



Editorial

What makes a place unique? Each of us may think differently of this question, but it may be hard to disagree that people play a central part in moulding the identity of a place. People are continuously interacting with the space around them through their traditions, beliefs, cultures, and vocations, making each place unique. When such interactions find wider acceptance, they give birth to a community.

The Districts of Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur comprise of numerous such communities that have lived in the high Himalaya for generations. Nature played a central role in how people's ways of life got shaped. The mountains, valleys, rivers, pastures and wildlife have been and continue to be an integral part of local life and culture. These stories are important, but often remain untold. HimKatha is a modest attempt to mediate a dialogue among a diverse set of voices on this relationship between people and nature. Through the stories we carry, we hope to celebrate human-nature relationships in the high Himalaya. HimKatha hopes to explore local cultures, traditions and practices that have stood the test of time. While

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doing so, we hope not to shy away from discussing topics that concern the region. We shall make a special effort to ensure that local women find an equal voice through this newsletter. HimKatha shall be published twice a year: in spring and autumn

For our inaugural edition, we have stories from all across the mountains. We start at Udaipur in Lahaul where Deepshikha Sharma spoke to a bunch of spirited women from the Mahila Mandal, who run an initiative to protect their forests. The article looks at the critical role women have played in forest conservation in India and the world. We then travel to Spiti where Tanzin Thinley recounts an incident in which a herder lost many livestock in a single night – such incidences are not uncommon in this region but this story is about people coming together to solve such problems. Deepshikha follows it up by narrating another story from Bharmour where a chance encounter with a bear led to an unfortunate accident. While such incidents are rare, they have the potential to cause great damage. Based on

their narrations, Tanzin and Deepshikha try to explore possibilities in dealing with such situations, should one ever encounter such ill fate. In a short piece, Tinkle Bhatt, a young Forest Guard from Lahaul, also talks about what keeps her motivated. We, then, travel to Ladakh with Sherab Lobzang who takes us on a tour of rare art that she stumbled upon while growing up in the village of Kumdok and later travelling through the rest of the region. It is fascinating how these relics remain in the most unlikely of places. We also carry a special section dedicated to our young readers, with fun activities that have been contributed by Ruchi Dhona. Have fun trying those out along with your children, or grandchildren!

Do make time to read HimKatha and join the dialogue. Let us know if you would like to share an interesting story or speak about an important topic. We are eager to hear back.

Ajay Bijoor
Nature Conservation Foundation



Environment & Women

By Deepshikha Sharma

In the year 1730, the king of Jodhpur, Rajasthan sent out a band of soldiers to cut a few Khejri trees for construction of his palace. Khejri are one of the few trees that grow in deserts and are of a high cultural and religious value to many communities across India. So, for Amrita Devi of Khejrli village (named after Khejri tree), to cut down Khejri was an act of disrespect to the Bishnois, a community to which she belonged. When the soldiers arrived, she along with her three daughters stood between them and the trees. When the negotiations to save the trees failed, the soldiers killed all four of them. The news of the sacrifice travelled fast and people from neighbouring villages also joined to support Khejrli. However, the soldiers did not show any mercy and killed as many as 363 people. About 240 years later, in 1970, women of Reni village, Uttarakhand (then Uttar Pradesh), inspired by Amrita

Devi, came together to save their forests from being cut down by government contractors. Twenty-seven women hugged the trees and did not allow a single tree to be cut down. Later, other villagers joined and the stand-off which lasted four days, ended with contractors finally withdrawing from the village. This story of resilience gained the world's attentions and came to be known as the 'Chipko Movement'.

