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# The Himalaya Initiative Half-Yearly Bulletin

Half-yearly bulletin of the ATREE-The Himalaya Initiative (THI) Office Gangtok Sikkim

Picture Credit: Mr. Jhony Lepcha, Gurudongmar Glacier Lake-2 (GL2), North Sikkim, winner International Mountain Day 2025 photo contest

The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) spans nine Indian states Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya, along with two Union Territories, Ladakh and Jammu & Kashmir, and the hilly areas of northern West Bengal and Assam (Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao). Covering 16% of India's land area, the IHR is a vital multifunctional landscape known for its rich biodiversity, diverse ecosystem services, and cultural heritage. Although it constitutes only 11% of the total area of the Hindu Kush Himalayas, it supports 36% of its population and influences the lives of over 1.2 billion people downstream.

However, the region is highly vulnerable to climate change, with projected temperature increases of up to 5°C by 2100 that could result in the loss of two-thirds of its glaciers. Such changes threaten biodiversity, ecosystem stability, and the livelihoods of mountain communities. Strengthening the resilience of both ecosystems and local populations is therefore critical.

Established in 1998 as the Eastern Himalaya Programme, ATREE (Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment) brings over 25 years of experience in generating knowledge, building regional capacity, and promoting sustainable livelihoods in the Eastern Himalayas. Building on this legacy, ATREE has launched The Himalaya Initiative (THI), a ten-year strategic framework aimed at fostering environmental conservation and socially just, sustainable development.

THI seeks to generate rigorous interdisciplinary knowledge, inform policy and practice, and train future environmental leaders. Its vision is to create sustainable multifunctional landscapes, economically and socially empowered communities, resilient institutions, and human resources capable of meeting emerging environmental challenges.

Aligned with ATREE's overall priorities, THI focuses on four thematic areas:

A. Biodiversity Conservation for Enhanced Ecosystem Services: Biodiversity exploration, restoration of degraded landscapes, and long-term ecosystem monitoring.

B. Sustainable Use and Green Economies: Promoting nature-based products, entrepreneurship, and sustainable resource use for diversified livelihoods.

C. Climate Change Mitigation, Adaptation, and Resilience: Promoting climate-resilient agriculture, water management, and disaster preparedness.

D. Sustainable Landscapes for Place-based Action: Supporting environmental education, restoration, and policy innovation for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

The present issue of the Bulletin is making an effort to align with Strategy and share our collective progress to wider stakeholders, including strategic partners, implementing partners, donors, and our local communities, who are the backbone of ATREE's progressive pathways – Happy reading!

**Dr. Nakul Chettri, Associate Director, THI, [nakul.chettri@atree.org](mailto:nakul.chettri@atree.org)**

## Through the Lens: Understanding Biodiversity in Shared Landscapes of the Darjeeling–Kalimpong Hills

Dr. Avantika Thapa, [avantika.thapa@atree.org](mailto:avantika.thapa@atree.org)

*“Even in landscapes shaped by people, life finds a way to thrive.”*

Biodiversity conservation is often imagined as something that happens deep inside forests. Yet, much of today's wildlife survives in shared spaces; places where people have modified nature to meet their needs.

Camera traps were placed across areas where human settlements, reserve forests, broom grass patches, and agricultural fields merge seamlessly and landscapes are anastomosed by winding mountain roads and everyday human movement. These are not untouched wildernesses, but living mosaics that connect forest fragments, farms, and villages into a single ecological system.



Setting up camera traps in such places was both challenging and deeply rewarding. I wasn't just looking for rare species, but trying to understand how wildlife persists in the margins, in spaces that are neither fully wild nor entirely cultivated.

The cameras revealed a world of coexistence and adaptation. Common species such as barking deer, macaques, wild boars, and peacocks appeared frequently, their presence illustrating how wildlife adjusts to human-dominated environments.

These species have adapted to feed on crops and household waste, finding human-grown food to be a perfect substitute for what degraded forests can no longer provide. While comparatively low-density carnivores such as common leopards and the Asiatic black bear have learned to avoid being detected by precisely predicting human spatio-temporal activity, and satisfy their nutritional needs.

