



THE HIMALAYA BULLETIN

Half-yearly bulletin (Bilingual) of the ATREE - Regional Office, Gangtok, Sikkim



Picture Credit: Pema Yangden Lepcha

Note

Beginning with Volume 12, Issue 1, *The Eastern Himalaya Bulletin* will be published under the new title, *The Himalaya Bulletin*.

This change reflects the growing scope of the publication while reaffirming our commitment to sharing research, conservation initiatives, and perspectives from across the Himalayan region. Although the title has changed, the bulletin's purpose and editorial vision remain unchanged.

We thank our contributors, reviewers, collaborators, and readers for their continued support and look forward to your continued engagement with The Himalaya Bulletin.

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Dr Nakul Chettri,
Associate Director,
ATREE - THI

Message from the Associate Director

On 4 May 2026, I completed my first year as Associate Director of ATREE's The Himalaya Initiative (THI). The past year has been a period of intensive learning, institutional reflection, and collective action. It provided an opportunity to better understand ATREE's long-standing contributions to conservation and sustainable development in the Eastern Himalaya, particularly within the Khangchendzonga Landscape, while gaining insights into the organisation's programmes, systems, strengths, and future opportunities.

A major focus during the year was enhancing organisational effectiveness and fostering a more collaborative and results-oriented work culture. Efforts were made to strengthen linkages between research and field implementation so that scientific knowledge could better inform on-ground actions and generate tangible benefits for local communities. Through regular programme reviews, team interactions, and strategic discussions, greater emphasis was placed on integrating research, conservation practice, and development interventions across projects.

Institutional learning and capacity development were also prioritised. Orientation sessions on systematic planning, monitoring, and evaluation were introduced to improve project implementation and reporting. Friday Seminars were institutionalised as an internal peer-learning platform where staff members could share experiences, discuss research findings, and learn from one another. These initiatives encouraged teamwork, strengthened cross-disciplinary collaboration, and promoted a culture of continuous learning.

Operational improvements formed another important area of work. Project management processes were strengthened through objective-based travel planning, clearer roles and responsibilities, improved reporting mechanisms, and closer coordination with the finance team. Regular mentoring, review of field activities, and strategic guidance helped improve implementation quality while supporting the professional growth of younger colleagues.

Resource mobilisation remained a key priority throughout the year. In collaboration with colleagues, seven major project proposals were developed and submitted to funding agencies, including IKI, NMHS, DST, ANRF, and NABARD. These proposals aim to secure long-term support for biodiversity conservation, ecosystem management, sustainable livelihoods, and climate resilience initiatives across mountain landscapes.

Significant efforts were also invested in strengthening institutional visibility and communication. The recruitment of a Communication Associate, greater engagement with social media, contributions to knowledge-sharing platforms, and the redesign of the half-yearly bulletin helped improve outreach and communicate stories of impact more effectively. Recruitment of new staff members further strengthened institutional capacity and brought diverse expertise into the organisation.

Another important achievement was improving coordination between ATREE's Gangtok and Bengaluru offices. Closer engagement with teams responsible for Finance, Human Resources, Development, and Communication fostered stronger institutional cohesion and encouraged greater participation of Bengaluru-based colleagues in THI programmes and events.

The year also highlighted the importance of building on ATREE's nearly three decades of work in the Eastern Himalaya. While the organisation has established a strong regional presence through numerous conservation and development initiatives, sustaining long-term impacts remains a challenge due to short project cycles and limited resources. There is also a need to systematically archive and consolidate the wealth of knowledge, data, and experiences generated over the years.

Looking ahead, priorities include strengthening institutional systems, developing integrated programme frameworks, mobilising resources for emerging thematic areas, expanding partnerships, and contributing more actively to ATREE's academic mission. Overall, this first year has been one of transition, institution-building, and strategic learning, laying a stronger foundation for enhancing impact, relevance, and sustainability across the Indian Himalayan Region.



Re-building the connection: How the people from a transboundary landscape reshaping the equation with the elephants

Leesh Ray

Photo Credit: Leesh Ray

It was the third week of October, 2023 and the harvest had been only days away. The rains had been good that year. The stalks were heavy, bent with grain the colour of pale gold in the early light. Purnima Barman, a 40 years old woman, who has lost her husband during an encounter with a tusker had checked the field the evening before and gone to bed satisfied, lulled by the quiet of a calm night into something she rarely felt during those months: ease. No shouting. No orange sweep of torchlight from someone chasing shadows at the forest edge.

By the time she reached her field at dawn, a herd had already passed through. Three bighas of standing paddy, a full season's care, the soil tilled and sown and weeded and watched across four months, had been flattened and eaten down to roots. What the elephants had not eaten they had walked through. The field looked like something had simply erased it.

"I sat at the edge and I cried," Purnima says now.

That was 2023, there were no watchtowers, no well-equipped response teams, no organised network connecting communities to each other or to the authorities responsible for the land. There were only the elephants, arriving when and where they chose, and the people who woke to ruin. Season after season, the calculus was the same: plant, tend, hope, lose.

Three years later, its June, 2026, Purnima's field is standing. In addition to paddy, she has successfully grown mustard seeds in last winter, and also growing bay leaves and lemons with a support from ATREE to promote alternate crop cultivation to reduce crop loss from elephant invasion. And Purnima herself, along with more than six thousand of villagers from twelve-plus villages of the traditional transboundary elephant-corridor are reshaping the definition of human-wildlife coexistence, and becoming a part of the system that keeps it that way.



What the Mechi river observes now: post-sunset hour scenes

The call comes just after dusk, or sometimes early in the morning. A WhatsApp message, a few words in walkie-talkie, a shared pin on a map. Within minutes, Rahul, Dipak, Amit and their team members are on their motorcycles. Halogen searchlights over the Mechi riverbed, riding not away from the elephants but to search them.

A herd of elephants has been spotted near Rakam Jote, and the team's job is not to chase the animals away in panic, but to track their movement, alert households in the path, and gently guide the herd toward the forest. It is painstaking, sometimes frightening work. But the RRT members do not look frightened; rather, they all are focused.

In the transboundary villages of Naxalbari, this is a common scenario

"Before, when elephants came, everyone used to run in different directions," Jeet said, pausing at the edge of a mustard field. "Some people threw firecrackers. Some tried to shout them back. There was no coordination. But now the scenario has been changed. People are more empathetic towards elephants; no one attacks or irritates elephants at any means in our locality."

This notice worthy change has been strengthening carefully over the past three years by the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE); to bring a positive transformation through not just how communities respond to elephants, but how they think about them.

A transboundary landscape witnessing lives of humans and elephants

Running swiftly along the Indo-Nepal border in the Naxalbari landscape, the Mechi River witnessing the large cross-border migration of elephants.

The Naxalbari landscape is the single most important corridor for elephant movement in the entire West Bengal.

Due to the increasing habitat fragmentation and expanding human settlements, human-elephant conflict is increasing remarkably. When large herds of elephants move through cultivated lands, the scale of loss can be catastrophic a year's worth of food and income reduced to mud and broken stalks in a single night. Houses have been damaged. People have been injured.

"People would try to drive them off with vocal-sounds, lights, firecrackers," recalls Krishna Prasad Dahal, one elderly man in Surajbar. "Sometimes it worked. Sometimes the elephants charged. We never knew what would happen."

ATREE's intervention

In 2024, ATREE started working on "Piloting Holistic Human-Elephant Coexistence" project in the Naxalbari landscape with a quiet but strategic vision that the communities living alongside these animals were not merely victims to be protected, they are potential partners in conservation.

Working across more than twelve villages and eventually reaching over six thousand people, the ATREE team began by listening. They conducted baseline assessments to understand what communities already knew, what they feared, and what they needed. They sat in on village meetings, spoke to community members, SSB personnel, administrative heads; visited schools, and met with Forest Department officials.

From Fear to Familiarity

Across the 20+ villages under Naxalbari landscape, the shift in community attitudes has been gradual but visible. Women's groups that once spoke of elephants only in terms of terror and damage now discuss them with a nuanced awareness of their habits and movements. Children who participate in the project's school outreach programmes can explain why elephants are important, and how many species of elephants are there are in the World.

"My daughter told me that if you see an elephant, you should not run," says Amar Oraon, a farmer from Tukria Basti near Kolabari forest. "She said you should move quietly to the side and let it pass. She learned this in school. And she explained it beautifully"

This quiet transfer of knowledge from programme to classroom to kitchen table is one of the project's most important, least measurable achievements. Conservation cannot be sustained by outside organisations alone. It has to take root in the communities that live with it every day.

A Partnership Made Visible

One of the project's quiet but critical achievements has been the strengthening of collaboration not only between communities and the Indian Forest Department, but between the administration of Naxalbari Block Office as well. A total of 4 watchtowers similar to watchtowers constructed by ATREE, 6 solar-powered water pumps, and 60+ solar-powered street lights have already been installed by the Naxalbari Block authority under the government of West Bengal as a result of convergence.

Forest officials have participated in training sessions, community meetings, and joint monitoring exercises. The development and regular dissemination of elephant movement alerts have created a shared information network that connects RRT members, village monitors, and forest, which eventually contribute towards strengthening human-wildlife coexistence.

Responses from different sectors, like other NGOs, the forest department, local administrations, indicate that this trust is real, measurable, and growing, reflected in increased community participation in monitoring, higher uptake of safe-behaviour guidelines, and a documented reduction in the panicked, dangerous responses that once characterised elephant encounters in the area.

The Road Ahead

Coexistence is not a destination. It is a practice; something that must be renewed, generation by generation, village by village, encounter by encounter.

What ATREE is building in this transboundary landscape is not a solution so much as a foundation. The watchtowers stand. The WhatsApp groups hum with alerts. The RRT members track elephant movement along the banks of the Mechi river. The community members know what to do.

And on a quiet evening at Hatiram Jote (Yes, they named a village to reflect their connection with the elephants!), Prabal Munda, a farmer, steps out of his home to check on her field. In the distance, at the forest's edge, a large herd of elephants is moving purposefully, heading west, toward the Mechi, toward Nepal, following a path their ancestors have walked for longer than anyone can remember.

He watches for a moment. Then picks up his phone and types a message to the group: "Large herd near the western field. Moving toward the river. All safe". He presses send and goes back inside.