Women for centuries have shared an innate connection with the environment. Nature is embedded in the work women engage with and thus, for generations they have worked hard to conserve it for themselves and the future generations. Forests and rivers preserved for thousands of years are now threatened across the planet. Unregulated development, extraction, deforestation, carbon emissions have led to serious



Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons

environmental, health and social justice implications. Studies show that these implications are not equally borne by all. The perpetrators of environmental and social injustice are the ones least impacted by it. People, especially women, belonging to disadvantage caste and class suffer the most from these atrocities. Joan Davidson, a writer talks about how, in Rajasthan, over the last few decades, the water table has been declining due to the introduction of sugarcane, a water intensive cash crop. Many water sources have also been polluted due to the use of pesticides in farms and industries. Because of this and growing pressures of climate change, women, of low-income households, are spending more time each year fetching water from far away sources. She also says the same for deforestation. When forests are cleared from around the village, the burden of procuring herbal medicine, fuel and fodder from other distant forests lies on the women in most parts of the country. Unfortunately, these hardships are rarely accounted for while planning for any development policy or project. However, women have now started to take active part in conservation of the resources they heavily depend upon. Apart from these reasons to fight for the environment, many women activists around the world are leading environmental movements against powerful lobbyists to alter the course of our otherwise predicted future. Women, as young as twelve years old Ridhima Pandey of India who is fighting the climate injustice through legal battle, Greta Thunberg, a Swedish activist, who has inspired millions of youngsters to protest all over the world or Marina Silva an activist who took to politics to save the Brazilian

rainforests, have taken it upon themselves to bring greater consciousness to these matters. And there are many names to this list of women champions fighting the battle to ensure environmental and social justice to all. Women have been playing a very powerful role in positively shaping our environment all across the globe. The stories of these women may now seem big, but they all have had humble beginnings, many of them starting individually as the world slowly joined in.

In contemporary Indian context, women have been using the platform of Mahila Mandals to raise awareness about many environmental issues pertaining them and the community at large. Last year, on a short trip to Lahaul, I learned more about the Mahila mandals of Lahaul from a good friend, Shivkumar, in Udaipur. He told me about how the women of Lahaul were very active leaders of their villages and also helped in protecting the forests across the district. This year, I was able to speak with Ms. Sarita Devi, the president and Ms. Pingla Devi, one of the senior members of the Mahila Mandal of Udaipur, to understand their reasoning for this conservation initiative. The interview was



Illustration by Rohit Rao

everyone respects and follows this decision to save the forests.

What do you do if you see someone cutting trees?

Pingla Devi: People of Udaipur do not do that anymore. However, once in a while we do have people from outside in our forests. Whoever sees such a person, they immediately let us know about it. We go and enquire their purpose of visit to the forest and report it to the Forest department if we suspect that they might be here to cut down trees.

Because of the forests the animals also wander close to the village. What do you think of that?

Sarita ji: Yes, brown bears especially come out of the forest during the spring. They eat our apples and destroy our vegetables. Some time we do get angry at them, but the truth is that even they struggle to live in such harsh conditions. We have to live with them because without them our forest will also not survive.

How has the lock down impacted your conservation initiative?

Pingla Devi: Because of the lock down, we are not able to visit the forests as frequently as before. However, once in a while we do make visits. Till now we haven't received any information of trees being cut.

Your story is really inspiring. Himachal is one of the few states in India with rich forests. How can we continue to save these forests?

Sarita ji: We have good forest cover across the state because of the joint efforts of our communities and Forest Department. We

rely on the forests for everything. We should work towards making them richer and diverse. Everyone in their own village should plant more trees and take measures to prevent excess cutting of trees. Only this way we can ensure that our future generations will have more than what we got from our parents.

"...but the truth is that even they struggle to live in such harsh conditions. We have to live with them because without them our forest will also not survive."

The women of Lahaul have taken that extra step to protect what is theirs. The belonging with forests is a common temperament shared among most Himachali people. However, there is definitely more work that needs to be done. Himachal has been under constant pressure of unwarranted development. Tourism, for example, has although brought a lot of economic development to parts of Himachal, but due to poor management, it has also created many related problems like garbage dumps, deforestation, water depletion and pollution. This has impacted the quality of life. Women have been at the forefront of deteriorating lifestyles. We can still rectify some of the damages that have been done and take action to ensure the environmental and social integrity of our landscape. For generations, we have protected our forests, rivers and mountains and together we should continue to be their guardians for a better future.