*“Every image captured tells a story of adaptation and of ecological change.”*

While these behaviors demonstrate the remarkable resilience of wildlife, they also highlight a deeper issue: the growing dependence of wildlife on human-modified ecosystems. This dependence signals the decline in forest productivity and calls for urgent restoration efforts to ensure that natural food webs can function again.

At the same time, these shared landscapes remind us that conservation need not be confined to protected areas. Multifunctional mosaics can contribute to ecological balance if managed thoughtfully, maintaining habitat connectivity and good practices to safely share space, minimize marginalisation and encourage native vegetation.

Camera traps play a crucial role here. Acting as silent observers, they recorded patterns of wildlife movement, resource use, and human-wildlife interaction that would otherwise remain invisible. These data can help design better conservation strategies that integrate the realities of both people and wildlife.

Looking ahead, involving communities in such monitoring is key. When local residents help deploy and manage camera traps, they become co-stewards of biodiversity. Their participation transforms conservation from an external intervention into a shared responsibility.

*“Conservation in shared spaces is as much about people as it is about wildlife.”*

Through this experience, I have come to see camera traps not just as research tools, but as bridges between science and community, between human life and the wild rhythms that persist around us. They remind us that biodiversity conservation even in the most human-modified landscapes of the Darjeeling–Kalimpong hills enhances the resilience of ecosystems on which we all depend.

## Rediscovering the Wild: Citizen Science Initiatives in Sikkim and Darjeeling

Dr. Sailendra Dewan, [sailendra.dewan@atree.org](mailto:sailendra.dewan@atree.org)

In the Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalaya, ATREE-led citizen science initiatives are doing more than generating biodiversity data; they are reconnecting people, especially youth, with their natural and cultural heritage. In an increasingly globalised world where traditional bonds with nature are fading, these initiatives provide an opportunity to rediscover the region's biodiversity and renew appreciation for the close relationship between culture and the natural world.

ATREE led citizen science activities such as the City Nature Challenge, National Moth Week, and Big Butterfly Month, have become vibrant platforms across people of different ages. Through these events, students, farmers, and nature enthusiasts come together to explore their surroundings and contribute to biodiversity documentation. In 2024 and 2025 alone, more than 400 new participants joined iNaturalist, contributing over 10,000 observations of several taxa from the region. This surge in



participation reflects growing ecological awareness and a collective pride in the natural wealth of the landscape. Notably, about 10% of these contributors have continued documenting biodiversity regularly, showing sustained interest and commitment to nature observation and citizen-led conservation.

Beyond biodiversity monitoring, these initiatives are also building local capacity. For instance, 17 members of local communities have been trained as bird guides, enabling them to transform their knowledge and enthusiasm for nature into sustainable livelihood opportunities.

By linking citizen science with cultural ecosystem services, these efforts in Sikkim and Darjeeling demonstrate how participatory conservation through citizen science can deepen ecological understanding, revive traditional ecological knowledge, and inspire a new generation to care for the landscapes that define their identity.

## Discovering Nature: Learning Biodiversity in Our School Environment under Place Based Education

Yougesh Tamang, [yougesh.tamang@atree.org](mailto:yougesh.tamang@atree.org)

On 10th and 11th September 2025, a one-day each event titled “Discovering Nature: Learning Biodiversity in Our School Environment under Place Based Education” supported by the Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST), aimed to connect students directly with their local environment, promoting hands-on learning, ecological awareness, and conservation initiatives.

A total of 71 students creatively expressed their understanding of nature. Special attention was given to local endangered species, including the Himalayan Newt (*Tylototriton verrucosus*), Indian Pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*), and rare native butterflies.



The programme highlighted ongoing conservation efforts such as habitat restoration, awareness campaigns, and community-based protection initiatives, inspiring students to actively participate in safeguarding local biodiversity. The event focused on:

- Observing and documenting local biodiversity
- Developing scientific skills such as classification, recording, and identification
- Creating a School Biodiversity Register as a resource for future classes
- Integrating biodiversity learning with Science, Geography, Art, and Language lessons
- Inspiring environmental responsibility and conservation ethics
- Establishing a School Nature Club to continue PBE activities

Through field observations, discussions, and creative exercises, students developed a strong connection with their environment and a sense of stewardship toward local endangered species.