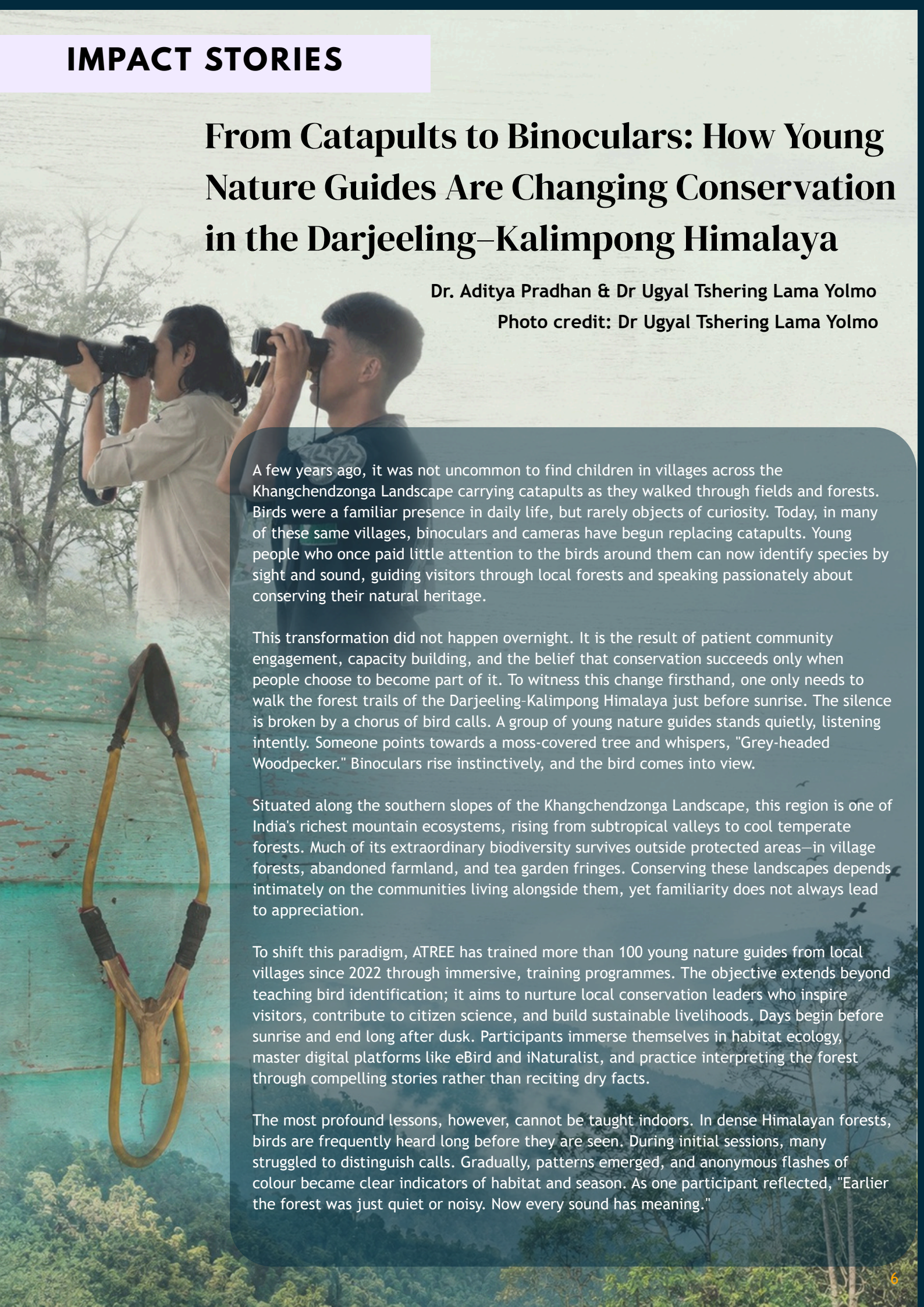
That moment, unhurried, informed, unafraid, is what coexistence looks like when it begins to work. Not the absence of elephants, but the presence of knowledge. Not the end of fear, but the beginning of understanding. Not a wall between species, or between nations; but a shared landscape, held carefully together by the people who have chosen to live in it, and to let the residents who are living in this landscape from the very beginning, and protecting it since then...THE ELEPHANTS, ULTIMATE GUARDIANS OF THE FORESTS!



From Catapults to Binoculars: How Young Nature Guides Are Changing Conservation in the Darjeeling–Kalimpong Himalaya

Dr. Aditya Pradhan & Dr Ugyal Tshering Lama Yolmo

Photo credit: Dr Ugyal Tshering Lama Yolmo



A few years ago, it was not uncommon to find children in villages across the Khangchendzonga Landscape carrying catapults as they walked through fields and forests. Birds were a familiar presence in daily life, but rarely objects of curiosity. Today, in many of these same villages, binoculars and cameras have begun replacing catapults. Young people who once paid little attention to the birds around them can now identify species by sight and sound, guiding visitors through local forests and speaking passionately about conserving their natural heritage.

This transformation did not happen overnight. It is the result of patient community engagement, capacity building, and the belief that conservation succeeds only when people choose to become part of it. To witness this change firsthand, one only needs to walk the forest trails of the Darjeeling-Kalimpong Himalaya just before sunrise. The silence is broken by a chorus of bird calls. A group of young nature guides stands quietly, listening intently. Someone points towards a moss-covered tree and whispers, "Grey-headed Woodpecker." Binoculars rise instinctively, and the bird comes into view.

Situated along the southern slopes of the Khangchendzonga Landscape, this region is one of India's richest mountain ecosystems, rising from subtropical valleys to cool temperate forests. Much of its extraordinary biodiversity survives outside protected areas—in village forests, abandoned farmland, and tea garden fringes. Conserving these landscapes depends intimately on the communities living alongside them, yet familiarity does not always lead to appreciation.

To shift this paradigm, ATREE has trained more than 100 young nature guides from local villages since 2022 through immersive, training programmes. The objective extends beyond teaching bird identification; it aims to nurture local conservation leaders who inspire visitors, contribute to citizen science, and build sustainable livelihoods. Days begin before sunrise and end long after dusk. Participants immerse themselves in habitat ecology, master digital platforms like eBird and iNaturalist, and practice interpreting the forest through compelling stories rather than reciting dry facts.

The most profound lessons, however, cannot be taught indoors. In dense Himalayan forests, birds are frequently heard long before they are seen. During initial sessions, many struggled to distinguish calls. Gradually, patterns emerged, and anonymous flashes of colour became clear indicators of habitat and season. As one participant reflected, "Earlier the forest was just quiet or noisy. Now every sound has meaning."

This transformation extended deeply into professional ethics. Discussions on responsible birding challenged participants to question practices like excessive audio playback or disturbing nesting birds. A young guide from Sukhia-Pokhari shared, "ATREE has taught us ethical birding practices, and I want to build my professional career following this principle of not disturbing birds during nesting and not using playbacks." Conservation was no longer just a topic of discussion, but a personal value.

Rather than discouraging them, realizing that identifying birds was highly complex fostered a deeper appreciation for field natural history and a hunger to keep learning. Bringing together youth from across the region also created opportunities extending beyond formal sessions. Friendships evolved into professional alliances, establishing the Nature Guides Network. This platform allows members to stay connected, share observations, and exchange guiding opportunities.

The practical outcomes are already reshaping lives. One guide from Latpanchar shared that despite his village being a premier birding destination, untrained locals were long excluded while a select few guides reaped the benefits. The training changed his trajectory entirely. Armed with newfound expertise, he has guided over fifty birding groups in just over a year. Reflecting on his journey, he noted, "I realised that opportunities come with knowledge, professionalism and trust." He jokingly adds that if a group is exceptionally experienced, he still defers to a senior guide, recognizing he still has a long way to learn.

This passion often extends into active habitat restoration. Another participant, knowing that vulnerable Rufous-necked Hornbills are a major draw to his locality, is now spearheading an initiative to plant fruiting trees to enrich the birds' natural environment.

Made possible through the generous support of the Oriental Bird Club, The Rufford Foundation, and the Rural India Support Trust, this journey has nurtured a generation of young people who see forests not simply as places they live beside, but as landscapes they are proud to protect.

The forests have not changed. The birds have not changed. What has changed is the way people see them. Across the Darjeeling-Kalimpong Himalaya, catapults are slowly giving way to binoculars, curiosity is replacing indifference, and a new generation is discovering that the greatest stories hidden within these forests are the ones they now have the knowledge, confidence, and responsibility to tell.



Young Salamander Guardians: Passing the Torch for a Living Fossil in the Darjeeling Himalaya

Yougesh Tamang

Photo Credit: Yougesh Tamang

For years, members of the Namthing Pokhari Sanrakshan Samiti (NPSS) have quietly guarded one of the Darjeeling Himalaya's most extraordinary natural treasures. Hidden amidst the mist-laden pine forests of Sittong III lies Namthing Pokhari, a small wetland that serves as a critical breeding habitat for the Himalayan Salamander (*Tylototriton himalayanus*), a rare and threatened amphibian often described as a "living fossil" because of its ancient evolutionary lineage.

The community's journey to protect the salamander has not been easy. As tourism increased and environmental pressures mounted, local conservationists watched with concern as plastic waste, habitat degradation, and declining awareness threatened both the wetland and the species it supports. While NPSS members remained committed to safeguarding Namthing Pokhari, a pressing question lingered: Who would continue this work in the future?

That question began to find an answer on World Environment Day 2026.

Through its Place-Based Education (PBE) programme, the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) brought together students and teachers from K.N. Memorial Academy, Shelpu, members of NPSS, and local community members for a day of learning and action at Namthing Pokhari. The programme was designed not merely to teach students about biodiversity, but to help them develop a personal connection with the landscapes and species that define their home.



The day began with students stepping into the role of conservation practitioners. Equipped with gloves and collection bags, they participated in a cleanliness drive around the wetland, removing plastic waste and other litter that threatened the fragile habitat. For many students, it was the first time they had actively contributed to protecting a species in the wild. What might have seemed like a simple clean-up activity became a powerful lesson in stewardship, helping them understand how everyday human actions can directly affect the survival of wildlife and the health of ecosystems. As students explored the wetland, participated in habitat conservation activities, listened to local stories, and learned about the remarkable life history of the Himalayan Salamander, something deeper began to emerge. What started as an educational event evolved into an intergenerational exchange of knowledge, responsibility, and hope.

For many members of NPSS, the most memorable moment came at the end of the programme. Inspired by what they had learned and experienced, 58 students from Classes VIII to X pledged to become custodians of the Himalayan Salamander and its habitat. In a symbolic gesture that moved many participants, the students were formally welcomed as “Young Salamander Guardians” by members of the Sanrakshan Samiti.

For the community elders and conservation volunteers who had spent years protecting Namthing Pokhari, the induction carried profound meaning. It represented more than a pledge, it was the passing of a conservation legacy to a new generation.

Several NPSS members expressed their happiness at seeing local children take ownership of conserving a species that many outsiders have never heard of, but which forms an irreplaceable part of their natural heritage. They spoke of their pride in knowing that young people were willing to continue protecting the Himalayan Salamander long into the future. For them, the sight of students cleaning the wetland, learning about its biodiversity, and finally pledging to safeguard this ancient species was a powerful reminder that conservation succeeds when communities nurture the next generation of stewards.

The impact of the programme extended well beyond a single day. Students began sharing stories of the Himalayan Salamander with their families and friends, encouraging others to appreciate the ecological importance of Namthing Pokhari. Teachers observed a growing interest in environmental issues among participants, while community members welcomed the enthusiasm and curiosity that the students brought to conservation discussions.

The formation of the Young Salamander Guardians demonstrates the transformative potential of Place-Based Education. By connecting young people with their local biodiversity, culture, and conservation challenges, the programme helped turn environmental awareness into action. More importantly, it strengthened the bond between community conservation efforts and future generations.

Today, the Young Salamander Guardians stand as a symbol of hope at Namthing Pokhari. Their commitment reassures the community that the responsibility of protecting this unique wetland and its ancient amphibian resident will not end with the current generation. Instead, it will continue through a growing network of young conservation champions who understand that safeguarding the future of the Himalayan Salamander begins with caring for the place they call home.





Every Home, an Orchid. Every Family, a Custodian.

Pramod Rai

Photo Credit: Anjana Limboo

There was a time when orchids in Sirisy were simply part of everyday life.

Elders still remember a local orchid enthusiast affectionately known as "Orchid Sailaa" who would share native orchids freely with neighbours, nurturing a culture of appreciation across the village. For the Rai and Limboo communities, orchids also held cultural value. The fibres of *Dendrobium moschatum* were traditionally used to make ropes for Dhajura, an ornament worn with ethnic attire. Orchids were not just plants. They were part of the village's identity.

As forests changed and development expanded, that connection began to weaken. Trees disappeared, taking with them the epiphytic orchids that depended on them. In Sikkim, home to nearly 532 orchid species despite being India's second smallest state, this loss carries serious ecological consequences. Orchids are sensitive indicators of ecosystem health, relying on specialised fungi, pollinators, and healthy forests to survive.

In Sirisy, South Sikkim, a group of residents decided that this relationship with nature was worth restoring.

What began as a community effort in 2021 has, over three years, grown into an inspiring model of grassroots conservation. Led by botanical researcher Pramod Rai and supported by village youths including Vaskar Rai, Sanjay Rai, Sujan Rai, Shrawan Rai, Udai Limboo, Sajal Rai, and others, the initiative united residents around a simple but ambitious goal: every household in the village would become a guardian of native orchids.



The background image shows a lush green forest scene. In the foreground, the back of a person's head and shoulders are visible on the left, wearing a light-colored shirt. On the right, another person is partially visible, wearing a brown jacket and a green cap. The central area is a semi-transparent dark blue box containing white text. The text describes a conservation project in Sirisay-Thampong village, detailing the journey from 2021 to 2026, the involvement of 17 volunteers, the distribution of 630 seedlings, and the transformation of the village into a living conservation landscape.

The journey unfolded in phases. Conservation drives in 2021 and 2024 laid the foundation, achieving an encouraging survival rate of around 75 percent. Building on this success, the community organised a final drive on 21 June 2026 to reach the remaining households and strengthen earlier plantations.

A team of 17 volunteers visited all 75 households across Sirisay-Thampong village, identifying suitable host trees and carefully mounting native orchid seedlings according to ecological suitability. Alongside each planting came conversations about protecting host trees, avoiding indiscriminate collection from forests, and understanding the role orchids play in maintaining healthy ecosystems.

