

# Perceiving perceptions



The Chamba Valley  
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Located in the western Himalaya, Chamba is one of the most picturesque valleys in Himachal Pradesh. It is home to a wide range of flora and fauna, including majestic species like Asiatic Black Bears *Ursus thibetanus* and the Chamba Sacred Langurs *Semnopithecus ajax*. The landscape bears a mosaic of terraced farmlands and traditional villages within thick Deodar and Oak forests.

The people of the Chamba valley mostly rely on agricultural practices for their livelihood, and most of them live a forest-dependent life. People mostly grow Maize, Mustard, and Jowar alongside seasonal vegetables suited for the terrain. In addition, a lot of the farmers also have fruit orchards producing Apples, Plums, Apricots, and Walnuts. Lately, people in the region have reported to spot bears more often on their farms or

near their villages. These encounters are slowly becoming a part of their everyday life, leading to human–bear negative interactions.

To understand the drivers behind human–bear negative interactions, we conducted a perception study using a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions. This approach allowed respondents to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words, offering deeper insights into the issue. The questions were asked mostly in Hindi and occasionally in the Chambiyali language to ensure that the participants expressed themselves freely.

The study was carried out in 31 villages with 119 different participants. A majority of the participants raised concerns regarding crop depredation by the bears. Respondents reported that the bear activity in croplands

## Zooreach Activity Update



Understanding perceptions. © Vishal Ahuja

increases significantly during the monsoon when the maize crop ripens. Depredation of the crops and fruit orchards not only affects the communities economically but are also intensifying negative interactions in the landscape. 87.39% (104) of the participants agreed to be directly dependent on the forests and accepted that they carry out

collection of NTFPs along with grazing activities, remaining 12.60% (15) claimed that they do not rely on forests for their sustenance at all.

On 23 March 2024, our team organised a camera trap training workshop for the RRT team members of the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department.

The Chamba Forest Division had provided our team with six camera traps, which were deployed in different places surrounding the Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary at random to collect opportunistic data. Data collection was carried out from the month of March to November 2024. As the winter approached, the traps were removed and handed over to the forest department.

A total of 12 different species were documented in the study area, including 11 mammals and 1 bird species, reflecting the rich biodiversity of the Chamba landscape.

Among these, the majestic Asiatic Black Bear stood out with multiple sightings



HRP team demonstrating camera traps ©Amrin Ansari



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**Asiatic Black Bear**

recorded during the study period. Other species include the elusive Yellow-throated Marten *Martes flavigula*, Jungle Cat *Felis chaus*, and Leopard Cat *Prionailurus bengalensis*. Kalij Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos* was often sighted in pairs.

The frequent documentation of bears outside protected areas points to the increasing overlap between wildlife habitats and human settlements and justifies the reasons behind increasing negative interactions in the landscape. Hence, there is an urgent need for research and conservation actions for a better understanding of the human–bear dynamics and ensuring coexistence.



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