## One-Day Teachers' Training Workshop on Place-Based Education for School teachers from Sittong Valley

Yougesh Tamang, [yougesh.tamang@atree.org](mailto:yougesh.tamang@atree.org)

A one-day Teachers' Training Workshop on Place-Based Education (PBE) was held on 09th August 2025 in Sittong Valley, Kurseong Block, Darjeeling District, organized by ATREE Darjeeling Community Conservation Centre (CCC) under the Action for Mountains and Peoples (AMP Himalaya) initiative supported by the Rural India Supporting Trust (RIST). The workshop aimed to strengthen environmental education by linking classroom learning with local biodiversity, culture, local environmental challenges, and community knowledge. A total of 14 teachers from five local schools: Panchabatti Higher Secondary School, Mamring Toryok Higher Secondary School, Mahaldiram Junior High School, Mt. Zion Mission School, and K. N Memorial Academy participated in the training, which was facilitated by ATREE Darjeeling CCC in collaboration with the ATREE Bangalore SNAIL team ([www.snailnetwork.org](http://www.snailnetwork.org)). The sessions introduced participants to the concept of PBE, emphasizing learning through local experiences and real-world environmental challenges.

As part of the workshop, each participating teacher received a SNAIL Kits containing 15 interactive activity-based modules designed to promote experiential environmental learning and outdoor exploration among the students. The training included hands-on activities, group discussions, and curriculum review exercises that connected classroom subjects to real-life environmental concerns such as plastic waste, forest degradation, water conservation, biodiversity conservation, climate change, and sustainable livelihoods. Teachers actively contributed their ideas on incorporating PBE in their schools, highlighting that this approach would make lessons more engaging and meaningful while fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and environmental stewardship among students. The workshop concluded with a certificate distribution ceremony and sharing of draft PBE curriculum modules for teacher feedback, marking an important step toward developing a locally rooted, climate-smart, and community-centered education model for the Himalayan Region



# NEWS AND UPDATES

## Consultation Workshop on Strengthening Yak Pastoralism and Rangeland Network in India

Pema Yangden Lepcha, [pema.yangden@atree.org](mailto:pema.yangden@atree.org)

The Consultation Workshop on Strengthening Yak Pastoralism and Rangeland Network in India was held on 1st and 2nd September 2025 in Gangtok, Sikkim. Organized by the Department of Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services, Government of Sikkim, ATREE, through the Eicher Group foundation under Royal Enfield Social Mission, and ICIMOD, the workshop aimed to facilitate the formation of a state-level Yak Herders Association in Sikkim and initiate the



establishment of a national Indian Himalayan Yak Herder Federation encompassing Sikkim, Ladakh, and Arunachal Pradesh. The event addressed critical challenges confronting yak pastoralism, including pasture degradation, human-wildlife conflicts, deficiencies in veterinary services, and socio-economic pressures such as youth migration and limited market access for yak products. Participants engaged in thematic discussions on these issues, reviewed organizational structures suitable for community associations, and explored the roles of women and youth in the pastoral economy.

Regional case studies highlighted successful cooperative models and the cultural significance of yak herding, while panel discussions emphasized sustainable pasture management and capacity building. A key outcome of the workshop was the constitution of an interim Indian Himalayan Yak Herder Federation, representing diverse regions and stakeholders, to guide the network's development.

The workshop concluded with commitments to expand veterinary outreach, promote integrated pasture management, empower women and youth, and enhance economic opportunities for yak herders. This event represents a significant step toward coordinated community-driven efforts for sustainable yak pastoralism and rangeland conservation in the Indian Himalayas.

## Meeting/Workshop Attended

Dr. Sunita Pradhan, [sunita.pradhan@atree.org](mailto:sunita.pradhan@atree.org)

“From Blueprint to Biodiversity On 5<sup>th</sup> July 2025, organised by the Asian Development Bank, Mayfair Hotel, Gangtok, Sikkim, as a speaker on “Pangolins in the Himalaya”, highlighting the impacts of linear infrastructure development on burrowing species like the pangolins.



