

Farmer chronicles: Understanding perceptions of women on crop raiding in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

The Himalayan Langur Project (HLP) is working to restore the extremely neglected, poorly known, deteriorated broad-leaf oak and pine forest habitat in Chamba, western Himalaya. This is a long-term project in partnership with local communities in 28 villages who are interested in growing native vegetation on their non-arable farmland to support local wildlife such as langurs, black bears, macaques, and porcupines to reduce their dependence on crops.

To fulfil the project objectives, we visit all the villages in the study area and interact with the women there to empower them and carry outreach activities to equip them with eco-based adaptations and educate them on climate change mitigation.

During the interactions we also carry out group perception studies to understand the needs of the people in the landscape and their understanding of the project & climate crisis. Knowing the areas specific perseverance's is very important to make any wildlife study successful (Dickman 2010). In some places human-wildlife interactions may lead to human-human conflict between people sharing different goals, cultures, attitudes, feelings, and wealth (Madden 2004).

Since 15 March 2024, the Himalayan Restoration Project (HRP) has conducted four outreach activities at Chittar, Saun, Jhille Nalli, and Mayari Gala villages. The groups have been a mix of young and old women who took part equally in the meetings.



Chamba, Himachal Pradesh—Himalayan Restoration Project has been working here since 2021, to restore the degraded forest and livelihoods.
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All the discussion were open ended and instead of conducting individual surveys we discussed together in groups with everyone. Conversations were in Hindi and Chambyali. We tried to understand the major livelihood sources of the people, challenges they face, effect of climate change on their lives, and finally tried to understand the solution they want. A majority of the women we interacted with were associated with agricultural

activities, growing maize, barley, radish etc. People in all the villages said that they saw langur and macaque troops every day in their village. In Saun we saw a group of macaques going around the village and entering people's houses.

Chittar

A village under the Bakhatpur panchayat, 15 minutes trek away from the main roads was visited on 15 March 2024. We interacted with over 20 women from the self-help groups here. Here women are mainly associated with farming related activities. They feel there has been a sharp reduction in farming produce and thus livelihoods due to crop raiding in past few years. According to them the population of monkeys, langurs, and black bear have increased over the past few years along with increase in forest cover. But the women in the village agreed that forests lack food for wild animals. All the respondents felt that the Chir Pine plantations were useless, as neither animals feed on them nor is it of any use for the people. Some people felt that the animals have been introduced in the landscape by the forest department. In general, people were upset with increasing macaque population in the villages.

When asked about climate change and its effect, people acknowledged the changing rainfall patterns and snowfall. Though they agree that climate change is causing loss in crop produce, majority of the people thought loss caused by animals is more. Only a few

women thought that crop loss caused due to climate change and raiding is similar.

Saun

We visited Saun village, under Rathiyar panchayat on 16 March 2024, to carry out a meeting with 15 women of self-help groups and understand their perceptions. All the women in this village work in their agricultural farms. All the women were very angry with the increasing population of macaques in their village and farms and feel that the crop loss is caused due to macaques and langurs. Crop raiding caused due to black bear is comparatively less. Women here said that the forest cover has reduced and there is no food for the animals in forest. People's livelihood



Himalayan Restoration Project team carrying out discussion and understanding women's perceptions at Chittar village. © Sanjay Molur.

has been affected severely due to increasing crop raiding.

The women in this village believed that crop raiding is lot more responsible for their crop loss than climate change. The people agree that there has been change in rainfall and snow fall pattern but were not ready to agree that it causes major crop damage.

Jhille Nalli

On 17 March 2024, we visited Jhille Nalli village in Bakhatpur panchayat region to talk to the women there. Most of the women in this village were farmers, while two of them were studying MBA & teaching kids. Surprisingly, in this village unlike the other two, the population of langurs was quite more than that of macaques. People said that this change had happened over last 10 years. People see black bears seldom as well but are not hostile

or afraid of the animal. Women here agreed that the forest cover has reduced and so has the food for animals but did not know what to do.

When asked about climate change, people knew it was causing loss of crops but were unable to quantify or compare the damage with that caused by the animals. In general majority of the respondents felt that langurs are responsible for major crop damage.

One of the respondents Miss Puja, has been associated with the project for quite some time now. The HRP team planted saplings on her farm as a recce project earlier, but due to lack of rain, most of the saplings could not survive. This incident helped a few people among the respondents understand that lack of rain was also leading to major crop loss.