By the end of the drive, every household in the village was nurturing at least one native orchid species.

In total, 630 seedlings representing 29 species across 11 genera were distributed, including *Dendrobium nobile*, the State Flower of Sikkim, along with *Coelogyne barbata*, *Arachnis clarkei*, and *Vanda pumila*. Importantly, the orchids were sourced from rescued plants collected from fallen trees and through exchanges among responsible growers, ensuring that conservation efforts caused no harm to wild populations.

The seedlings were generously contributed by veteran orchid conservationists Dr. Nayan Bokhim, Dinesh Tshering Bhutia, and Pramod Rai. Their decades of experience in ex-situ conservation, together with local knowledge and community participation, created a partnership where science and tradition worked hand in hand.

The programme, jointly organised by the Dong Heavenly Path Organization (HPO) and the Dong-Sirisay Village Youths, was inaugurated in the presence of Ward Panchayat Yoshnita Yangma (Rai), whose continued support has helped sustain the initiative since its inception. Beyond the numbers lies an even greater achievement.

The project has transformed orchid conservation from the work of a few enthusiasts into a shared community responsibility. Nearly half the households were already cultivating native orchids before the latest drive, reflecting how conservation had gradually become part of everyday life. The final phase ensured that every family became part of this collective effort.

The village itself is botanically exceptional. Sirisay is home to *Chlorophytum sikkimense*, currently known only from this landscape, and *Eulophia siamensis*, a terrestrial orchid whose only confirmed Indian population has been recorded here. Protecting orchids in Sirisay therefore means safeguarding species of national significance.

The success of Sirisay Orchid Village demonstrates that meaningful conservation begins with people. It grows through shared knowledge, respect for local traditions, scientific guidance, and a collective willingness to care for the landscapes that sustain us.

Today, every home in Sirisay hosts a native orchid.

Together, those 75 households have transformed an entire village into a living conservation landscape, offering a powerful example of how communities can protect biodiversity, one tree and one orchid at a time.

The Hearth That Changed More Than a Kitchen

Sanjeeb Pradhan

Photo Credit: Sanjeeb Pradhan

The day in many Himalayan villages begins long before the first meal is prepared.

For countless rural households across Sikkim and the Darjeeling Himalayas, cooking starts with gathering firewood. Women and children often spend hours walking through nearby forests, carrying heavy bundles home across steep mountain trails. The work is demanding, the smoke from traditional mud stoves fills kitchens with harmful fumes, and the growing demand for fuelwood places increasing pressure on forests that already face the impacts of climate change.

These everyday realities inspired a simple yet transformative solution.

Through the Action for Mountains and People (AMP-Himalaya) project, the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), with support from the Rural India Support Trust (RIST), is working with communities across Sikkim and the Darjeeling Himalayas to strengthen climate resilience through biodiversity conservation, ecological restoration, sustainable livelihoods, and community participation.

One important step in this journey has been the introduction of Improved Cook Stoves (ICS).

At first glance, the stove looks much like the traditional mud stove that has served Himalayan households for generations. Yet its design tells a different story. Built from locally available materials such as mud, cow dung, and sawdust, it incorporates an improved combustion chamber and a chimney that burns biomass more efficiently. The result is simple but significant. It uses far less firewood, cooks more efficiently, and greatly reduces the smoke that fills village kitchens.

The benefits extend well beyond the home.



Using less firewood means fewer trips into the forest and less pressure on fragile mountain ecosystems. It also helps reduce carbon emissions while conserving the forests that provide water, biodiversity, and countless other ecosystem services to Himalayan communities. For women and children, the time once spent collecting fuelwood can instead be devoted to education, livelihoods, or family life.

What makes the initiative especially meaningful is the way it places communities at its centre. Alongside the installation of improved cook stoves in more than 3,000 households, the programme is building a network of trained local women and youth who serve as master trainers. By supporting stove construction, maintenance, and wider adoption, they are ensuring that the technology remains affordable, locally managed, and sustainable long after the project concludes.

So far, 423 two-pot-hole improved cook stoves have been installed across Sikkim and the Darjeeling landscape, each representing more than a cleaner kitchen. Together, they mark a quiet but important shift towards community-led climate action.

Sometimes, resilience begins not with grand infrastructure or sweeping policies, but with a humble hearth. In the Indian Himalayas, a simple cook stove is helping protect forests, improve health, save time, and strengthen livelihoods, proving that meaningful climate solutions often begin at home.



Conversations at the Edge of the Forest

Dr Avantika Thapa

Photo Credit: Dhiren Chettri

The conversation began with a familiar concern. Farmers spoke of fields raided overnight by wild boar, troops of macaques stripping orchards bare, and Indian peafowl feeding on crops that had taken months of care to grow. For many in the Darjeeling Himalaya, human and wildlife share the same landscape, but not always peacefully.

On 16 June 2026, more than 40 farmers and college students gathered for a training programme on Crop Protection from Wildlife, Compensation Mechanisms, and Human-Wildlife Coexistence, organised under the Agriculture Technology Management Agency (ATMA) scheme by Mr Dhiren Chettri, Assistant Director of Agriculture, Darjeeling-Pulbazar Block. The day became far more than a technical training. It evolved into an open conversation about living with wildlife in a rapidly changing landscape.

Invited as resource persons, Dr Nakul Chettri, Associate Director, and Dr Avantika Thapa, Postdoctoral Research Associate from ATREE's Regional Office in Gangtok, brought together global perspectives and years of field experience rooted in the Darjeeling Himalaya.

Dr Chettri placed the local stories within a much larger picture. Human-wildlife conflict, he explained, is no longer viewed as an isolated conservation challenge. It has become a global concern recognised under the Convention on Biological Diversity through the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and reflected in India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. While international agreements may seem distant from village fields, they signal a growing recognition that safeguarding biodiversity and securing livelihoods must go hand in hand.

Building on this broader context, Dr Thapa shared lessons drawn from seven years of research across the landscape. Her experiences revealed that conflict is rarely shaped by wildlife alone. Development schemes, environmental policies, changing land use, and local realities often intersect in unexpected ways, sometimes creating difficult situations for farming communities. At the same time, she outlined practical measures that farmers could adopt in the short, medium, and long term to strengthen crop protection, improve livelihoods, and move towards coexistence rather than constant confrontation.





The discussions were enriched by the presence of Shri Rapden Bhutia, Joint Director of Agriculture (P), Administration, Sadar Sub-Division, Darjeeling. Turning to the students in the room, he posed a simple question: how many of them hoped to contribute towards building a more sustainable future through their careers? Every hand went up. Moments later, he asked another question. How many had taken notes during the day's sessions? Once again, hands rose, this time holding notebooks already filled with observations, ideas, and questions. It was a quiet but powerful reminder that curiosity often marks the beginning of change.

Joining virtually, Dr Hrituraj Darnal, Range Officer, Darjeeling Range, guided participants through the procedures for claiming compensation for crop and livestock losses caused by wildlife. He also shared an important policy update. With macaques no longer included in the scheduled species list, the Forest Department will no longer be responsible for their translocation or population control. The announcement sparked lively discussion as participants reflected on what this change could mean for communities already facing increasing encounters with macaques.

By the close of the programme, it was evident that there were no easy answers to the challenges of human-wildlife conflict. Yet the day's conversations reinforced something equally important. Meaningful solutions emerge when scientific research, government policy, and the lived experiences of local communities come together. In the Darjeeling Himalaya, where people and wildlife have long shared the same mountains, that dialogue may prove to be one of the most valuable tools for building a more resilient future.



What Was Hidden in a Bag

Priyanka Rai

Photo Credit: Priyanka Rai

Our fieldwork often begins with simple questions. Have you seen a pangolin here? Where was it last spotted? Are there burrows nearby? Most conversations end with directions, stories from years ago, or a polite shake of the head. Every now and then, however, a conversation takes an unexpected turn.

One such moment came during a key informant interview in Sumi Gaon, Kalimpong.

We had stopped at a modest home to ask about the presence of pangolins in the village. The woman who welcomed us spoke quietly but openly. She recalled seeing pangolin burrows near her home and mentioned that she had eaten pangolin meat in the past. There was a hint of hesitation in her voice, yet she agreed to take us to a burrow that she and her daughter had discovered a few months earlier.

Together, we walked along a narrow path until she pointed to the entrance of the burrow, tucked away beneath the vegetation. We documented the site, grateful for another piece in the puzzle of understanding the species' presence in the landscape. It seemed that the interview had reached its natural conclusion.

Back at her home, as the conversation drifted from wildlife to everyday life, she quietly disappeared into another room.

When she returned, she was carrying a small bag.

Without saying much, she opened it.

Inside lay the unmistakable overlapping scales of an Indian pangolin.

The room fell silent.

She explained that her husband had killed a sub-adult pangolin, weighing about 2.5 kilograms, just a month earlier. The family had eaten the meat, describing it as a delicacy, while the scales had been carefully preserved because they believed they possessed medicinal properties. What began as a routine interview had suddenly become a stark reminder that pangolin hunting remains a reality, often woven into long-held traditions and beliefs rather than driven solely by commerce.

Before we left, she reached into the bag and placed four of the scales in our hands.

Those four scales carried a weight far greater than their size. They were not merely biological samples. They were evidence of a hidden story unfolding quietly in the forests of the eastern Himalaya.

They spoke of a species that slips silently through the night, of cultural beliefs that have endured across generations, and of the difficult path towards conservation, where protecting wildlife also means understanding the people who share its landscape.

Fieldwork is often measured in kilometres walked, interviews completed, or data collected. Yet some of its most important discoveries arrive without warning, tucked away in a bag, waiting for the courage of someone to reveal them.





Latpanchar: Where Research Found a New Meaning

Sangay Wangdi Bhutia

Photo Credit: Dr Ugyal Tshering Lama Yolmo

FIELD DIARIES

For a long time, my work in the field revolved around forests, species, and data. I was comfortable documenting biodiversity, recording observations, and piecing together stories hidden within landscapes. The forest had always felt familiar. What I had never truly experienced was guiding people through it.

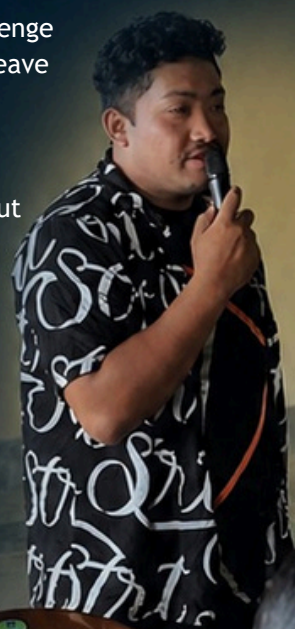
That changed during the Certificate Course on Biodiversity Survey Techniques and Ecological Monitoring at Latpanchar, Darjeeling.

As the programme approached, I found myself carrying an unexpected sense of uncertainty. Beyond the science, there were students to mentor, field activities to coordinate, and countless small details that kept the course running each day. There were moments when everything seemed to demand attention at once, and I often wondered whether I was doing enough. Through it all, the encouragement and quiet guidance of my seniors at ATREE gave me the confidence to keep going, one day at a time.

Somewhere between the morning field walks, classroom discussions, and evening reflections, something began to change. The students grew more curious, more confident, and more engaged with every passing day. Their questions became deeper, their observations sharper, and their excitement for the natural world unmistakable.

When the programme concluded, their heartfelt feedback made every challenge worthwhile. In their words, I found reassurance that even a small role can leave a lasting impression.

I arrived in Latpanchar believing that conservation was about understanding nature. I left with a different perspective. Conservation is just as much about nurturing people who will one day protect it. Sometimes, the most meaningful discoveries in the field are not the ones recorded in a notebook, but the quiet moments that change the way we see our own purpose.





Building a Chatbot That Listens: The GaonSahayog Story

Srijana Sharma

Photo Credit: Srijana Sharma

Every meaningful solution begins with a conversation.

As ATREE developed GaonSahayog, a multilingual chatbot for the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya, I soon realised that the project was never just about technology. Before writing answers, we first had to understand the questions people were asking.