# Empowering Bird Guides for Conservation in the Darjeeling–Kalimpong, Eastern Himalaya

Dr. Aditya Pradhan, [aditya.pradhan@atree.org](mailto:aditya.pradhan@atree.org)

The Darjeeling–Kalimpong Bird Guide Refresher Training, held in Maneybhanjyang from 22–24 August 2025, brought together 17 previously trained guides for a three-day programme aimed at strengthening bird identification skills, guiding ethics, and conservation awareness. Organised by ATREE–Eastern Himalaya in collaboration with the Darjeeling Wildlife Division, the training combined classroom lectures, participatory discussions, and hands-on field sessions to enhance both technical knowledge and professional guiding practices. Despite challenging weather, participants documented 38 bird species during field exercises and took part in data-collation activities that highlighted the value of systematic biodiversity monitoring. Expert-led sessions covered raptor and waterbird identification, the role of birds in ecosystems, the cultural and ecological significance of the Kanchenjunga Massif, and the core principles of ethical birding and guiding.



The interactive format enabled participants to refresh field skills, gain renewed confidence in guiding, and deepen their understanding of how responsible bird tourism supports conservation and local livelihoods. The training was supported by the Rufford Foundation, UK.

# Integrated Surveillance for Zoonoses: Insights from ZSI's Darjeeling Workshop

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On 4 November 2025, the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), Kolkata, convened a targeted workshop on 'Integrated Disease Surveillance' in Darjeeling. Conducted in close collaboration with the Animal Resources Development Department of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, the gathering brought together representatives from public health, veterinary health, the forest department, and academic research.

Dr. Avantika Thapa and Mr. Saurabh Gurung represented ATREE and contributed meaningfully to the deliberations. Central to the agenda were efforts to resolve interoperability issues within the One Health paradigm, with an emphasis on establishing interdisciplinary alliances to counter zoonotic pathogens endemic to the Darjeeling region.

Participants from ATREE presented grounded insights from local ecological monitoring while integrating contemporary advancements reported by ZSI and counterpart entities in the public and private sectors. Such interactions highlighted the urgency for coordinated monitoring protocols to enhance early detection and response to emerging zoonoses, promoting a more resilient public health ecosystem in Darjeeling and beyond.



# APRC4 Update: Showcasing ATREE's Scrub typhus research in Penang

Saurabh Gurung, saurabh.gurung@atree.org

I had the opportunity to present our poster titled "Understanding Scrub typhus, an emerging threat in India at the 4th Asia Pacific Rickettsial Conference (APRC4) held in Penang, Malaysia, from 29<sup>th</sup> September to 1<sup>st</sup> October. Co-authored by Sunita Pradhan (ATREE) and Shrijana Gurung (Department of Health & Family Welfare, govt. of Sikkim), the work highlighted ATREE's ongoing efforts to study reservoir hosts, vector ecology, and risk factors linked to this re-emerging zoonotic disease across the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayan landscape.

Participation at APRC4 offered a vital window into global approaches to combat rickettsial diseases, through discussions on vector patterns and monitoring techniques alongside fellow researchers from abroad.

Such exchanges shed light on potential ways to bolster public health measures suited to the Himalayas' distinct environmental and social contexts. This experience also bolsters ATREE's initiatives, linking our field-based findings to broader international models for sharper surveillance and response in the Eastern Himalayas.



## Inauguration Program of the Restoration Project in Rangbull Agriculture Farm, Darjeeling

Tara Chettri, tara.chettri@atree.org

The inauguration of the restoration initiative Under the Mountains to Mangrove (RE-HIM) Project supported by Conservation International, was held at Rangbull Agricultural Farm in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture, GTA on 21st August 2025. The event marked the beginning of efforts to restore 10 hectares of degraded and waste land aimed at enhancing ecological



resilience and improving local livelihoods. The programme saw participation from diverse stakeholders, including representatives from the GTA Councillor- Agriculture, Officials from the Department of Agriculture, both West Bengal(WBAS) and GTA, Forest Department (Silviculture and Wildlife Divisions), NABARD, and members of eight local societies and surrounding communities. A plantation drive of over 4,000 saplings of native species Paiyu (*Prunus cerasoides*), Kafal (*Myrica esculenta*), Pipli (*Piper longum*),