The predicament of a herder

By *Tanzin Thinley*

Winters in Spiti valley are filled with celebrations of a fruitful year and prayers for a bountiful year ahead. Most of the time is spent within the villages as travel is usually difficult especially when heavy snowfall causes road blocks. Year 2018 was also not much different. In the month of November as we were readying ourselves for the coming winter months in Kibber, I received an urgent message from a colleague in Mysore in Karnataka. "A herder has lost many livestock in Chango, possibly killed by a wild animal" the message said. These were the only details along with a WhatsApp video that was being circulated. Understanding that the matter could be grave and the weather was still permitting travel, I decided to leave immediately for Chango which is in Kinnaur. I requested Tanzin Thuktan, my colleague, to join me. Chango is about 110 km away from Kibber.

We did not have any details about the owner or where exactly the incident had happened. Upon reaching Chango we were clueless, but the good thing about small towns and villages is that everyone knows each other very well. So, when we enquired about the case with local shopkeepers, they were well aware of it and they told us that Thuktan Tendar was the owner of the livestock and showed us the way to his house. Thuktanji is an apple farmer in Chango and has a settlement at Liti dogri. When we arrived at his house, he was confused about why we had travelled from so far to talk about his loss. With a little hesitation, he narrated the whole incidence to us.

On 16th November 2018, Raju, the care taker of the corral, had returned to the village to gather supplies for the dogri. He decided to stay back in the village for the night. The next day when he went back and opened the door of the corral, the animals rushed out in panic. Usually he would have had to take a lot of effort in getting the animals out of the corral. He knew something was wrong. It was a strange behaviour. Standing by the door he





Tanzin Thinley

Tanzin Thinley is a farmer and a herder from Kibber. He developed a keen interest in wildlife as a young boy. For nearly 20 years now he has been actively involved in wildlife conservation in Spiti valley. He has worked with many villages to ensure that their wildlife related losses can be prevented as well as mitigated.

carefully scanned the inside of the corral and to his surprise he saw a set of shining eyes staring back at him in the dark. He immediately knew what it was and slammed the door shut. He called Thuktan and narrated the incident. Within few hours the news had reached every household in Chango and nearby villages.

"Standing by the door he carefully scanned the inside of the corral and to his surprise he saw a set of shining eyes staring back at him in the dark."

A snow leopard, which had entered the corral in the dark of the night, had somehow got trapped inside. It garnered a lot of attention from local leaders and forest department to school teachers. Everyone had reached *dogri* to enquire about the incident and see the snow leopard. Upon many assurances of receiving relief for the loss, Thuktan released the snow leopard. He also made a video of the release as a record that the animal had been released unharmed. When they inspected the corral from inside, they saw 19 animals which had been killed and 11 critically injured. Within 2-3 days even they succumbed to their injuries. However, after the release, all the hype around the case vanished. So, when I met

with Thuktanji, a few weeks later, he was understandably angry and had lost hope of receiving any financial help. I asked him if I could visit the dogri, to which he agreed.

Liti dogri is about 15 km away from Chango. It has three big corrals which houses small-bodied animals like goats and sheep of several livestock owners of the village. Thuktan ji's corral at any time has 200-250 animals. Upon inspection of the corral, we noticed that the door of the corral was old and did not shut completely. We gathered that the snow leopard must have entered through the door and had gotten trapped inside. To prevent further loss, we decided that we would replace the door with a new sturdy one. The next few days were filled with hurdles. The closest material shop and welder was 130 km away in Reckong Peo. Getting the material on time was crucial to avoid further losses. The three of us drove to Peo in Thuktan ji's car and bought doors for the corral. The villagers came to help us fix the door. The compensation process as well as the relief amount was also not very clear.

To get more details of what you can do in such cases of livestock depredation, please read the detailed article "Living with the wild"

If any wild predator enters your corral, contact your Beat Forest Guard who is in-charge immediately and if you live in Kinnaur or Lahual & Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, you can also give us a call on +91765000277. More contact details can be found on the last page



Repairing broken door of Thuktanji; Photo courtesy Nature Conservation Foundation

We decided to speak to the local Forest Guards and Range Officers. They informed us that the file had been sent to the DFO's office in Reckong Peo. We then met with the DFO who was very sympathetic and assured us that Thuktanji would receive the claim as per the new notification rates. Within few weeks Thuktanji received the claim from the department. Compared to the actual loss suffered and other collateral costs incurred, the financial relief offered by the Forest Department was often considered too little. Fortunately, the department has revised these rates since August 2018 to ensure that

the herders can cope with these situations better than before. As a herder myself, I believe that we must try to ensure that such events are avoided in the first place. Wild animals have always lived around us and will continue to do so. We have always taken precaution to keep our livestock safe from them, and we have to continue doing so. With access to better resources in our remote areas, we may be able to plan this more effectively and upgrade our corrals to make them predator-proof. This way we may be able to prevent any future losses that might occur.



