

Conservation and Co-existence in the Forests of Chamba

Three months ago, I embarked on my journey as a field intern for the Himalayan Langur Project (HLP) in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh. During my time here, I have had the opportunity to conduct community and bird surveys, study the behavioral ecology of Himalayan langurs, and learn to identify a plethora of native flora species. Being a part of this project has opened many avenues for me as a budding conservationist.

As a recent postgraduate with an MSc in Global Wildlife Health and Conservation from the University of Bristol, I was eager to apply the theoretical knowledge I acquired through my academic studies. My passion lay in being part of a project that prioritized holistic conservation and awareness as key factors in its agenda.

After spending a considerable amount of time in the field, learning, and participating in Zooreach's various HLP initiatives, including outreach programs, perception studies, reforestation programs, and more, I can confidently say that my expectations have been profoundly met.

A Day In My Life: The field station is located in Gajnoi, a remote area approximately 30 km away from Chamba town, where I live with three other interns. The view here is nothing short of breathtaking as we get to marvel at the mountains merging with heavenly clouds painted on a bright, blue sky from our bedroom



View from the field station taken on my first day here.
© Namita Nalamala.

window. The sounds of cicadas buzzing, birds chirping, and the water streams outside the building have now grown familiar to my ears.

A typical day in my life in Chamba is distinct in its own way. We have various field days planned with separate itineraries, including traveling to the Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary, visiting our native plant nursery, and walking or hiking into villages to conduct surveys. No two days are alike. On days with unfavorable weather conditions, such as heavy rainfall, we tend to stay back in the field station and complete our work here instead.

The Chamba Itinerary

Native Plant Nursery: One of the major conservation issues plaguing the forests of Chamba, as in many forests worldwide, is



Native plant nursery located in Dugli. Namita and Shakti working in the field. © Aishwarya S. Kumar.

fragmentation and land degradation, leading to a rise in human-wildlife negative interactions. To address this crisis, Zooreach has initiated a reforestation project by establishing a plant nursery housing several plant species native to Chamba. The nursery is being developed in Dugli, on land leased from Shakti, a nearby farmer.

So far, a total of 12 species have been planted since early February this year. Some of these include European nettle, soapnut, horse chestnut, wild pear, walnuts, and Himalayan cherry.

A typical day for us in the nursery includes creating larger beds, planting dried seed specimens, transferring saplings into bigger bags, clearing up mud and de-weeding.

Behavioral Ecology Studies: We also have weekly visits to the wildlife sanctuary to study the behavior of Himalayan Grey Langurs. At times, we observe groups of them sitting atop the trees, jumping from one to another, and munching on leaves and fruits.

Behavior studies *in situ* always involve an element of uncertainty. There were days when we ventured out into the field hoping to spot at least a single individual, albeit in vain. Conversely, there are random days when we happened to find several groups of langurs swinging and swaying atop the tree branches, much to our joy.

In June, we conducted an annual langur census to estimate the population in the sanctuary. Four surveyors, along with the local forest guards, set out to observe sightings for three days. Unfortunately, we could not find many, as the langurs were likely feeding in farms during this time of the year.

Biodiversity Learning: As someone who struggles with memorizing names (especially scientific ones), taxonomy has never really been my strong suit. However, since my time here, I have been unable to deny the curiosity that bubbles inside me every time I see a new and vibrant plant, bird, or butterfly species. It urges me to stop, ponder, and inquire. Thanks to the knowledge of my supervisor and peers, I have been able to learn and identify a variety of species over time.



Namita Nalamala and P. Kritika observing langur behaviour. © Sanjay Molur.



Pahadi woman carrying fuelwood. © Namita Nalamala.

This has led me to the epiphany that there is a stark difference between learning taxonomy through textbooks in a practical lab versus learning taxonomy in the field, surrounded by living, breathing organisms that make up our biodiversity.

Forest Dependency Surveys: A significant part of my conservation interests lies in creating awareness through understanding the role of local communities as key stakeholders. This includes conducting perception studies targeting the perspectives, reliance, and resilience of local communities toward their environment as a first step.

Through collaboration and assistance from my supervisor, Mr. Vishal Ahuja, my colleagues, and Dr. Sanjay Molur, I designed a forest dependency survey to identify the most consumed forest resources by local people and investigate the extent of their consumption in individual households. I also wanted to identify any potential household determinants that could impact the level of dependency.

An additional component of this survey was to investigate people's perceptions of crop raiding

and mitigative strategies, following up on a previous crop raiding study conducted in 2016 in and around the Khajjiar-Kalatop area. Our study site included the 28 villages of Rathiar panchayat in Chamba district. So far, we have completed 23 of these surveys. We are a total of five surveyors led by our supervisor and cover an average of 5–7 km on foot for each village.

Initially, when I started hiking and walking longer distances, I felt rather dejected after discovering how unfit my body was and how difficult it was for me to keep up with my fellow interns. However, with time, continual efforts, and constant support from my team, I have become more acclimated to this terrain and the challenges that come with it.



Himalayan Azure Sapphire spotted at our nursery in Dugli © Namita Nalamala.

Community and Conservation: My Thoughts:

Before working on this project, I believed that community engagement is a boon for effective biodiversity conservation and habitat management. Now, I see that it is a necessity.

In my process of conducting this study, I became aware of some of the most vital concepts of community conservation. In particular, the deeply interlinked relationship of local communities with the forest; whose components essentially revolve around the use of forest resources, land degradation, and human-wildlife negative interactions.

Firstly, it should be noted that the main form of occupation here is farming. For certain families, it is their sole source of income. Secondly, the people depend on the forest for two major resources – fuelwood and fodder. Individuals venture out into the forest every day for livestock grazing and collection. They tend to walk in groups to avoid being injured by the Asiatic Black Bears, which inhabit these regions.

We have also come across survivors of bear attacks who have shared their stories and noted a considerable increase in these occurrences over the past few years.

Another major human-wildlife issue here is crop raiding. Rhesus Macaques, Chamba Sacred Langurs, and Asiatic Black Bears are the three most common crop raiders seen every harvest season. The adversities faced by these communities were more than evident through our conversations with them.

From a community perspective, one can see how the rise in wildlife crop raiding and bear

attack incidents has directly impacted people's livelihoods and contributed to antagonistic attitudes toward wildlife and conservation.

On the other hand, there is a lack of knowledge and communication on the reasons behind this rise in negative interactions, the ongoing degradation of forest land, and the role of climate change in accelerating these processes. I recall an interview where an individual believed that the reason behind the rise in crop raiding was because the local government chose to release troops of monkeys into the forest. Interviewee's mitigative solutions included species relocation, and in some cases extermination.

The data obtained from these perception studies can help ascertain appropriate conservation actions and mitigative strategies which not only prioritize habitat protection and management but also focus on capacity building through awareness and education, creating alternative sustainable livelihoods, and raising the standard of living for local communities. I believe that at the end of the day, conservation sustenance lies in 'People for Conservation and Conservation for People.'

Having the opportunity to experience and grow on a personal and professional level through this internship makes me indebted towards Zooreach, Dr Molur and the team.'

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