Champ (*Michelia cathartii*), Katus (*Castanopsis indica*), Maya (*Eriobotrya pedunculata*), Lapche Kawlo (*Machilus odoratissima*), and Lopsi (*Spondias axillaris*). This symbolized a strong collaborative commitment toward restoring degraded landscapes and strengthening community stewardship in the Darjeeling Himalaya. Earlier on 30th July 2025, an agreement was signed to initiate ecological restoration and sustainable land management interventions on approximately 200 acres of degraded/fallow government land located at Rangbull and Sonada Government Farm, Darjeeling. The agreement was signed by Shri Younus Lepcha, Deputy Director of Agriculture (WBAS,) and Dr. Nakul Chettri, Associate Director, ATREE-EH.

# Village goes online

Srijana Sharma, [srijana.sharma@atree.org](mailto:srijana.sharma@atree.org)

The comic “The Village Goes Online” beautifully captures a new wave of change sweeping through the villages of Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills. With mobile phones in hand, farmers will be discovering how digital tools can make everyday life easier and more informed.

Through the site-specific chatbots being developed by ATREE with the support of Rainmatter Foundation, people will be able to access vital information- from daily weather updates and government schemes to new farming techniques and pest control methods. What was once distant knowledge will now be right at their fingertips!

This growing digital awareness will be helping communities to make smarter decisions for their fields and families. As seen in the comic, curiosity and collaboration are turning phones into powerful tools for progress-showing that even small screens can bring big change to the hills.



# Community-Based Nursery Establishment

Tara Chettri, [tara.chettri@atree.org](mailto:tara.chettri@atree.org)



Six community-based nurseries were successfully established across Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Sikkim. This nursery was initiated as part of ongoing restoration activities supported by Priceless Planet Collation-Master Card (PPC-MC) and Conservation International Foundation (CI), to ensure a localized and sustainable supply of native and ecologically important saplings for plantation drivers and strengthening local community participation in restoration efforts. Sites were identified in consultation with local self-help groups, Village committees, and community members. A Nursery Management Committee was formed in a location to oversee the operation of the nursery.

A formal agreement was signed between ATREE, landowners, and the Committee to define roles and responsibilities. Two-day hands-on training sessions, covering theoretical and practical aspects of nursery management, were conducted at all sites, benefiting 33 participants (9 men and 24 women). The nurseries will support future plantation programs and create livelihood opportunities through sapling production and maintenance incentives, while also promoting community ownership and collaboration with local institutional bodies.

# Journeying Across the Himalayas II: Celebrating Stories, Culture, and Community

Pema Yangden Lepcha, [pema.yangden@atree.org](mailto:pema.yangden@atree.org)

Journeying Across the Himalayas II (JATH II), organised by the Royal Enfield Social Mission, was held from 4–10 December 2025 at Travancore Palace, New Delhi. Building on its 2024 edition, the multidisciplinary festival brought together art, culture, conservation, and community narratives under the theme “Ours to Tell,” foregrounding the voices of indigenous Himalayan communities and sustainable practices.

The festival featured immersive exhibitions such as The Himalayan Knot on Ladakhi Pashmina, Echoes of the East showcasing Northeast Indian textiles and languages, live sand mandalas by monks from Namgyal Monastery, and diverse art installations.

Workshops, performances, film screenings through DIFF on the Road, hands-on workshops, and a vibrant Himalayan Bazaar further enriched the experience.

ATREE – The Himalaya Initiative was represented by Dr. Eklabya Sharma, Strategic Advisor & Director & Pema Yangden Lepcha, Research Associate, alongside yak herder Mr. Thupden Lachungpa from Lachung, who participated as a panelist for “Keeping the mountains alive: The critical role of rangelands and pastoral practices” on 7th December 2025. The platform enabled meaningful dialogue, networking, and potential collaborations supporting ATREE’s work on yak pastoralism and rangeland management.