Trekking the Forests of Himachal

By Tinkle Bhatt

To be a forest guard in Himachal Pradesh means trekking in some of the harshest terrains to document and protect the most vulnerable wildlife. But to me that is what brings the thrill to my work. Few months back while I was patrolling the forest near Yangla village alone, as I mostly do, I came to learn that a black bear was also roaming the same areas that I had covered. The thought of encountering a bear is a scary one, and I was glad that I didn't cross paths with the animal. At the same time, I was a little disappointed as I did not get the chance to see it.

Being a forest guard takes you to new places, you get to meet new people and experience their culture and history and observe their relationship with wildlife. Lahaul offers a lot of opportunities in this regard with its rich culture and heritage. People here really respect forests and nature and it makes my work more enjoyable.

"Being a forest guard takes you to new places, you get to meet new people and experience their culture and history and observe their relationship with wildlife."

Since I get to travel a lot, I like to document it all through photographs and wildlife photography, although challenging, it is something that I enjoy a lot. This photograph of two male ibex resting on a rock was taken by me on March 17, 2020 at Stingari. I was trekking with a senior who told me that if we stay calm and respectful, the ibex will not run away and they will also take interest in us.



Tinkle Bhatt

Tinkle Bhatt has been associated with the Territorial Wing of the Forest Department in Lahaul for the last five years. She is the third generation serving the Forest Department of Himachal Pradesh in her family. She has a passion for nature and strives towards human-wildlife co-existence in the valley.