Over the course of our field visits, we met farmers, women, youth, and village elders across Sikkim and Darjeeling. Through 35 Focus Group Discussions and more than 50 Key Informant Interviews, we listened to stories of changing weather, farming challenges, wildlife encounters, government schemes, and the knowledge that communities have carried for generations. Each conversation helped shape what GaonSahayog needed to become.

Another part of the journey took us to Rinchenpong in West Sikkim and the Sittong Valley in Darjeeling, where we explored how people use mobile phones in their daily lives. It was encouraging to see how digital technology had already become an important source of information for many rural households, reinforcing the need for a platform that is simple, practical, and locally relevant.

To make the chatbot more inclusive, we also worked with community members to record voice samples in Hindi and Nepali. Listening to local accents, expressions, and ways of speaking reminded us that technology is most useful when it speaks the language of the people it hopes to serve.

Being part of GaonSahayog changed the way I think about innovation. The most important lessons did not come from algorithms or software, but from conversations in village courtyards and field paths. They reminded me that the strongest technologies are not built only with code. They are built with trust, local knowledge, and the willingness to listen.

As GaonSahayog continues to grow, I hope it becomes more than a digital tool. I hope it becomes a bridge between communities, knowledge, and the landscapes they have cared for over generations.



Parengtar: Where Tradition Takes Root

Satkar Deep Thapa

Photo Credit: Satkar Deep Thapa

Along the Indo-Bhutan border, the village of Parengtar is proving that preserving agriculture can also preserve culture.

For generations, paddy farming was at the heart of village life. Farmers from Parengtar and neighbouring Bhutan once crossed the border to help one another during the harvest, strengthening not only livelihoods but also bonds of friendship and shared tradition.

As border regulations tightened, people migrated, and cash crops such as areca nut became more profitable, paddy fields gradually fell silent. With them, a centuries-old way of life began to fade. Rather than letting that heritage disappear, the community chose to bring it back. Today, villagers collectively cultivate, harvest, and store paddy, ensuring that the tradition lives on, even when the harvest is meant mainly for their own households.

Their efforts now extend beyond the fields through community-based ecotourism and the annual Kholeydai Festival, celebrating a simple but powerful truth. When a community comes together, conserving a crop can also mean conserving its identity.



Totola Ko Phool

Harra

The Forest That Feeds a Village

Repbamla Lepcha

Photo Credit: Repbamla Lepcha

Long before the first crop is harvested, the forest has already filled many kitchens.

In the villages of Panbu and Rangbull, within the Kalej Valley, the forest is far more than a stretch of green. It provides fuel for the hearth, fodder for livestock, medicine for common ailments, and wild foods that arrive with the changing seasons. Every forest trail carries knowledge passed quietly from one generation to the next.

During household surveys and Focus Group Discussions, one message surfaced repeatedly. When villagers spoke about the forest, they rarely spoke about timber. Instead, they spoke about the everyday resources that sustain their families.

Fuelwood remained the most valued resource, especially for households with limited livelihood options. Alongside it came fodder, medicinal plants, and a rich diversity of non-timber forest products that support both household needs and local incomes.

The conversations soon turned to food. Villagers described gathering fiddlehead ferns (Ningro), bamboo shoots, Totolako phool, watercress (Simrayo), stinging nettle (Sisnu), Gurbo, wild mushrooms, and forest fruits. Some are shared within the community, while others are sold in local markets, providing seasonal income and enriching household nutrition.

The forest also serves as a living pharmacy. Elders spoke of plants such as Harra (*Terminalia chebula*), Rukh Amala (*Phyllanthus emblica*), Chiretta (*Swertia chirayita*), Timbur (*Zanthoxylum armatum*), and River Astilbe (*Astilbe rivularis*). Along with their medicinal value, these species carry generations of traditional knowledge. Yet many worried that this knowledge is fading as younger generations become less familiar with the forest.

Another concern echoed through our conversations. People spoke of returning from the forest with lighter baskets than they once did. Bamboo shoots, fiddlehead ferns, mushrooms, medicinal plants, and wild fruits have all become less abundant over the past decade. Villagers attributed this decline to habitat degradation, forest fires, unsustainable harvesting, changing land use, and increasing wildlife interference.

Even so, stories of resilience emerged. Several households have taken up beekeeping, including the rearing of stingless bees locally known as Putka. The honey provides both food and income, demonstrating how livelihoods can thrive while supporting healthy forest ecosystems.

As our fieldwork drew to a close, one truth stood out. The forests of Panbu and Rangbull are not simply reservoirs of biodiversity. They are woven into everyday life, sustaining livelihoods, preserving culture, and nurturing traditions that have endured for generations. Protecting these forests means safeguarding not only nature, but also the knowledge, food, and livelihoods that continue to shape life in the Kalej Valley.

Where Tradition Learns to Grow

Dr Sailendra Dewan

Photo Credit: Dr Sailendra Dewan

At first glance, Lingey Payong Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU) in Namchi District appears much like any other village in Sikkim. Terraced fields cascade down the hillsides, while scattered homesteads are surrounded by cardamom plantations, vegetable gardens, fruit trees, and patches of forest, reflecting the tranquil rhythm of rural life. Yet, spending time with the local community revealed a different story. Beneath this familiar landscape lies a community that is quietly redefining what it means to practice traditional agriculture in the rapidly changing rural landscape of the Eastern Himalaya.

What stood out was not the abandonment of tradition, but its thoughtful adaptation. Farmers continue to cultivate their land using indigenous knowledge and practices passed down through generations while remaining open to innovation. A remarkable example is the Farmer Field School established at the farm of Mr. Kuber Nath Acharya, where farmers regularly gather to exchange experiences, learn improved agricultural techniques, and discuss practical solutions to farming challenges. Here, scientific knowledge complements rather than replaces traditional wisdom, creating a learning environment that is rooted in local realities. Dairy farming has also emerged as an important component of household livelihoods, providing a reliable source of income and enhancing resilience. Well-managed cattle, along with sheep and goats reared on the farm, reflect an integrated farming system that efficiently utilizes available resources.

Equally inspiring is the enthusiasm with which the younger generation is embracing digital technologies. Farmers such as Mr. Balaram Gautam have transformed social media into a powerful platform for agricultural outreach. Beyond sharing daily farming activities, these platforms are used to demonstrate innovative practices, connect with fellow farmers, promote local products, and inspire audiences well beyond the boundaries of the village. Their efforts illustrate how digital communication can strengthen traditional farming by creating new opportunities for learning, networking, and market access.

Lingey Payong demonstrates that rural transformation does not necessarily require abandoning traditional ways of life. Instead, it shows how communities can successfully blend indigenous knowledge with scientific innovation, diversified livelihoods, and modern communication technologies. This harmonious balance between tradition and progress makes Lingey Payong more than just another Himalayan village; it stands as an inspiring example of resilient, community-led, and sustainable rural development.



KNOW THE UNKNOWNNS

Meet the Queen Maker: How P. D. Lama Is Strengthening Himalayan Beekeeping

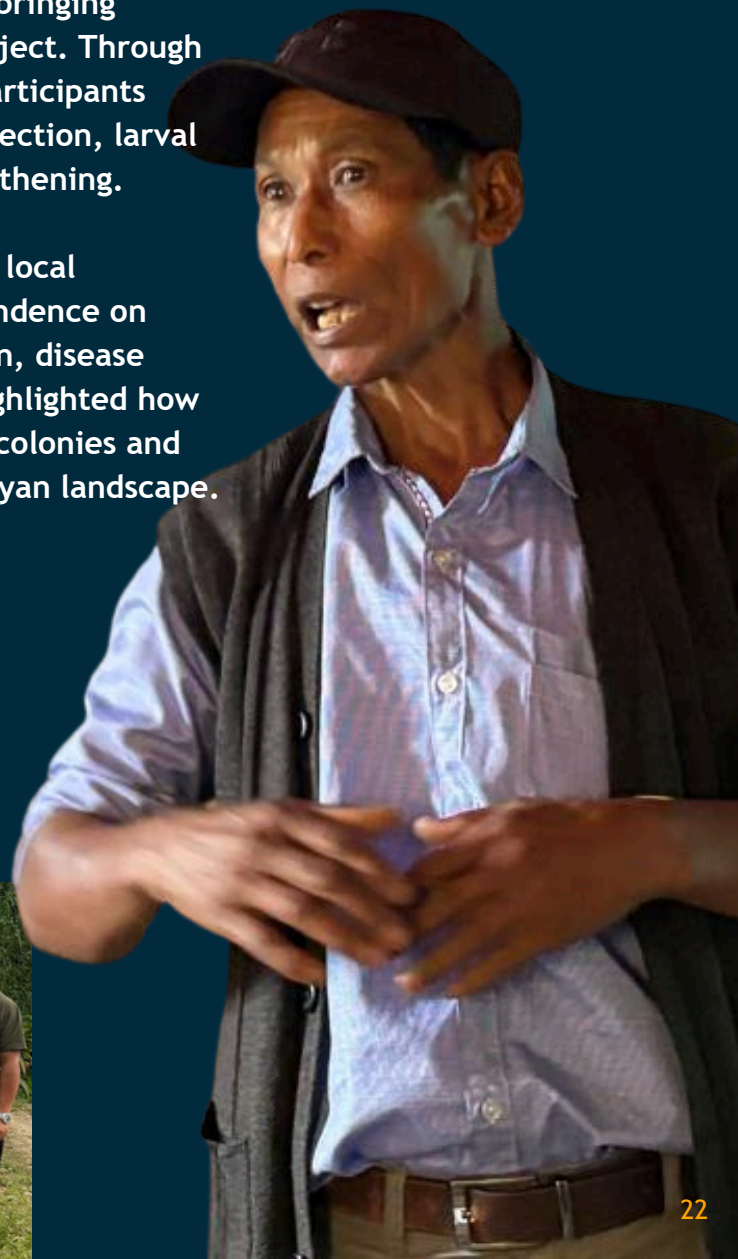
Tshering Dorji Bhutia, Tara Chettri & Dr Nakul Chettri

Photo Credit: Dr Nakul Chettri

Every thriving beehive has a queen at its heart, and few understand her importance better than Mr. P. D. Lama, an experienced apiculture expert who has spent years helping beekeepers improve the health and productivity of their colonies.

On 1-2 June 2026, Mr. Lama led a two-day Queen Bee Rearing and Grafting Training Programme in Sittong, Darjeeling, bringing together 22 beekeepers from the AMP-Himalaya Project. Through classroom sessions and hands-on demonstrations, participants learned the science of honey bee biology, queen selection, larval grafting, queen cell management, and colony strengthening.

By mastering the art of rearing healthy queen bees, local beekeepers can become self-reliant, reducing dependence on external suppliers while improving honey production, disease resistance, and pollination services. The training highlighted how nurturing a single queen bee can strengthen entire colonies and support more resilient livelihoods across the Himalayan landscape.



NEWS & UPDATES

ATREE Contributes to High-Level Himalayan Policy and Research Dialogues



National Consultation on Incentive Mechanisms for Springshed Management, jointly organised by NITI Aayog and ICIMOD

ATREE actively contributed to a series of national and regional policy dialogues convened by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and partner institutions, advancing discussions on sustainable mountain development across the Indian Himalayan Region.

Representing ATREE, Dr. Sailendra Dewan participated in the National Consultation on Incentive Mechanisms for Springshed Management, jointly organised by NITI Aayog and ICIMOD in New Delhi on 24 March 2026, where he contributed to discussions on ecosystem-based approaches, biodiversity-linked incentives, and springshed restoration. He also represented ATREE at the Roundtable Policy Dialogue on "Agroecological Transformation in the Himalayas" held in Gangtok on 30 March 2026, sharing perspectives on climate-resilient agriculture, agroecological research gaps, and landscape-level approaches to sustainable farming.

ATREE further participated in the Partners' Session of the 57th ICIMOD Board of Governors' Meeting on 12 May 2026 in Gangtok. The delegation, comprising Ms. Anita Arjundas (Executive Director), Dr. Eklabya Sharma (Strategic Advisor and Senior Fellow), Dr. Nakul Chettri (Associate Director, ATREE-THI), Dr. Sailendra Dewan (Fellow in Residence), and Mr. Sanjeeb Pradhan (Senior Project Manager), showcased ATREE's work on biodiversity conservation, mountain ecosystems, high-altitude rangelands, yak diet ecology, human-elephant coexistence, and transboundary conservation in the Khangchendzonga Landscape, reinforcing regional collaboration for resilient Himalayan futures.



