

Tales from Himalaya: The Chamba Conservation Story

"The beautiful valley, Chamba in Himachal Pradesh harbors rich wildlife including an endangered species of langur that sparked my journey in conservation". That's how Vishal Ahuja, project co-ordinator of the Himalayan Langur Project (HLP) from Zoo Outreach Organisation, talked his way into conservation in 'Follow the Leader' session as part of the Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation (RHATC) Program, 2024–25.

The session began with an overview of the project's first phase, which aimed to gather baseline data on the distribution of the Chamba Sacred Langur. These langurs inhabit multi-male, multi-female groups ranging from 25–40 individuals. The adult males possess a mane-like, grayish-brown upper coat and females or

young ones may not have the coat, yet they are equally beautiful and attractive. They are classified as 'Endangered' by the IUCN Red List because of their limited range and low population. Moreover, prevailing conflicts with humans also demanded the first phase to include conflict zone mapping and documenting conservation challenges in Chamba. To resolve long standing taxonomic uncertainties, Vishal, Sanjay and the team distinguished between two species—*Semnopithecus ajax* and *Semnopithecus hector*—based on morphological traits. *Semnopithecus ajax* was found in 124 out of 244 sites in Chamba, out of which 76 reported interactions between humans and langurs. The Himalayan Langur Project collaborates closely with the communities in Chamba to create cooperative conservation via

CSL feeding from a garbage dump.
 © Arpan.



Chamba, Himachal Pradesh-Himalayan Restoration Project has been working here since 2021, to restore the degraded forest and livelihoods.
 © Sanjay Molur.

HRP HLP Team ©Paridhi.



education and research. This finding prompts an important question: Why do wild animals risk their lives to venture into human-inhabited areas when they have ample food available in their natural habitats? This set the stage for the project's second phase (2014–2016), which seeks to explore the underlying factors driving such behavior and develop strategies to mitigate these interactions. Perception studies were then initiated by Vishal and his colleagues, who noted that men commute outside the hamlet to earn their daily income, while women work mostly on fields. They surveyed 51 villages and discovered that maize (100%) is the most important crop, followed by barley (43%) by langur destruction. In an effort to reduce conflict between people and animals, phase three (2017–2019) started

with outreach initiatives, such as workshops to identify plant species in the Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary.

The Himalayan Langur Project has paved its way into the development of Himalayan Restoration Project (HRP), as much of the foundational work was already completed in the HLP. The project is ongoing, primarily driven by researchers who are not only studying the species but also focusing on the perspective of human-animal coexistence issues. In July 2020, 110 trees were planted on a farm close to Gajnu, utilizing natural species that provide as food for langurs, macaques, and bears. Himalayan chestnut and walnut were planted in Mayari Gala, Baddi, and Chapnaal in the winter, with



Education outreach program at the government school.
 © Sanjay Molur.

HRP Team setting up the nursery.
 © Sanjay Molur.



additional pre-monsoon planting taking place in June 2021. Vishal addressed the Zoo Outreach Organisation's awareness-raising initiatives in collaboration with village heads, forest officials, and women's self-help groups (WSHGs) in Chamba. Pre-monsoon plantings resumed in 2022, with the WSHGs in Chattar village planting 120 saplings, Rathiyar village planting 350, and Dugli village planting 300. With the objective to further promote long-term conservation, this awareness effort resulted in an agreement with Shakti from Dugli village to build a wild fruit nursery.

The study revealed that a lack of native plants in the forest is driving langurs to invade farmland, damaging crops. As a result, seed collection initiates in November 2022 and the Astral Foundation provided funding for the construction of a nursery in March 2023. The

team started growing indigenous plants, such as *Prunus cerasoides*, *Pyrus pashia*, *Grewia optiva*, soapnut, horse-chestnut, and walnut. In 2023, nursery activities expanded, and Kritika began her internship program conducting a census study along six trails in collaboration with the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department (HPFD), and she emphasized that traffic congestion and langur feeding are increasing human-langur conflicts in this mountainous area. The outreach program continued to expand, reaching schools and colleges to raise awareness among not only students but also to women in WSHGs. Green Hub documented this capturing its progress and impact.

The HRP initiative has impacted 28 villages, engaging 500 families, and 2,000 people. They have established 400+ herbarium sheets of the native plant species found in the region.

Sanjay and Trisa at the nursery. © Kritika.

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

WSHG working towards restoration. © Vishal Ahuja.



As part of the initiative, they have created ecologically-focused community empowerment and community-driven restoration activities, engaging two local representatives to promote sustainable livelihoods. More than 400 individuals, in collaboration with Zoo Outreach Organisation, are actively engaged in planting 1500 native saplings alongside germinating 3,000 seeds of endangered plant species. Simultaneously, the team has trained over 50 HPFD personnel to monitor wildlife effectively, working together with local communities to identify and safeguard wildlife corridors across 28 villages, thereby protecting critical habitats and enhancing ecosystem restoration.

During the session Amrin, an intern, provided observations about the species recorded on camera traps in Chamba. The recordings featured Asiatic Black Bear, Chamba Sacred Langur, Rhesus Macaque, Grey Mongoose, Yellow-throated Marten, Jungle Cat, Leopard Cat, Red Fox, Indian Crested Porcupine, and

local inhabitants also contributed to the documentation, as a few unintentionally trapped the pictures in the cameras while checking the traps.

The major takeaway from the session was the power of community-driven conservation, revealing how collaborative efforts can bridge human-wildlife harmony and preserve biodiversity for generations. In addition to that, it is also crucial to recognize challenges and have an open mindset, and communication skills for long term conservation strategies. Thinking about the session, a quote surfaced from Mysore Zoo: "Wild animals are great assets". With this motivation, I'd like to express my appreciation to the whole team and Zoo Outreach Organisation for organizing this fantastic session. Also, I'd like to acknowledge my fellow batchmates for their support.

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