Living with the wild

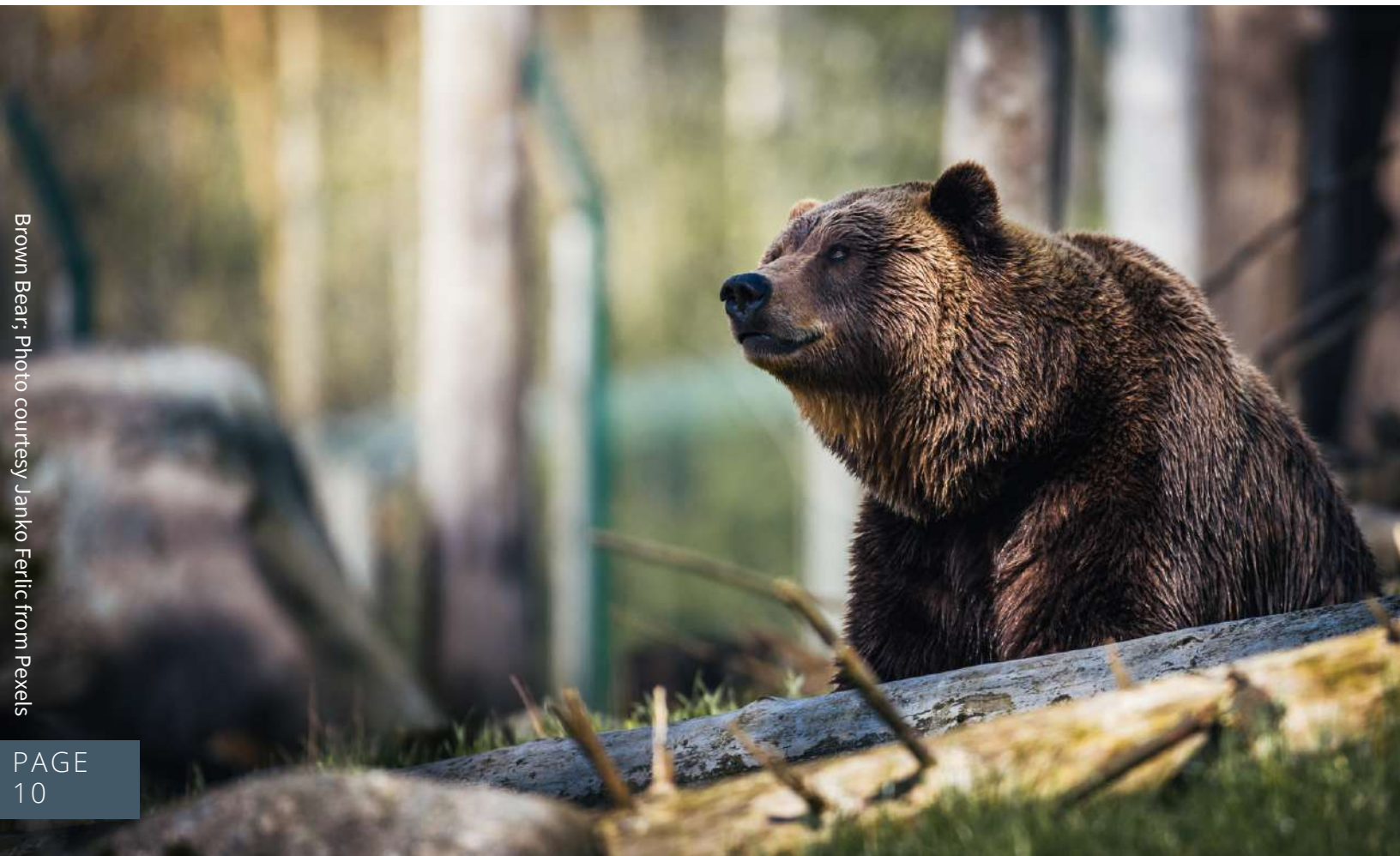
By Deepshikha Sharma

The 19th day of November 2018 was like any other day for Vikram of Pangi, Chamba district. He was walking his cattle in the nearby village pasture by the banks of Chenab river. Little did he know that his life was about to change. While walking through thick shrubs and vegetation, he didn't realise that he had accidentally come too close to a brown bear. The sudden realization of the proximity threatened the animal, and out of fear, it attacked Vikram. Vikram, caught off guard, did his best to reduce the impact of the attack. He managed to save his life, but suffered multiple grievous injuries all over his body and partial loss of eyesight. He immediately went to the nearest hospital to get medical help. He later filed for compensation with the Range Office in Pangi.

In another part of Himachal, a snow leopard, in the dark of the night, entered the corral of a herder and killed 20 animals. The herder, overnight, lost most of his livestock and being in one of the remote areas, he had no clear idea of what had to be done and how he could get some economic relief from the forest department.

"Some of these instances lead to a lot of emotional stress and in some scenarios may also impact the individuals' personal relationships."

Such cases are not new to these herding communities who often come in close quarters with the wildlife around their villages and pastures. Some of these instances lead



to a lot of emotional stress and in some scenarios may also impact the individuals' personal relationships. It is a very heavy price one pays for living around wildlife. We must ensure that anyone who suffers such a loss is not neglected and helped throughout the process.

Although this problem has been a part of herder's life for many generations, there are new-age solutions to prevent and mitigate some of these economic losses. One thing that every individual can do beforehand is to economically safeguard themselves and their family, in case of a medical emergency, by opting for accidental death and disability insurance offered by the central government under Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY) scheme. Although there are eligibility criteria, some degree of financial coverage can be availed from Ayushman Bharat as well. Himachal Pradesh Government offers Ayushman Bharat through its Himachal Pradesh Swasthya Bima Yojna Society

(HPSBY). If one does not have any life insurance or pension plan, they should also consider getting one from Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY) and Atal Pension Yojana (APY). For more details on these insurances refer to Table 1. Forest department also has provision for providing relief in case one is attacked by wildlife. For details on relief rates offered by Forest Department refer to Table 2.