## Learning Beyond Walls: A Three-Day Nature Camp through Place-Based Education at Bungkulung village, Darjeeling

Yougesh Tamang, [yougesh.tamang@atree.org](mailto:yougesh.tamang@atree.org)

A three-day Nature Camp under the Place-Based Education (PBE) program was held in Bungkulung Village, Darjeeling, from December 15-17, 2025, engaging 30 students and 3 teachers from local schools. Organized by ATREE with support from RIST, the camp transformed the Eastern Himalayas into interactive classrooms, bridging theoretical knowledge with real-world experiences.



Key highlights included:

- Hands-on learning about the Himalaya's biogeography and biodiversity.
- Training in bird and butterfly identification, including citizen science activities using tools like iNaturalist.
- Exposure to sustainable rural livelihoods, such as organic farming, beekeeping, and fish farming.
- Visits to community-led eco-friendly enterprises, demonstrating the link between conservation and livelihood.

The camp concluded with student presentations and certificates, fostering a lasting connection between participants and their environment. Students found the experience eye-opening, while organizers emphasized its role in promoting environmental awareness and community responsibility.

# Foundations of Field Ecology course, National Center for Biological Science (NCBS)

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I attended the Foundations of Field Ecology course at NCBS's Pachmarhi Field Station, designed for hands-on training in ecological fieldwork. The course emphasized state-of-the-art field methods, research design, and involved active participation in data collection and analysis. Topics included vegetation sampling, bird and mammal identification, camera trapping, and GPS use. Participants learned quantitative frameworks like population estimation and distance sampling, complemented by workshops on experimental design and ethical practices. The diverse landscape provided an excellent natural laboratory for understanding ecological processes. Overall, the course significantly enhanced my ecological research skills and is valuable for my future work in wildlife research and conservation.



## International Mountain Day: 11 December 2025

Pema Yangden Lepcha, [pema.yangden@atree.org](mailto:pema.yangden@atree.org)

On the occasion of International Mountain Day, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), under The Himalayan Initiative, hosted a photography contest themed “Glaciers Matter: for Water, Food, and Livelihoods in Mountains and Beyond.”

The contest sought to draw attention to the cascading impacts of rapidly disintegrating mountain ecosystems on millions of people living downstream.

### First Prize

Mr. Jhony Lepcha secured the top position with a mesmerizing photograph of Gurudongmar Glacier Lake-2 (GL2), North Sikkim, captured on his Android phone. Humbly attributing the moment to chance, he shared that he was “simply lucky to be present at the right time.”

### Runner-up

Mr. John Bhutia impressed the jury with a striking image of the Kangchenjunga Range. While the mighty peaks are a daily sight from his home, he said that the sky that day, dramatically painted with clouds, was unlike any other, prompting him to pick up his camera.

The winners were felicitated by Dr. Eklabya Sharma, Padma Shri awardee, Strategic Advisor & Director, ATREE, Regional Office, THI Gangtok, who remarked:

“As long as young people appreciate the mountains, there is still hope.”

Through young voices and powerful images, this contest reminds us why glaciers, and the mountains they belong to, matter far beyond the high Himalaya.



### The Shifting Landscape of Agroforestry in Sittong, Suruk and Samthar

Satkar Deep, [satkardeep73@gmail.com](mailto:satkardeep73@gmail.com)

Agroforestry has long been an integral part of the traditional farming systems in Sittong, Suruk, and Samthar. The major forms practiced in these regions include farm-based, mandarin-based, large cardamom-based, broomstick-based agroforestry, and terrace rice cultivation. Although many farmers continue to rely on these systems for subsistence, a noticeable decline in production has been observed over the years. This decline is largely attributable to labor shortages, changing climatic conditions, the spread of pests and diseases, and frequent crop raids by wild animals. Consequently, farmers have become increasingly demotivated to continue agroforestry practices. Today, only a handful of them remain dedicated, either to meet household needs, to pursue limited commercial opportunities, or to preserve their traditional way of farming.



