chamba. Dr. Sanjay Molur and I are currently exploring further funding opportunities to sustain the native plant nursery. Our team is concentrating on working in Rathiyar Panchayat but hopes to expand to additional areas in the next five years. We are now focused on designing outreach programs with support from active and interested members, collaborating with the local district administration, and partnering with the Forest Department to further our project's goals.

Vishal Ahuja, Himalayan Langur Project, Zoo Outreach Organisation / Wildlife Information Liaison Development Society, Coimbatore.

© hlpwild.



Plantation in Randoh Village.