Partners' Session of the 57th ICIMOD Board of Governors'



Conservation International Delegation Visits Darjeeling Restoration Landscape

A delegation from Conservation International (CI) visited the Darjeeling Landscape from 12 to 14 June 2026 to review ecological restoration efforts under the Mountains to Mangroves Initiative. The delegation included Mr. Jackson Luc Frechette, Senior Vice President and Chief Field Officer (FMU Asia), Ms. Prachi Maheshwari, Conservation Finance Lead (Asia), and Mr. Saurav Malhotra, Managing Director (Asia). They were accompanied by Ms. Anita Arjundas, Executive Director, ATREE, and Dr. Nakul Chettri, Associate Director, ATREE-THI.



The team visited restoration sites at Rangbull and Panbu, along with the Lalung Community Nursery, where they interacted with community members and reviewed restoration progress. A plantation drive underscored the collective commitment to landscape restoration. Discussions also explored opportunities to strengthen long-term sustainability through carbon finance, including the potential of restoration activities and improved cookstoves to generate carbon credits. The visit reaffirmed the importance of community-led restoration in building climate-resilient landscapes across the Darjeeling Himalaya.

Citizen Science Workshops Strengthen Biodiversity Monitoring in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya

ATREE, in collaboration with Sikkim University, conducted two Citizen Science Workshops on Documenting Biodiversity in Agroforestry Systems at Pemling, Sittong III, Darjeeling (7-8 March 2026) and Lingmoo Payong Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU), Sikkim (19-20 June 2026) under the National Mission on Himalayan Studies (NMHS) project From Forest to Farms. The workshops brought together students, teachers, farmers, Panchayat representatives, forest officials, and community members to build skills in biodiversity documentation and ecological monitoring.

Participants received hands-on training in citizen science, species identification, agroecosystems, and the use of the iNaturalist platform through expert-led sessions and field surveys. At the Sittong workshop alone, 68 participants documented 48 observations representing 30 species, and verified by 14 experienced identifiers on iNaturalist. Similarly, at Pemling we had 43 participants and at Lingmoo we had 55 participants. Together, the workshops strengthened community capacity for participatory biodiversity monitoring while fostering greater appreciation for the rich biodiversity of the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya.



Advanced Nature Guiding Workshop Strengthens Skills and Networks in the Eastern Himalaya

From 22-24 May 2026, ATREE's Regional Office hosted the Advanced Nature Interpretation & Guiding Workshop at Latpanchar, bringing together emerging and experienced nature guides from across the Darjeeling-Kalimpong Himalaya. Supported by the Action for Mountains and People (AMP-Himalaya) programme, the workshop coincided with the International Day for Biological Diversity 2026, celebrating the theme "Acting Locally for Global Impact."

Selected from 49 applicants, 16 participants representing nine villages took part in three days of immersive field training, with 15 successfully completing the programme. Through guiding simulations, biodiversity monitoring, citizen science, and nature interpretation exercises, participants documented 63 bird species, including the Rufous-necked Hornbill and Great Hornbill. The workshop also marked the launch of the Nature Guides Network and its dedicated digital platform, creating a lasting community of practice to support professional nature guiding, biodiversity documentation, and sustainable nature-based livelihoods across the Eastern Himalaya.



Certificate Course Builds the Next Generation of Himalayan Biodiversity Researchers

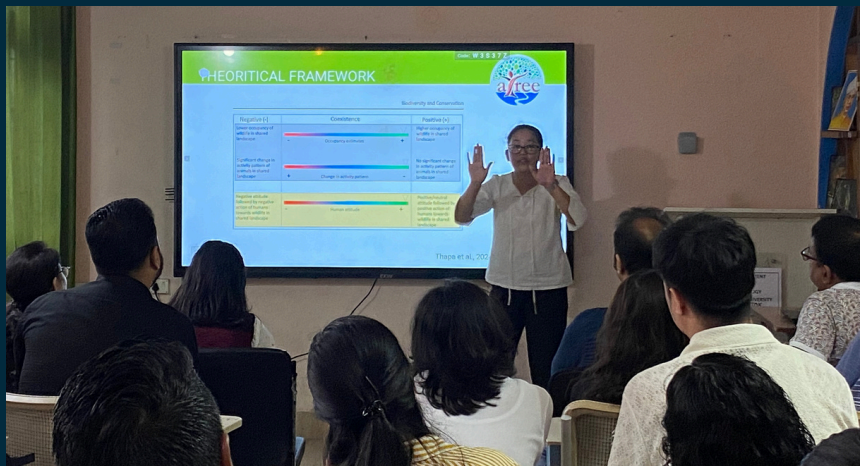
From 26-31 May 2026, ATREE's Eastern Himalaya Regional Office, in collaboration with the ATREE Academy, organised a six-day Certificate Course on Biodiversity Survey Techniques and Ecological Monitoring at Latpanchar, Darjeeling. The programme brought together 19 postgraduate students from Sikkim and the Darjeeling Himalaya, with 57.9% female participation, to strengthen skills in biodiversity assessment and ecological research.

Combining classroom sessions with intensive field-based learning, the course covered Himalayan biogeography, biodiversity monitoring, ecological data analysis, and survey techniques for vegetation, birds, butterflies, mammals, and herpetofauna. Participants also gained hands-on experience in bird identification, vegetation sampling, camera trapping, Sherman trapping, habitat assessment, and ecological monitoring. Working in teams, they designed and presented mini research projects, building practical research, analytical, and communication skills. The programme strengthened local capacity and inspired a new generation of conservation researchers committed to safeguarding the biodiversity of the Eastern Himalaya.



ATREE Expert Speaks on Human-Wildlife Coexistence at Sikkim University

Dr. Avantika was invited to the Department of Zoology, Sikkim University, to a one-day programme to celebrate the International Day for Biological Diversity on 22nd May 2026. She delivered a talk on the theme “Acting Locally for Global Impact,” emphasising that human-wildlife coexistence is increasingly advocated for but remains extremely difficult to operationalise. The programme featured a series of events, including invited talks, a poster competition, and panel discussions.



ATREE Pilots GaonSahayog AI Chatbot for Farming Communities

ATREE successfully piloted the GaonSahayog WhatsApp chatbot in May 2026 with farming communities in Sittong and staff from Naxalbari. The AI-powered platform provides region-specific information on biodiversity-friendly farming, traditional crops, human-wildlife conflict, climate advisories, and government schemes.

The pilot included field demonstrations, focus group discussions, user onboarding, and hands-on testing with farmers, cooperative members, and ATREE staff. A total of 25 community participants were onboarded during the pilot. User feedback highlighted the need for simpler Nepali translations, improved voice recognition, image-based query support, and better handling of Nepali written in English script. The insights are now guiding further enhancements, including multilingual improvements, expansion of the knowledge base, and the inclusion of priority crops such as large cardamom, red cherry pepper, millet, and wheat to better support farming communities across the Sikkim-Darjeeling landscape.



Dr. Avantika Thapa Participates in Conservation Asia Congress 2026

Dr. Avantika Thapa participated in the Conservation Asia Congress in Kathmandu, Nepal, organised by the Society for Conservation Biology, where she attended intensive workshops on quantitative data analysis and presented her work on the socio-ecological trap mechanisms operating in the Darjeeling-Kalimpong Himalaya.

A key session led by Dr. Darryl MacKenzie, pioneer of occupancy modelling, emphasised the importance of robust study design, high-quality data, and sound statistical assumptions in wildlife research. Workshops by Dr. Julia Jones (Bangor University, UK) and Dr. Tanny O'Garra (University of Oxford, UK) explored the role of counterfactuals and confounding variables in evaluating conservation interventions. The discussions also highlighted the importance of strengthening conservation research in data-poor landscapes by integrating long-term scientific approaches with traditional ecological knowledge. The insights gained will help inform Dr. Thapa's ongoing and future research on biodiversity conservation and human-wildlife coexistence in the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya.



Tracing Tradition Across the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya

Across the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya, every village has its own story of farming, resilience, and living with nature. As part of the National Mission on Himalayan Studies (NMHS) project, From Forest to Farms, ATREE and Sikkim University are documenting these traditional agroforestry practices to better understand how indigenous knowledge can strengthen biodiversity conservation and climate resilience.

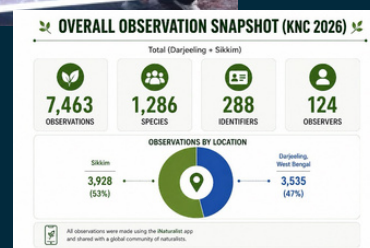
Through household interviews and field surveys, researchers are recording local farming practices, community-led conservation efforts, and ecological knowledge that have sustained mountain communities for generations. So far, the study has covered 195 households across 63 villages in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, spanning elevations from 358.46 m to 2,196.74 m. The insights gathered will help identify sustainable agroforestry models that combine traditional wisdom with scientific knowledge, contributing to more resilient landscapes and livelihoods across the Himalayan region.



Khangchendzonga Nature Connect (Spring Edition) 2026 Inspires Citizen Scientists Across the Himalaya

A flowering shrub, a roadside fern, or a bird in a campus garden became windows into biodiversity during Khangchendzonga Nature Connect (KNC) - Spring Edition 2026, one of ATREE's annual citizen science initiatives held as part of the global City Nature Challenge. Conducted across Darjeeling and Gangtok on 23, 25, and 26 April, the programme introduced participants to biodiversity documentation using the iNaturalist platform through orientation sessions and guided field explorations.

The initiative brought together 124 observers, including 81 participants in ATREE-led events and 43 independent contributors, who collectively recorded 7,463 observations representing 1,286 species. Supported by 288 identifiers, 68% of observations reached research-grade status, while 62% of participants were first-time iNaturalist users. The event once again demonstrated how everyday spaces can become living classrooms, fostering citizen science and a deeper appreciation of the remarkable biodiversity of the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya.



ATREE Promotes One Health Awareness to Combat Scrub Typhus

As part of its efforts to strengthen grassroots awareness of scrub typhus and other zoonotic diseases in the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya, ATREE conducted One Health outreach programmes at St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling on 24 March 2026 and Sittong-III Gram Panchayat on 28 June 2026. Organised under a National Mission on Himalayan Studies (NMHS) project, the events engaged students and community members in understanding the links between human, animal, and environmental health.

Technical sessions by Dr. Sunita Pradhan and Saurabh Gurung highlighted the ecology, transmission, diagnosis, prevention, and ongoing research on scrub typhus in the region. At the Darjeeling programme, awareness among 97 participants increased from 49.41% before the sessions to 98.88% afterwards. The outreach reaffirmed the importance of community engagement and youth participation in advancing One Health solutions for the prevention of zoonotic diseases in the Indian Himalayan Region.



Restoration Begins with Listening

Before a single tree is planted, the most important step is listening to the people who know the landscape best. Between 6 and 25 May 2026, ATREE facilitated a series of community consultations under the PPC-CI Mountains to Mangroves (M2M) Re-HIM Project across Kalimpong and Darjeeling, bringing together 42 farmers, landowners, Self-Help Group members, and community representatives to shape restoration priorities.

The discussions revealed growing concerns over invasive species such as *Lantana camara* and *Mikania micrantha*, changing land use, and abandoned agricultural lands, alongside the continued dependence of rural communities on forests for fuelwood, fodder, medicinal plants, and other bioresources. Through participatory ranking exercises, communities identified 41 native tree species for restoration, with *Daphniphyllum himalayense*, *Terminalia arjuna*, *Gmelina arborea*, *Juglans regia*, and *Prunus cerasoides* emerging as priorities. The insights gathered are now guiding restoration efforts that are rooted in both ecological science and community aspirations.



Beyond Conflict: Experts Explore Coexistence in the Himalaya



Dr. Avantika Thapa was invited to serve as a panelist and resource person at the conference "Beyond Conflict: Multispecies Relations in the Himalaya", organised by the Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal, Siliguri, on 29 April 2026. The conference brought together practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and forest officials to discuss human-animal relationships, coexistence, and the future of Himalayan landscapes.

The event featured participation from the West Bengal Forest Department, including Mr. Sonam Bhutia (Forest Range Officer) and Mr. Devesh Pandey (Divisional Forest Officer), along with eminent academicians such as Prof. S.P. Singh from ICAR-CAFRI, Kurseong. The discussions highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue and collaborative approaches to addressing human-wildlife interactions and advancing sustainable conservation in the Himalayan region.