For livestock, one could take steps to prevent such an incident by repairing and reinforcing corrals to ensure no gaps in walls/doors remain. The roofs can be reinforced with metal mesh to close off all possibilities of attack in the corral. Regular and timely maintenance is of utmost importance. However, the livestock is prone to attack in the pastures and forests as well. Village-level measures, like the insurance program, can help reduce the losses suffered due to such attacks. When the collective losses of the village are high, then insurance of livestock



Reinforcing the roofs of the corral to make them predator-proof; Photo courtesy Nature Conservation Foundation

Table 1: Medical, Life and pension plans offered by Central Government

Policy	Type of Policy	Website	Helpline	Premium (Rs)	Compensation (Rs)
Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY)	Accidental (age 18-70)	www.jansuraksha.gov.in	1800-110-001/ 1800-180-1111/ 1800-180-8053 (HP)	12/year	2 lacs
Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY)	Life (age 18-50)			330/year	2 lacs
Atal Pension Yojana (APY)	Pension Plan (age 18-40)			42 to 1454/month	1.70 to 8.5 lacs
Ayushman Bharat-Himachal Pradesh or Ayushman Bharat – National (can either opt for State or Central but not for both)	Medical	www.hpsbys.in	809-177-3886	Free for BPL & Street Vendors For others starting from Rs 365 to 1000/year	5 lacs/year per family (Max. five family members)
		www.pmjay.gov.in	14555 / 1800-111-565		

Table 2: Forest Department relief rates in case of wild animal attack on humans and livestock.

Sr. No	Particulars	Relief (Rs)
1	In case of death of a human being	4,00,000/-
2	In case of permanent disability to human beings	2,00,000/-
3	In case of grievous injuries/partial disability to human beings	75,000/-
4	In case of simple injury to human beings as per actual medical bill subject to a maximum.	15,000/-
5	In case of loss of Horse, Mule, Buffalo, Ox, Yak and Camel.	30,000/-
6	In case of Cow Jersey and cross breed.	15,000/-
7	In case of loss of Cow (local breed), Donkey, Churu, Churi & Pashmina Goat.	6,000/-
8	In case of loss of Sheep, Goat, Pig.	3,000/-
9	In case of loss of young ones of all animals (Buffalo, Cow Jersey and all other breeds, Mule, Yak, Horse, Camel, Churu, Churi, Donkey, Pashmina Goat, Sheep and Goat).	1,500/-

can be planned where the premium and compensation is decided by the villagers and a village committee manages the insurance fund. In case of a loss suffered by a family, compensation is paid out from such fund. However, the community must be careful and set clear rules and guidelines when starting a village-level insurance program. Currently, there are three villages in Spiti valley where the community runs the insurance program.

The forest department also provides compensation to the herders in case the livestock is killed by wildlife. However, despite all good intentions, there can be genuine difficulties in timely administering such claims by forest department and one must be patient but persistent. For details on relief rates offered by Forest Department refer to Table 2.

There are also some traditional solutions to the problem of livestock depredation. For example, in Gue village of Lahaul & Spiti district, there were multiple cases of surplus killing this year. Whoever lost their livestock were helped out by the entire community by each household contributing an animal to the owners. This practice not only takes the stress of losing livestock away but also does not let herder suffer economically. Such practices are reported in other parts of Himachal as well. I am sure that there will be many other local solutions that I have not talked about. I would love to hear

about them. Do write about the practices adopted to prevent and mitigate losses from wildlife in your village. Also, if you want to take up this issue in your own village or start an insurance programs and need further assistance, do reach out to me or my team. Our details are available on the last page of the newsletter.

In the end, I would like to mention that there is no one, sure shot solution to such complex problems, but Himachalis have continuously been adapting to these challenges, a characteristic of life in the hills and putting up with the adversities they face.



Deepshikha Sharma

Deepshikha Sharma is working with Nature Conservation Foundation as Conservation Manager. She enjoys working with communities and traveling to new places. She is working with communities on conservation projects in upper Himachal landscape.



A herder in front of his corral; Photo courtesy Snow Leopard Trust

Young Explorers

Hi, my name is Tashi.

And together we are explorers.

Rigzen, what are we going to do today?

I don't think so.

oh wow! I never noticed this. We have such wonderful animals around us of which we know very little.

Will you join us in this exploration?

I am Rigzen

We go to new places and see new things.

I am glad you asked. Tell me if you have seen the house of a sparrow?

Did you know that our house is also the house of a sparrow? Sparrows build their nests in between the gaps of our roof and walls.

