

Project Update: April 2017

The Rufford India Conference Ranthambore, Rajasthan 2017
(23 to 26 April 2017)

Rufford to Ranthambore: Fostering networks for biodiversity conservation in India

I am thankful to the Rufford Small Grant (RSG) for nature conservation to provide me financial support in form of a small grant to implement a project for conservation and sustainability for caterpillar fungus in the western Himalaya. Recently (23rd to 26th April 2017), I attended a conference *Fostering Grass-roots Conservation in India* - a Rufford initiative and supported by FERAL and Rajasthan Forest Department. The conference was organised in Ranthambore which is known for its tiger provinces and one of the best places in India to see this animal in natural habitat. The conference was organised to bring the Rufford grant recipients on a common platform to create a forum to discuss ideas, problems and create invaluable networking opportunities for biodiversity conservation. Every participant disseminated their project findings in the form of oral presentation, poster presentation or film documentary. It was a great opportunity to get aware about different contemporary ongoing research and initiatives to address the issues related to the nature conservation in various part of India which are supported by the RSG.



Panel discussion with Valmik Thapar (a renounced naturalist and film maker)

During the conference, I presented my work entitled “Assessing opportunity and challenges of *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* harvesting in the western Himalaya” which is supported by the RSG, Conservation Leadership Programme and Idea Wild Grant. It was a huge opportunity for me to disseminate this project findings related to conservation and sustainability of the species. During the presentation, I talked about the mass collection and trade of caterpillar fungus as well associated policies and challenges. I highlighted that harvesting and trade of

the species is lucrative and has become an important livelihood for the millions of mountain dwellers in remote part of the western Himalaya. Unsustainable and rampant harvesting of the species may cause its local extinction as well as destruction of pristine habitats which also support many threatened Himalayan flora and fauna including the snow Leopard.



Talking about the project findings during the conference

In the meeting, I also pointed out that despite increase in price and demand of caterpillar fungus, harvest at local level is decreasing and on the other hand number of harvesters has been increasing. Ultimately, increasing trade induced over-harvesting seems almost certainly responsible for decline in the populations of caterpillar fungus. Through interaction with community and visiting at harvesting site, the project team has observed one particular thing right way that over harvesting and decreasing population of the caterpillar fungus are leading the species towards extinction from natural habitat of its occurrences. Although to establish this kind of facts proper scientific investigation is required. While presenting the project findings, I concluded that the regulation of rampant exploitation and implementation of scientific sustainable harvesting is the need of the hour. I was also fortunate to have discussion and to get feedback from audiences about my research projects with lots of innovative ideas having potential to be implemented in the Himalayan perspectives.



Glimpse of the Ranthambore National Park



Tiger in the Ranthambore National Park

On the last day of conference, participants visited to the Ranthambore National Park to explore flora and fauna. This landscape is a former royal hunting ground and home to tigers,

leopards, deer and marsh crocodiles. The park has landmarks of heritage including the imposing 10th century Ranthambore Fort and now one of the most successful stories for tiger conservation in India. The park terrain alternates between dry deciduous forests and open grassy meadow with water bodies. I first time spotted tigers in the wild during this field visit which was really a great experience. For me, one of the biggest achievements from the conference is building strong networks with interdisciplinary conservation professionals from across India. We (Rufford Small Grant awardees) are working in various parts of India with diverse expertise so our bonding will be develop more and stronger for helping and supporting each other to achieve goals of nature conservation. I am really grateful to the RSG for providing me this wonderful opportunity to get in such beautiful network of brilliant people.



Conference participants with Josh Cole (RSG grants director)