ATREE Showcases Research and Earns Recognition at ICNS 2026

ATREE participated as a collaborating partner in the 2nd International Conference on Nature and Natural Sciences (ICNS 2026), held on 23-24 May 2026 and organised by Sikkim Alpine University. The conference brought together researchers, conservation practitioners, and students to exchange ideas on ecology, biodiversity, and sustainability.

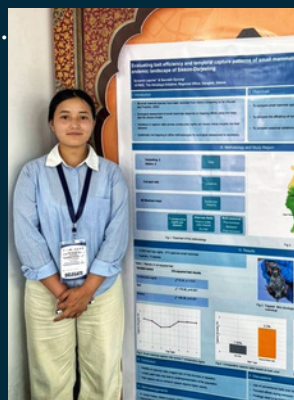
ATREE researchers made notable contributions throughout the event. Dr. Avantika Thapa co-chaired a technical session, while Repbamla Lepcha received the Third Best Paper Award for her research on human-wildlife conflict. Satkar Deep Thapa presented findings on ecosystem services, and Sonamit Lepcha showcased a poster on the ecological assessment of small mammals in the Khangchendzonga landscape. The conference also provided opportunities to strengthen collaborations and engage with researchers from diverse disciplines, reinforcing ATREE's commitment to advancing conservation research and fostering partnerships for sustainable landscape management in the Himalaya.



Repbamla Lepcha



Avantika Thapa



Sonamit Lepcha



Satkar Deep Thapa

Building Safer Restoration Landscapes Through Snakebite Preparedness

As ecological restoration activities expand across the Eastern Himalaya, ATREE conducted a series of Field Safety, Snakebite Prevention, and Emergency Preparedness training programmes from 3-5 June 2026 across Yang Makum, Suruk-Lower Dong, and Kambal in Kalimpong under the PPC-CI Mountains to Mangroves (M2M) Re-HIM Project. The initiative, part of the project's Environmental and Social Safeguard Framework, engaged nearly 100 restoration workers, community members, village restoration committees, and project staff.



Led by an expert from the Turkia Jhar Forest Range, the sessions covered snake ecology, identification of venomous and non-venomous species, snakebite prevention, first aid, and emergency response. Practical demonstrations on safe snake encounters were complemented by the distribution of snake handling kits to restoration site representatives. The programme strengthened community preparedness while promoting safe restoration practices and fostering greater appreciation for snake conservation and human-wildlife coexistence.

Place-Based Education Workshops Empower Teachers in Kalimpong

ATREE's The Himalaya Initiative conducted two Place-Based Education (PBE) teacher training workshops at Suruk Mondodari Higher Secondary School on 17 April 2026 and Shankar Higher Secondary School, Sinji on 19 June 2026. Organised under the RIST-supported project "Conserving Biodiversity, Restoring Landscapes, and Fostering Human Well-being in the Indian Himalayan Region," the workshops brought together 26 teachers from Kalimpong District.

The sessions introduced educators to place-based learning approaches that connect classroom teaching with local landscapes, biodiversity, culture, and community knowledge. Through interactive discussions and practical activities, participants explored experiential teaching methods that encourage observation, inquiry, and environmental stewardship, particularly among middle school students. The workshops also provided a platform for teachers to exchange experiences and discuss ways to integrate place-based education into existing curricula, strengthening locally relevant and engaging learning experiences for young learners.



ATREE Contributes to NGO Forum and Conclave 2026

ATREE participated in the NGO Forum and Conclave 2026, held on 16 March 2026 at Salesian College, Siliguri, under the theme "Building Hope and Harmony: A 'Harambee' Call to Unite a Divided Society." Organised by the Centre for Advancement in collaboration with the Department of Social Work, the conclave brought together civil society organisations, academics, and students to explore collaborative approaches to social and environmental challenges.



Dr. Nakul Chettri, Associate Director, ATREE-THI joined a panel discussion on co-building harmony alongside representatives from MARG, DAHAAR, CINI, Visva-Bharati, and the Eastern Himalaya Foundation. Dr. Avantika Thapa presented ATREE's conservation initiatives in the Khangchendzonga Landscape, while Saurabh Gurung, Pema Yangden Lepcha, and Yougesh Tamang engaged students through interactive sessions on scrub typhus, disease vectors, and place-based education, highlighting the role of science and community engagement in building resilient Himalayan societies.

Birding Curriculum and Nature Guides Network Handbook launched at Latpanchar Workshop



The Advanced Nature Interpretation & Guiding Workshop, held in Latpanchar from 22-24 May 2026, brought together 16 participants from nine villages across the Darjeeling-Kalimpong Himalaya for an intensive field-based training programme. Marking the International Day for Biological Diversity, the workshop also launched the "Bird Guide Training Curriculum: Handbook for Guides and Resource Persons of Darjeeling-Kalimpong Himalaya," co-authored by Dr. Aditya Pradhan and Dr. Saibal Sengupta. Developed as a standardised resource, the handbook will support future training and strengthen community-led bird guiding across the region.

The workshop also marked the inception of the Nature Guides Network, supported by the newly developed Nature Guides digital platform. The application enables local guides to build professional profiles, document guiding activities, and record biodiversity observations, fostering continued collaboration, citizen science, and sustainable nature-based livelihoods in the Eastern Himalaya.



डा. आदित्य प्रधान तथा डा. अवन्तिका थापालाई विद्यावारिधि उपाधि प्राप्तिको अवसरमा सम्मान

एट्री (ATREE) क्षेत्रीय कार्यालयले कलकत्ता विश्वविद्यालयबाट विद्यावारिधि (पी.एच.डी) उपाधि सफलतापूर्वक प्राप्त गर्नुभएका डा. आदित्य प्रधान तथा डा. अवन्तिका थापालाई सम्मान गरेको थियो। यस अवसरमा आयोजित कार्यक्रममा कार्यालयका सहकर्मी तथा कर्मचारीहरूको उपस्थिति रहेकोथियो। कार्यक्रममा उहाँहरूको अनुसन्धानमूलक उपलब्धिको प्रशंसा गर्दै बधाई तथा शुभकामना व्यक्त गरिएको थियो।

कार्यालय प्रमुख डा. नकुल क्षेत्रीले उच्च शिक्षा तथा अनुसन्धानप्रतिको उहाँहरूको समर्पणले संस्थाको शैक्षिक तथा वैज्ञानिक योगदानलाई थप सुदृढबनाएको विश्वास व्यक्त गर्नुभएको थियो। उहाँहरूले हासिल गर्नुभएको सफलता व्यक्तिगत उपलब्धिमा मात्र सीमित नरही अनुसन्धान, जैविकविविधता संरक्षण तथा ज्ञान अभिवृद्धिप्रति समर्पित सम्पूर्ण टोलीका लागि प्रेरणाको स्रोत बनेको उल्लेख गरिएको थियो। सम्मानस्वरूप मायाको चिनोप्रदान गरिएको थियो। कार्यक्रम सौहार्दपूर्ण वातावरणमा सम्पन्न भएको थियो।



Dr Aditya Pradhan



Dr Avantika Thapa

PROJECTS & PUBLICATIONS

Project

Snow Leopard conservation through community-led Yak herding, cultural revitalization, and landscape restoration in highland ecosystem of Lachen-Lachung, North Sikkim and Yuksom-Dzongri West Sikkim

Donor: Eicher Group Foundation

Global Publication

Pettorelli, N., Folkard-Tapp, H., Williams, J., Stringer, L.C., Pecl, G.T., Bridgewater, P., Chan, S., Singh, K., Pereira, L., Laughlin, B., Hughes, A.C., Macinnis-Ng, C., Hagenström, P., Schmeller, D.S., Davies, Z.G., Olofsson, J., VanDeveer, S.D., Hails, R., Dickey-Collas, M., **Chettri, N.**, Chaudhary, S. (2026) The risks of climate-nature silos - Why we need alignment and integration between environmental agendas. A report from the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), London, UK.

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PROJECTS & PUBLICATIONS

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CREATIVE

FEATURES

लाचार प्रकृति

प्रमोद राई

धेऽऽरै अघि हिरोसिमामा पङ्केको ध्वनि
अझै नै चऽर्को चर्को छ।
तर जगदीशले सुनेको वनस्पतिको चित्कार
अब त केवल सुस्केरा भरको छ॥

मान्छे
आफ्नो पाइतालाको छाप खैरो तर वरपर भने हरिऽयो चाहने।
उसको मनको विचार कति रातो।
दुःखेको दुनियाँलाई विध्वंशको उपहार
घाउमा चाहिएको मलमको साटो॥

हिजको सुन्ऽदर पुतली सयपत्री माथि
मान्छेले देखे अनि लिए तस्बिर हजार।
निलो पखेटा सरलक्क शरीर
कीटनाशकको परे प्रहार॥

विचार मरेछ आज त्यो फोहोर नाली मुनी तर कोही आएनन् उसको मलामी।
शरीरको अंग अंगमा राख्दै म तिम्रै हुँ भन्नेहरू पनि किन कोही आएनन्।
निष्ठुरी प्रियतमाको हृदय फलामी।
निष्ठुरी प्रियतमाको हृदय फलामी॥

ATREE's Pema Yangden Lepcha has contributed to the latest Tinkle comic on the Dokpas, drawing on her research and field experiences to introduce young readers to the lives, culture, and challenges of Himalayan yak pastoralists. ATREE's work on yak pastoralism is supported by the Eicher Group Foundation under the Royal Enfield Social Mission, strengthening pastoral livelihoods while conserving the Himalaya's unique cultural and ecological heritage.



YAK PASTORALISM



Research
Pema Yangden

Story & Script
Rebekah S.J.

Art
Rajib Das

Letters
Suyog Kapdoskar

Winter mornings can be bitterly cold in the eastern Himalayas, plunging to -15°C .



Thankfully, it is summer now, and Passang, a 14-year-old Dokpa* pastoralist-in-training, has work to do.

*A pastoralist community in the Himalayas

But first, breakfast! He has a warm cup of buttered yak tea and a bowl of tsampa*.



Yak milk is used a few months after the calf is born. Newborn calf milk is dense and cannot be digested by humans.

*Powdered wheat or barley mixed with yak milk

Passang's mother uses dried yak dung as fuel. She makes hard and soft cheese from yak milk that she hangs around the house. Yak fat is also used for cooking.



The Dokpas put down yaks for meat only in the month of August. The local panchayat (dzumsa) decides how many yaks are needed for meat.



The meat is dried and then cooked when needed.

Breakfast done, Passang heads out with his father for a hard day in the mountains.

Bye, Am*!



*Mother in Sikkimese Bhutia, the language of the Dokpas

The Dokpas have an interesting migration pattern. Unlike other Himalayan pastoralists, they go higher up the mountain in winter.

You see, the wind is strong high up there. It blows the snow down, leaving the ground snow-free to graze on.

The yaks graze here from December to February.

But it is not without reason.

But now it's summer and ooh, looks like Passang has spotted something!

Ah! Medicinal herbs!

Huh?

Aha! Snack time!

Passang!

It's Rokpu-ma. I just got the news that a snow leopard might have gotten to her. Hurry!

Oh no, Apo*! Rokpu-ma is my favourite little calf.

Passang is about to enjoy a slug! These slugs will improve his immune system.

*Father in Sikkimese Bhutia

It is a time of sorrow. Rokpu-ma is gone.



Passang will now have a funeral for her. It is a sacred ritual.

See the tail Passang is carrying with him? The pastoralists keep the tails of their beloved yaks who've passed as mementos.



He will always remember Rokpu-ma.

That's the third yak we've lost this month. We don't even get enough money from the government to compensate for our loss.



I don't like snow leopards! I don't know why people tell us to protect them!



I understand. But nature has its rules. Snow leopards usually hunt yaks only in the winter when food is scarce. Feral dogs are our biggest threat.



Feral dog population has gone up in recent years due to increased military presence in the border areas.



Unfortunately, this means that packs of dogs attack yaks all through the year.



The dogs feed on the military personnel's leftover food.

They must be careful. There're hardly any veterinary facilities and Passang's family simply cannot afford injured yaks.

The military minefields* are lush green. I hope none of our yaks stray there in hunger.

*An area with hidden explosives (mines)

The problems are mounting for the Dokpas. Global warming means the snowfall is unpredictable and water sources such as glaciers are drying up.

