

Community Outreach: challenges and interventions

The objective of the Himalayan Restoration Project is not just to plant trees, but to build a sense of stewardship and responsibility among locals and develop long-term partnerships in the landscape. However, working with communities comes with its own set of challenges, especially in a village setting where people sometimes have a mindset narrower than the nib of a pen. As Sally Walker used to say, 'Elitism', 'Envy', and 'Ego' are the three E's of extinction, but unfortunately these three E's are classical behaviours of all human beings. The real challenge begins when the conservationists have to deal with stakeholders bearing grudges to such an extent that they show a level of niche partitioning which could even put the Finches to shame.

A couple of months ago, our team faced such a problem in Randoh Village, where local labourers and the farm owners got into a dispute over their personal grudges. The situation had escalated to an extent that the farm owner had refused the entry of the HRP monitor on his farm and was

rethinking collaborating with HRP for plantation on his farm.

In order to understand the full picture, we organised a meeting in the village on 26 June 2026, where 25 people from the village attended. Our team communicated the objectives and long term plans of the Himalayan Restoration Project. We also introduced Mrs Seema, who has been appointed as an HRP monitor for that village and explained her job roles, responsibilities and importance to the partnering stakeholders.

Our outreach materials seemed to have an amazing impact on the audience, as we could explain everything very easily and got their attention. Gladly, the problem was resolved



Addressing the crowd. © Anuradha Jaryal.



Signing MoUs by stakeholders.
© Nethra Prem.



Outreach with WSHG participants. © Sachin Verma.

then and there, and not only did all of the stakeholders permit the HRP monitor to regularly visit their farms and check the status of the planted saplings, but they also showed interest in collaborating for the upcoming year's plantation by giving their non-arable farmlands.

Makeshift playground

One of our restoration sites this year is a Deodar *Cedrus deodara* dominated forest patch in Jhalein Village, where our team has planted saplings of 12 different species to promote a mixed-species forest in the future. A total of 105 saplings were planted in empty spaces between the already existing Deodar trees and were protected from grazing ruminants by the installation of plant protectors. This is one of the most picturesque restoration sites located at an elevation of 1,987 m along a forest trail lying equidistant from the adjoining village Nichli Meiyari.

Our team was completely shocked when we visited the site the following month, as we found out that most of the plant protectors had been displaced from the soil and were scattered around. HRP monitors Mrs Seema and Mrs Aasha reinstalled them back in place, but unfortunately this incident repeated the following month again.

Upon inquiring with the locals, we got to know that some children from the nearby village used to play cricket on the site, and the newly erected plant protectors were adding to the crowd. Displeased by their

presence, the children were displacing the plant protectors again and again from the saplings.

In order to solve this, our team conducted a meeting with the women self-help group (WSHG) of Nichli Meiyari on 5 October 2026, where 15 ladies participated. We discussed the problem in the meeting and requested the assistance of the participants to spread the word in the village to urge the children not to displace the plant protectors. We also built new communication channels in the village for future collaborations.

Our team also visited the local primary school and spoke to the students, where we tried to teach them the importance of the saplings at that site and the consequences of removing tree guards. This was by far the cutest outreach session HRP has ever done, as all of the participants were first and second graders and hardly above seven years of age.

It was chaotic in the beginning, but the kids were kind enough to accept their mistake, and a few of them promised to not do it again. However, a few of them had a different swag where they said that they did it because they didn't have any other place to play or simply



Tiny hands, big promises. © Amrin Ansari.

for the fun of it. That's where our monitors spoke to them in the local dialect and tried to convince them not to do so in the future. Just a single session of outreach is never enough to deal with conservation challenges, especially when we are trying to convince tiny human beings who are too young to understand the consequences of their actions. Our team is planning to follow up on the situation and evaluate the effectiveness of our outreach to plan an audience-specific approach to deal with the issue.



With the Panchayat team. © Vishal Ahuja.

Explaining restoration impacts through a poster. © Lakshya Rathore.

From Gram Sabha to Ground Action: Himalayan Restoration Project Working with Panchayats for Landscape Restoration

7 July: HRP's First Step Towards Collaboration under VB-G RAM G

Before joining the Himalayan Restoration Project (HRP), I had visited Himachal Pradesh, but I had never paid much attention to how people name their villages based on their location on the hillside. I learnt something new about this during my work in Chamba. Villages in the upper part are often called Uparli, those in the middle are called Manjli, and those in the lower part are called Nichli. Basodhan, for example, has Uparli Basodhan, Manjli Basodhan, and Nichli Basodhan.

The same pattern can be seen in other areas, including Bhoin. In a landscape where reaching one village from another can itself be a task, even the names tell a story about the mountains and the people who live there. On 7 July, we visited the Basodhan Panchayat

office to attend a Gram Sabha meeting. Around 150 people from nearly 30 villages, including Jot, Fatt, Bhoin, Tappar, Talai, and Basodhan, had gathered to discuss local issues. After waiting for almost an hour, we finally got our chance to speak. Standing in front of so many people was not easy, especially when everyone had come with their own concerns and important matters to discuss. But we had something important to share too.