### Into the White Unknown: The Winter Journey of Gnathang's Yaks

Sangay Wangdi Bhutia, [sangay.bhutia@atree.org](mailto:sangay.bhutia@atree.org)

When winter comes to Gnathang Valley in Sikkim, herders let their yaks roam freely to look for food hidden under the snow. The valley becomes quiet, with only the soft sound of yak bells in the cold air. Some yaks find their way home when spring returns, guided by memory and instinct. Others are lost to snowstorms or wild animals and become part of local stories. Their long winter journey is a struggle to survive, a simple yet powerful reminder of strength, patience, and the wild beauty of life in the high Himalayan mountains.



# Peacocks and the changing agricultural landscape of Suruk-Samthar

*Repbamla lepcha, repbamla@gmail.com*

In the fields of Suruk-Samthar village, dawn brought the rhythm of life, rustling leaves, cowbells, and the distant calls of peacocks. Once symbols of pride, these birds had become a menace. Shankar, a hardworking farmer, watched helplessly as the peacocks destroyed his chilli saplings, uprooting seedlings and trampling soil. Protected by law, they could not be harmed. Farmers tried agricultural nets and building scarecrows, but the birds grew clever and returned in greater numbers. With crops of pulses, cereals, and vegetables destroyed, the farmers turned to broomstick cultivation, hardy plants that the peacocks ignored. Over time, entire farmlands were transformed into broomstick plantations.



## Bonded for life

*Upama Rai and Bhasker Gurung, raiupama07@gmail.com/bhaskergurung789@gmail.com*

Through generations, pastoralism has been a way of living in the highlands of Sikkim. Pastoralists rely mainly on yak herding as a source of income. Yak herders spend the majority of their time in remote places taking care of their yaks while surviving through harsh weather and changing seasons.



For them, yaks are not just livestock but a companion, with whom they share a special bond of love, trust, and care. The herders care for their yaks, feed them, and, in return, the yaks provide milk, a vital source of livelihood. Over time, they begin to recognise yaks by their colour, size, and behaviour, while the yaks come to recognise their herder's voice. A similar case was observed in the Gnathang valley, East Sikkim. A herder with 165 yaks has named half of them and can identify them even in large groups. He has given names such as Kali (for a black one), Chucchi (for an angry one), Seti (for a white one), and the list goes on.

He even recognises the newly born calves of the yaks, holds them and loves them immensely. The calves also recognise his behaviour and voice and shows their love by following the herder and licking the herder's hair while milking. This relationship shows that love travels beyond words. Their bond exemplifies the harmony and mutual respect in pastoralism, showing that true connection flourishes through understanding and care. The herder's life is a little less lonely with the companionship of his yaks in the high mountain.

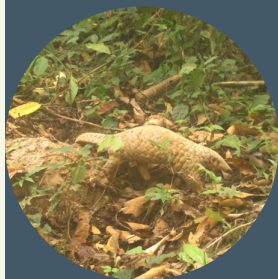
# Field documentation of the 2025 Drukpa Tshe-Zi Festival in Lhashar Valley

Pema Yangden Lepcha, [pema.yangden@atree.org](mailto:pema.yangden@atree.org)

The Drukpa Tshe-Zi Festival took place on July 28, 2025, in Lhashar-Zachu Valley, Mangan District, Sikkim. It was a vibrant event where the Drokpa community of Lachen celebrated their faith and yak herding traditions. The day started with prayers at the local monastery, followed by exciting yak races, singing, and dancing. The yaks were beautifully decorated, and traditional clothing and handmade crafts were showcased. The Department of Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services from Chungthang, along with the Indian Army, organized health camps for the yaks and herders. The herders requested additional support, such as the provision of solar lighting for protection against feral dogs. People from the community, local leaders, and organizations came together to honor and support this important mountain yak herding tradition.



## New projects and grants



Action Grant from The Habitat Trust for “Scaling Pangolin Conservation in the Kanchenjunga Landscape-India October 2025



Rufford Small Grants (Priyanka Rai) for “Strengthening Pangolin Conservation in the Khancghendzonga Landscape, India

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ATREE's mission is to promote socially just environmental conservation and sustainable development by generating rigorous interdisciplinary knowledge that engages actively with academia, policy makers, practitioners, activists, students and wider public audiences. ATREE's Northeast / Eastern Himalayas Programme has a direct presence in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya with a range of local partners in the other states of North East India.

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