This affects the grazing period, availability of food, productivity of yaks and the life of the community.

Apo, two more of my friends have given up pastoralism and have left for jobs in the cities.

Can't blame them, Passang. Cities are tempting as they have more opportunities.

There were 90 herders when I was your age. Now only 17 remain here.

But then what will happen to our community? To our yaks? They are already endangered!

For the Dokpas, their yaks are family and a source of livelihood. Their loss brings great sorrow.

Pastoralists provide free range milk and meat. Theirs is an environmentally friendly and sustainable way of life as they keep moving and the yaks nourish the soil with their dung.

It is important to raise awareness about their way of life and provide a platform for pastoralist voices to be heard.

ATREE's Dr. Sunita Pradhan contributed to the Tinkle comic, Pangolin: The Scaly Animal, drawing on her research and field experiences to introduce young readers to one of the world's most elusive and threatened mammals. Through engaging storytelling grounded in science, the comic explores the fascinating biology, ecological importance, and conservation challenges of the pangolin, inspiring children to appreciate and protect this remarkable yet little-known species.



PANGOLIN, THE SCALY MAMMAL



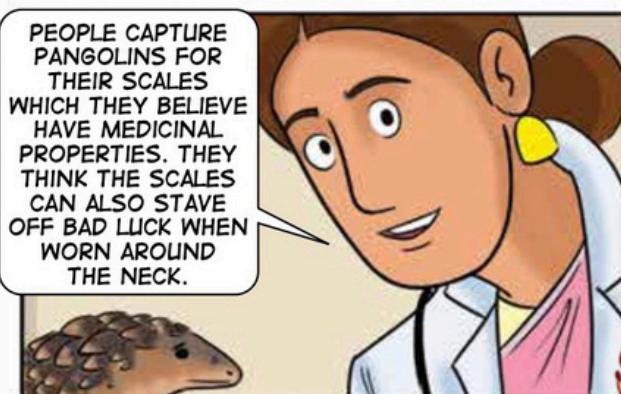
Research
Sunita Pradhan

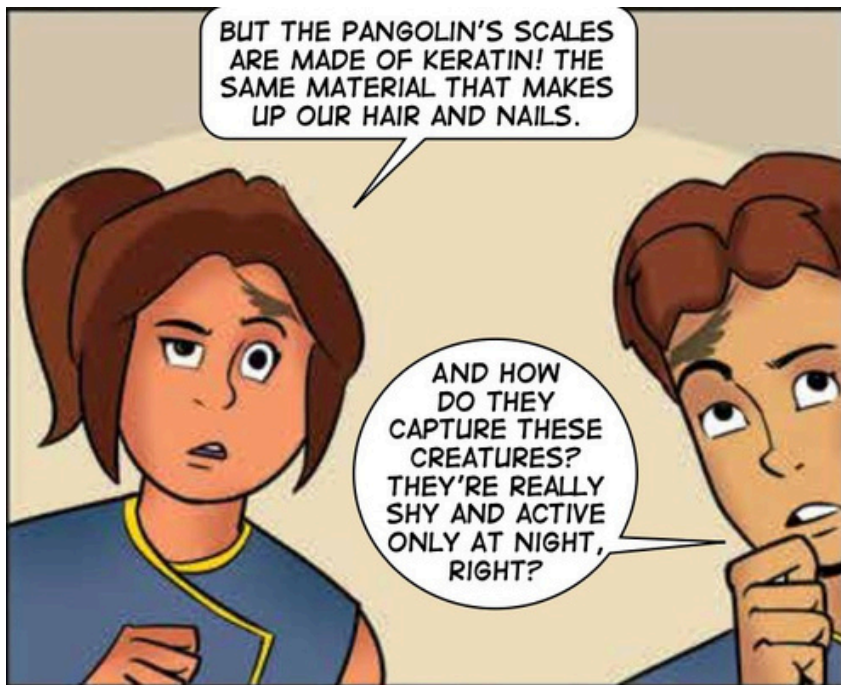
Story & Script
Devika Soni

Pencils & Inks
Vineet Nair

Colours
Snehangshu Mazumder

Letters
Pranay Bendre



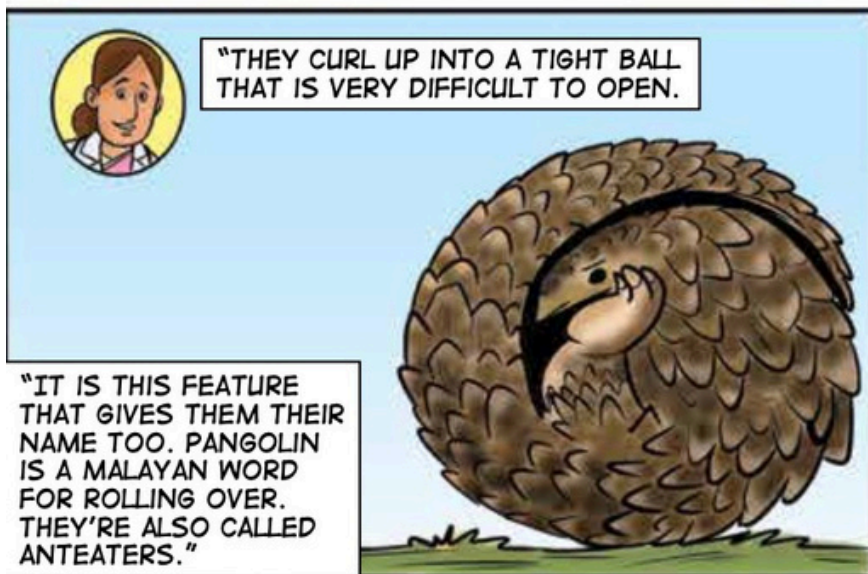


BUT THE PANGOLIN'S SCALES ARE MADE OF KERATIN! THE SAME MATERIAL THAT MAKES UP OUR HAIR AND NAILS.

AND HOW DO THEY CAPTURE THESE CREATURES? THEY'RE REALLY SHY AND ACTIVE ONLY AT NIGHT, RIGHT?

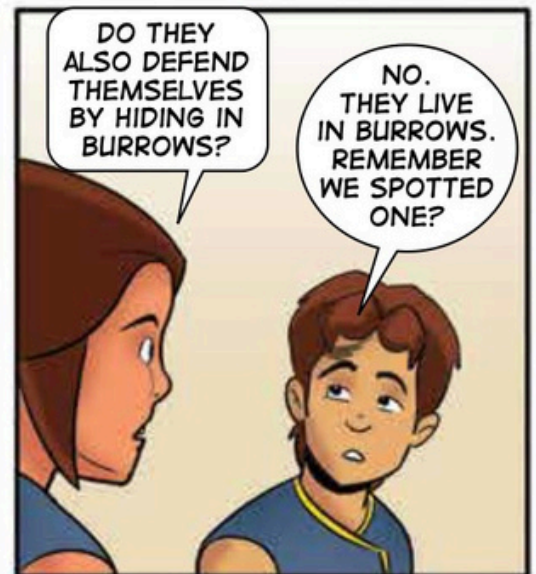


NOT JUST THAT. THEY ALSO DON'T HAVE ANY OFFENSIVE MOVES SO THEY ARE EASY TARGETS. BUT THEY HAVE AN EXCELLENT DEFENCE TECHNIQUE.



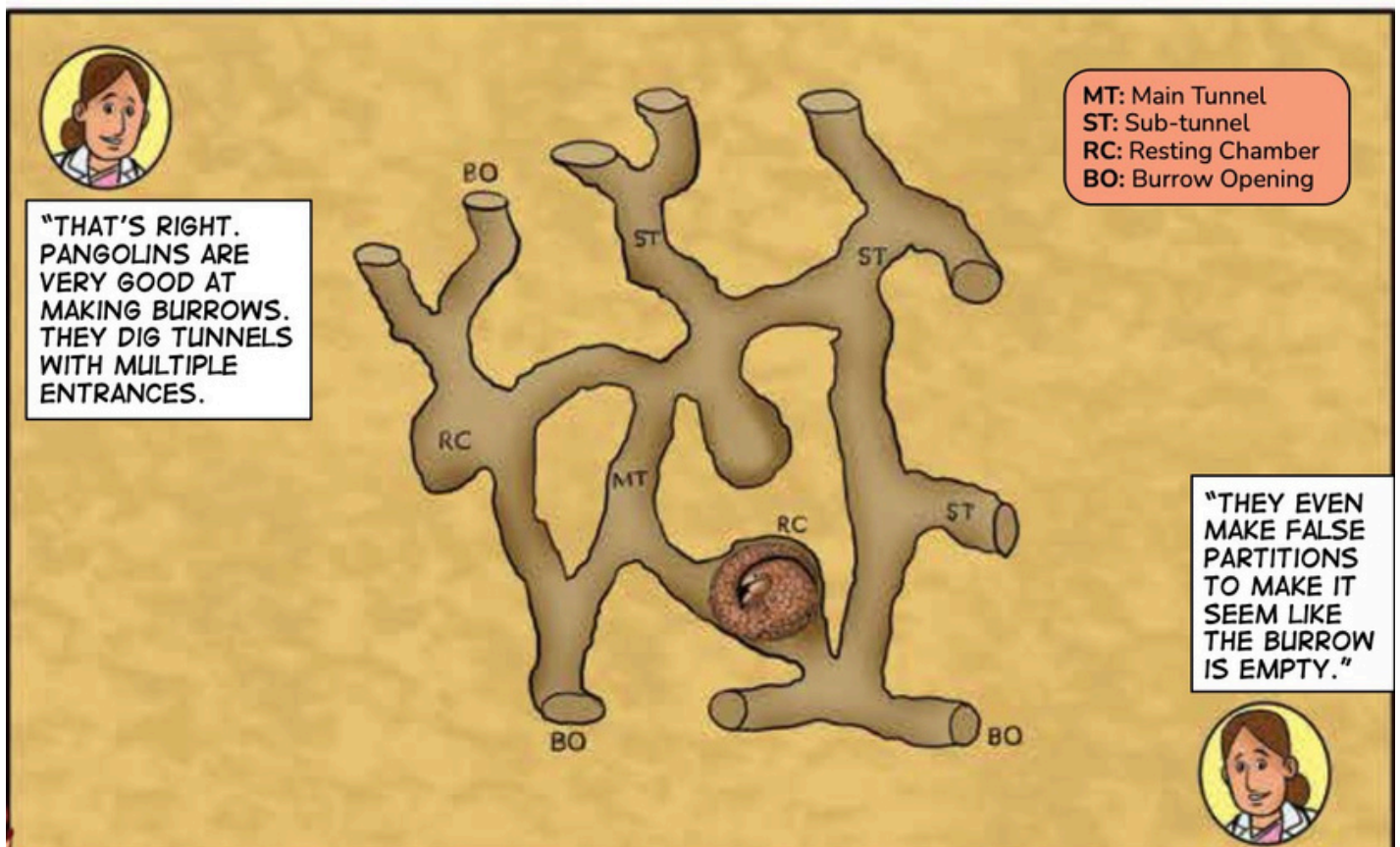
"THEY CURL UP INTO A TIGHT BALL THAT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO OPEN."

"IT IS THIS FEATURE THAT GIVES THEM THEIR NAME TOO. PANGOLIN IS A MALAYAN WORD FOR ROLLING OVER. THEY'RE ALSO CALLED ANTEATERS."



DO THEY ALSO DEFEND THEMSELVES BY HIDING IN BURROWS?