Then lets go and find out more about the homes of animals that live around us.

Let us begin by reading about the homes of different animals.

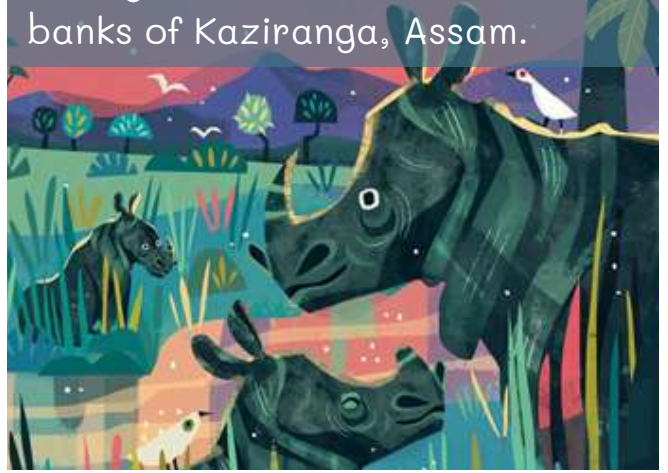


We Love Our Home

The Malabar Pied Hornbill loves a dust bath in the forest in Dandeli, Karnataka.



The Indian Rhinoceros loves sitting in wet mud on the river banks of Kaziranga, Assam.



The Irrawaddy Dolphin loves splashing in Chilika Lake, Odisha.



The Brown Fox loves playing hide-and-seek in the short grasslands at Jaisalmer, Rajasthan.



The Thick-tailed Pangolin loves resting in burrows in the dry lands of Gir Forest, Gujarat.



The Yellow-throated Marten loves jumping across treetops in Namdapha, Arunachal Pradesh.





Wow! Animals are just like us. They too love their homes.

That sounds like fun. You all should also come with us. It will be quite an adventure. But we must remain close to our home and stay safe.

You are right Tashi. I think animals are like us but yet different. I think we should explore the homes of some of the animals and birds that live around our village.



Activity

- Observe houses of at least 5 animals, birds or insects found around your house.
- Think about how these houses keep them safe and what material is used to build those houses and why?
- Write a short story about newly discovered animals, birds and insects and their home . Get creative!
- Send the story to us on the address given on the last page.



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Rigzen and Tashi Illustration by Rohit Rao

Page Concept by Ruchi Dhona (Let's Open A Book)

Art from our valleys

By Sherab Lobzang

Life in the mountains is tough. In addition to physical fitness, it demands a great deal of mental fortitude. This is particularly true among our elders, especially when you hear them speak about their younger days. Stories of how they managed to survive the long winter months tending to their livestock are hard to believe for our generation. Animals reserve a special place in our lives, and they too are often as spirited as hardy mountain people. Growing up in Ladakh, animals were an integral part of my life too: sheep, goat, donkey, horses and yak. And then there are the wild animals that were seen rarely, but often encountered when they preyed on livestock. Growing up in the village of Kumdok close to the Changthang region of Ladakh, I enjoyed exploring the mountains as a young kid. I still remember joining my mother to graze the village livestock in the pastures around our village. Each family took

turns to fulfill this task. During that time my mother would show me wild animals that were seen in the pastures around our village. We had to keep our livestock safe from hungry carnivores. I was fascinated by the outdoors and I still cherish those times spent exploring the pastures. I particularly remember the day I first encountered some very interesting art on some of the rocks in these pastures. As a 13-year old then, I wondered who had drawn them. I asked my mother and she told me that these were made many, many years ago. Probably even before our great, great grandparent's time. This was from a time when there were no notebooks, pencils and even schools which is why they may have etched them on the rock.