Himalayan Restoration Project team carrying out discussion and outreach activities with women at Saun village. © Sanjay Molur.

Mayari Gala

The 4th meeting with the women self-help group was held on 2 April 2024 at Mayari Gala. Eleven women from the same village enthusiastically participated in the meeting. As it was the advent of spring, the number of participants was restricted because most of the women were busy in farming activities. Macaques and langurs were the reason for major crop loss in this village. Women said that macaques were more in number and more frequent than the langurs and follow similar feeding patterns. People here saw bears during monsoon in maize farms and frequently in apple orchards. In this village four people had been attacked by bears in 2023 in their respective farmlands. Women here were scared to go to the farms since these incidents hence most of the people did not farm anymore affecting their livelihoods. People said that crop raiding problems have increased in past five to six years, forcing the villagers to restrict farming near their homes, to keep an eye on their fields.



The HRP team interacting with the women to understand the problems they face at Jhille Nalli.
© Sanjay Molur.

When asked about climate change, women agreed that change in rainfall pattern has hampered their agricultural practices but were certain that crop raiding was a major issue. They felt that forests have reduced due to landslides caused by heavy rains.

People in general across the four villages understood the fact that lack of food in the forest is forcing the animals into the crop fields, but none of them were ready to coexist with the animals in the villages. People complained that increased raiding has stopped them from growing their own vegetables and thus now they must buy their daily greens affecting them financially. People wanted to get rid of the macaques and langurs as they caused major damage. Except in Jhille Nalli, macaque population and visits were more in all the three other villages and more.

Macaques were seen damaging crops, digging out sown seeds, and raiding shops and homes in search of food. Though black bears caused crop loss, people were not that hostile towards the animal. This maybe because black bears come at night and thus lack of sightings makes people less intrigued, or the size of the animal is too overwhelming for villagers and thus they fear the animals. Though only in one of the villages there was bear attack in recent years, all the people across the landscape were afraid and a lot of them felt that bears feed on people. While people in Saun were not as afraid of black bears. This maybe because they see the animal often and thus lack of any

attack or conflict makes them overwhelmed of the animal but not afraid. The only two of the respondents who understood that it was not animals' fault to raid the crops, but that we humans have degraded their forest were literate.

People understand that the climate has been changing over years and that it is affecting their crops, but only a few of them agree that it has equal or more effect on crop loss than raiding. People did not understand the reason behind climate change and thus don't know what action to take. People who have seen direct effect of rainfall leaving to failure of plant growth understand that climate change is impacting the crops. Women in Chittar felt that the area under forest has increased even though there is a continuous fall in forest cover. This might be because the people thought small scrubby patches to be forest, and since this forest are usually invasive plants, they spread quite fast, making the women feel that the forest cover is increasing.

It is usually seen that traditional practices and indigenous people are much more tolerant and considerate towards the idea of coexistence, with wild animals, compared to people who have no experience with living in multiuse landscapes (Songhurst et al. 2016), but in this landscape though people were living for a few generations still they were antagonistic towards the idea of coexistence. Also, at time occupational changes and technological advancement associated with modern contemporary ideas may tend to take people away from their sacred idea of wild (Manfredo et al. 2003).

The success of any conservation study depends on the role of the conservationists and researchers in influencing the behaviour of indigenous people associated and in properly enforcing the approach important for conservation in that area (Keane et al. 2008).

HRP team visited Mayari Gala to understand the perception of the women in this region and solutions they want. © Vishal Ahuja.



After understanding the perceptions of the women, we addressed to them the objectives of the Himalayan Restoration Project and that we needed their help to achieve success. The women were quite interested to understand the restoration program that we will carry out in the region before monsoon 2024. Some villagers offered us a piece of their land to carry out plantation as well. We were lucky to interact with a few young members who were keen to join the project and help us carry outreach activities with more villages in the landscape. The ladies agreed to help us plant saplings on their farms and take care of them.

The discussion helped them understand that how these native wild fruit trees will provide food to the animals and reduce crop raiding in the region.

The meetings have helped us understand the importance of education and outreach programs to explain the women and youth the importance of forests and coexistence to fight climate crisis which in turn will reduce the crop loss. Including community interests and educating the community as a part of conservation has a successful outcome towards positively changing the way people think (Waylen et al. 2009). We understand the need of the people and are collaborating with them as key stakeholders to take part in the Himalayan Restoration Project.

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