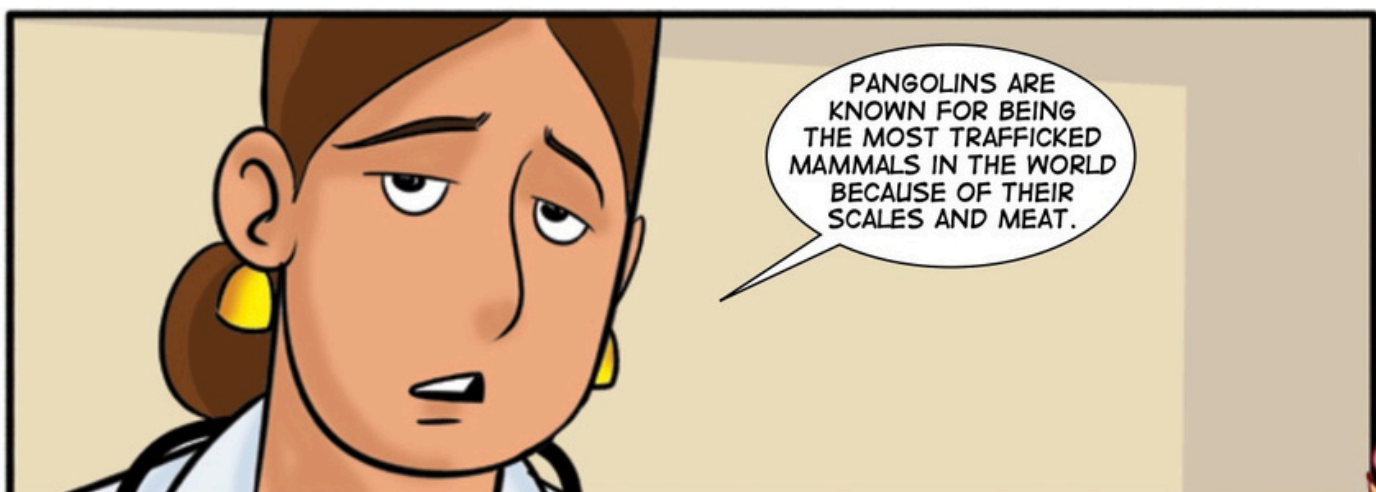
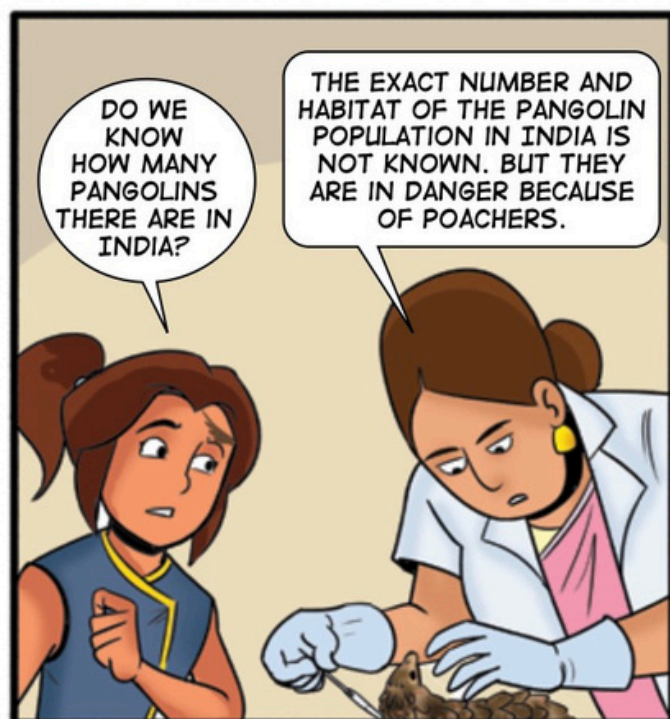
NO. THEY LIVE IN BURROWS. REMEMBER WE SPOTTED ONE?

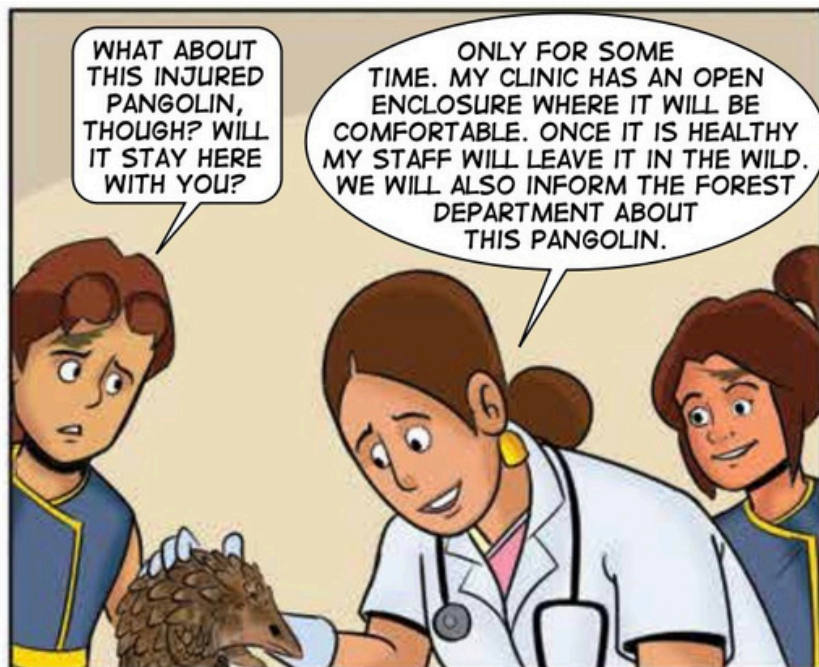


MT: Main Tunnel
ST: Sub-tunnel
RC: Resting Chamber
BO: Burrow Opening

"THAT'S RIGHT. PANGOLINS ARE VERY GOOD AT MAKING BURROWS. THEY DIG TUNNELS WITH MULTIPLE ENTRANCES."

"THEY EVEN MAKE FALSE PARTITIONS TO MAKE IT SEEM LIKE THE BURROW IS EMPTY."





SAFE ELEPHANT DRIVE

BY RRT – PEOPLE PROTECTING PEOPLE & ELEPHANTS

When elephants enter human-settlements, we respond fast, stay calm and use proven methods to guide them back safely.

RRT teams are trained volunteers who respond to elephant movements and manage situations with care, knowledge and community support.

1. ALERT & INFORMATION

Elephants spotted near the village boundary, heading towards fields!

RRT Control, information received. Team moving out!

Quick information sharing helps us respond early and prevent conflict.

2. TEAM MOBILISATION

Let's move in a calm and organized way. Safety for people and elephants first!

Trained RRT members, equipped with torches, crackers, whistles and communication devices, move towards the location.

3. ASSESS & PLAN

There are 6 elephants, including 2 calves. They are feeding in the paddy fields.

We assess the situation – number of elephants, direction, crown, terrain – and plan a safe drive route.

4. SAFE DRIVE TECHNIQUES

Use of light & sound Torches, lights and controlled noise create a safe deterrent.	Human chain We form a line and move in coordination.
Avoid pairs & provocation No stones. No chasing. We stay calm and firm.	Guide, don't harm Our goal is to guide them back, not hurt them.

5. GUIDING THEM BACK

Slow and steady... keep the line! They are moving in the right direction.

With patience and teamwork, we guide the elephants back to the forest or a safe habitat.

6. ALL CLEAR & MONITORING

Elephants have entered the forest. All clear!

We monitor till the elephants are safe and the area is calm. Then we inform the community.

7. COMMUNITY APPRECIATION

Thank you, RRT team! You kept us safe.

Together, we can live in harmony.

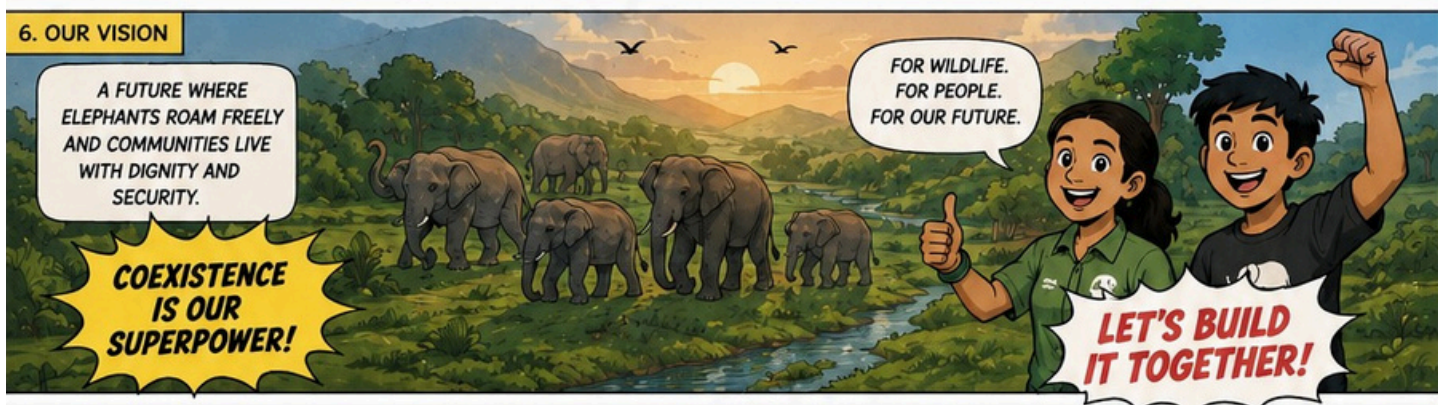
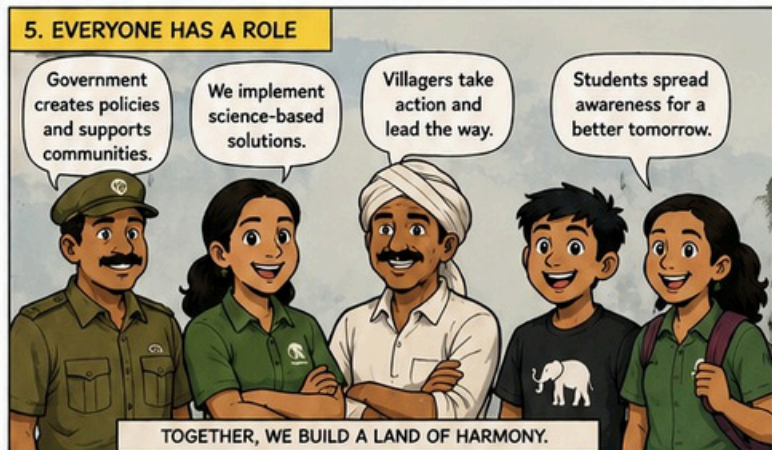
Community trust and support make every response effective and every coexistence story possible.

REMEMBER – COEXISTENCE IS A CHOICE WE MAKE EVERY DAY

Stay alert. Report early.	Don't crowd, Don't chase.	Respect their path. They were here first.	Support RRT. We are your team.
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When we work together with respect and responsibility, we ensure safety for people and a future for elephants.

SAFE TODAY. TOGETHER TOMORROW!



KNOW THE ATREE REGIONAL OFFICE

IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

Name	Positions
Aditya Pradhan	Postdoctoral Research Associate
Amit Routh	Field Assistant
Arati Gurung	Project Associate
Ashwin Chettri	Senior Database Associate
Avantika Thapa	Postdoctoral Research Associate
Brin Khadka	Senior Driver
Deepa Chettri	Project Assistant M & E
Eklabya Sharma	Strategic Advisor & Director, The Himalaya Initiative
Jiten Das	Field Assistant
Karchyoo Lepcha	Field Assistant
Karma Dorjee	Senior Office Assistant
Mahesh Khawas Bhujel	Field Assistant
Malavika Hosahally Narayana	Senior Project Manager
Nakul Chettri	Associate Director
Nisu Kumari	Project Accountant
Passang Chuzum Sherpa	Field Assistant
Passang Nima Sherpa	Senior Field Assistant
Pema Bhutia	Field Assistant
Pema Yangden Lepcha	Project Co-ordinator

Pramod Rai	Project Associate
Prazual Gurung	Senior Project Associate
Priyanka Rai	Research Associate
Ragyan Lepcha	Project Assistant
Ramesh Subba	Field Assistant
Repbamla Lepcha	Research Associate
Richa Tamang	Admin & Finance Officer
Sailendra Dewan	Fellow in Residence
Sangay Wangdi Bhutia	Project Associate
Sanjay Limbu	Field Assistant
Sanjeeb Pradhan	Senior Project Manager
Satkar Deep Thapa	Junior Project Fellow
Saurabh Gurung	Project Associate
Sonamit Lepcha	Project Assistant
Srijana Sharma	Project Associate
Sunil Dahal	Assistant Manager Administration & Finance
Sunita Pradhan	Wildlife Ecologist
Sushil Mukhia	Field Assistant
Tara Chettri	Field Coordinator
Tenzing Sherpa	Senior Field Coordinator
Tshering Dorjee Bhutia	Senior Project Associate
Ugyal Tshering Lama Yolmo	Communication Associate
Yougesh Tamang	Project Associate



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