A few years later, I left the village for higher studies. Returning home each year, I noticed that the number of livestock in my village





Sherab Lobzang

Sherab Lobzang is from Kumdok village of Leh District in Ladakh. While growing up the wildlife found around her village got her fascinated about nature. Her favorite pastime is listening to traditional stories of from the elders of the village. For the last 5 years, she has been working with children in Ladakh to explore nature and be the young voice to conserve it.

were reducing. Some years back everyone gave up herding sheep and goat. After completing my education, I began to work in wildlife conservation. My work took me to many places across Ladakh. I interacted with locals of every generation. I also worked closely with researchers who were trying to study nature and the relation that we Ladakhi share with them. That often took me back to rock art that my mother had shown me. Our ancestors may have shared a special relation with nature and animals, as was depicted from the art. This got me even more interested in rock art which is both rare and special. In the last few years, I have encountered rock art in the most unlikely places. I make sure to take a picture, each time I find new art. I often find myself thinking about what our forefathers were trying to tell us through the art. I would like to share some of these pictures and my thoughts with you.

Ulley Tokpo is a village in the western part of Ladakh. Walking along the banks of the Indus River, I stumbled upon this curious rock art. The image shows a hunter pointing a bow at an animal with long curved horns, while a guard dog watches on. Did our forefathers hunt for food? Maybe they did not rear animals like sheep and goat then. Why else would they hunt? When did they start rearing livestock and when did westop hunting? Thanks to livestock rearing we could stop hunting. But while hunting has stopped, archery remains a very popular sport and a cultural event that we participate in every winter. This is a common practice across many mountain communities in the Himalaya.





"Huntsman" rock-art, Gya-Miru; Photo courtesy Sherab Lobzang

I recorded this rock art image of a horseman between the villages of Miru and Gya on the highway that connects Leh to Manali. One of my senior colleagues had shown me this image. If you drive past this area today, you will not find this horseman anymore. Unfortunately, a large part the rock formation that carried this rock art was destroyed during road construction. But this image is a reminder of the role that horses might have played in the lives of our forefathers.

Horses were the most efficient form of transport, be that for hunting or even later for trade and exchange of produce through barter. The significance of horses has diminished with the arrival of vehicles. However, they still reserve an important cultural role in our communities. Horse racing is active in some parts during Losar, the New Year celebrated on the first day of the lunisolar Tibetan calendar. Another sport that was played earlier was Ta Polo, Ta meaning horse and Polo meaning ball. Could this have been a primitive form of the sport of polo? I often wonder where our forefathers might have learnt it from.

I once encountered this fascinating image of what looked like horsemen pursuing a large animal. I wondered if these were yak. When I spoke with some elders in my village, they mentioned that indeed they were: they were wild yak! Dong, as they are referred to locally, haven't been seen in a very long time. The domestic yak is believed to have been reared from the wild yak. Our elders explained that dong is much larger than the domestic ones we rear. Today, it is reported from a small part in Changchenmo which is largely unexplored. I wonder if there are other animals like the dong that once occupied these rangelands.



"Horseman and Yak" rock-art; Photo courtesy Sherab Lobzang



"Ibex" rock-art; Photo courtesy Sherab Lobzang

At the mouth of Phuyul valley near the village of Miru, I observed some very interesting rock art while carrying out surveys. This included images of wild animals, stupas which are religious structures in Buddhism and script which was hard to identify. Some of these etchings look like ibex based on the long horns they display. I find that particularly interesting because ibex was not found in these areas during our surveys in the past three years. Could the rock art be suggesting that these valleys were home to ibex in prehistoric times? It is hard to say. These are just a few of the images I have found so far. Many more remain

undiscovered and I hope to keep finding them and sharing their stories, as I do now. While I have been fortunate to stumble upon these ancient relics that are part of our heritage, I am concerned about the number of these relics we may be losing out of ignorance. Rock art, which may date back several thousand years, are messages to us from our ancestors. They deserve attention and care. If we were to lose them, we might lose an important part of our past heritage.

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This holds true not just for Ladakh, but for all areas where rock art of this kind tells a story of the past. It is up to us to rediscover them and celebrate the wonderful stories they tell. These stories told by our ancestors.



Write to us

Every place has a unique story to tell: about its culture, its traditions and practices, its folklore, or the sacred relation it has with the mountains. HimKatha is all about the capturing these stories and there is no one better to tell them, other than you!

So, lets share our experiences, stories of our villages, traditions, practices, with each other and with rest of the world through this newsletter.

If you have any feedback, suggestions or complaints regarding the newsletter, please do reach out to us.

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