We introduced the Himalayan Restoration Project and Zoo Outreach Organisation and explained why restoring the local landscape matters, not only for people but also for wildlife. Our aim was to help people understand how planting native species and protecting them could improve the local environment and, over time, help reduce negative encounters between people and wildlife. We distributed stickers featuring five local flora and fauna species and showed posters explaining how restoration could bring positive changes to the landscape.

We also shared our planting targets. This year, we aim to grow and plant more than 10,000 saplings, with a target of over 20,000 in the following year, including the replacement of saplings that did not survive previous planting efforts. But planting thousands of saplings in these hills is easier said than done. The terrain is difficult, and finding enough labour is a constant challenge. Sometimes, we have to bring workers from other villages to complete the work.

That is why we also spoke about getting support through MGNREGA, now known as VB-G RAM G. With support from the Panchayat and the scheme, we hope to involve local workers in restoration activities in their own villages. This would help us manage the work while also giving local people an opportunity to contribute directly to making their surroundings greener. We also hoped that stronger government and community involvement would encourage people to protect the saplings and tree guards, which are sometimes damaged, removed, or used for other purposes.

What made the meeting special was the response from the Panchayat representatives. The Pradhan and Up-Pradhan supported our efforts and assured us that they would help take the plantation work forward. The Up-Pradhan, in particular, gave us the

opportunity to speak first, even though many other matters were waiting to be discussed. We were grateful for that trust.

When we left the meeting, I realised that our outreach had reached much further than the 150 people sitting in front of us. Each person could share what they had learnt with their family, neighbours, and other villagers. One meeting could therefore start conversations across many more households.

For us, 7 July was an important step in our work with Basodhan Panchayat. Although we had already conducted outreach activities with other Panchayats, this was our first opportunity to present HRP's work to the Basodhan Gram Sabha. It was also our first pitch for support under VB-G RAM G. We hope this collaboration will help us overcome some of the



Addressing the crowd.
© Shreya Yadav.

challenges on the ground, involve local people in restoration, and bring lasting change to the hills of Chamba. After all, restoration is not just about putting saplings into the soil; it is about getting people involved, helping them care for what grows, and working together to give native forests a better chance to survive.

2 October: Taking Himalayan Restoration to New Communities: A New Beginning for HRP in Parotha

On 2 October, we attended a Gram Sabha meeting in Parotha, a village towards the northern side of Chamba. Unlike some of our existing project sites, Parotha is quite far from our other sites and field station. Reaching there regularly is not easy, and the steep slopes make plantation work even more challenging. Still, we knew that taking our restoration work to Parotha was important, especially because the area faces frequent landslides, both big and small.

Around 60–70 people attended the meeting. Since Parotha is home to people from different religious communities, it was important for us to communicate carefully and respectfully so that no community's sentiments were hurt. Thankfully, our local team members and stakeholders helped us understand the local situation and explain the Himalayan Restoration Project (HRP) in a way that people could relate to. Although we had not met most of the people or the Pradhan before, our local stakeholders helped introduce us to the Pradhan and Up-Pradhan and made it easier to start a conversation.

This year, we have seven local stakeholders supporting our work in Parotha. Their support made a real difference during the meeting. We explained HRP's work and the importance of restoring the local landscape, using the local language so that people could better understand our purpose. It was encouraging



With the Panchayat team. © Satish Thakur.

to see how people listened and began sharing their own thoughts about the environment and their village.

One thing that genuinely surprised me was how many people came forward and offered their land for restoration. I believe that living with the risk of landslides has helped people understand the importance of trees and vegetation in protecting the landscape. After the meeting, several people contacted us to discuss restoration on their land. So far, we have identified around one hectare of land in Parotha and nearby areas for this work.

During the discussion, some people suggested planting *Robinia pseudoacacia*, locally known as Rubina, because its leaves are used as fodder for cattle. Since the tree has been growing in the area for years, people are familiar with it and its uses. We explained that even though cattle eat its leaves and it is useful to local people, Rubina is not a native species. We also discussed the difference between native and non-native plants and why it is important to choose native species for ecological restoration. Our aim is not just to plant more trees, but to restore the landscape with species that naturally belong to the region.

The meeting gave us a good start, but the real work was still ahead. Parotha is far from our other sites, and travelling there frequently requires time and effort. The plantation sites are also on steep slopes, making the work physically demanding. However, we did not want these challenges to become a reason for leaving the area out of our restoration efforts. We pushed ourselves to reach Parotha because

the need for restoration was just as important there.

For me, 2 October was more than another Gram Sabha meeting. It was HRP's first outreach in Parotha and the beginning of new relationships with the local community. Seeing people voluntarily offer their land gave me hope that our work could grow beyond our existing sites. With the support of local stakeholders and the Panchayat, we hope to expand our network, restore more land with suitable native species, and bring HRP's work to more communities across Chamba.

Restoration in a place like Parotha will not be easy, but the willingness of local people to participate reminds us why the effort is worthwhile. A project may begin with a small team, but when the community becomes part of it, its reach and its chances of lasting success grow much stronger.

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