

Final Evaluation Report

We ask all grant recipients to complete a project evaluation that helps us to gauge the success of your project. This must be sent in **MS Word and not PDF format**. We understand that projects often do not follow the predicted course but knowledge of your experiences is valuable to us and others who may be undertaking similar work – remember that negative experiences are just as valuable as positive ones if they help others to learn from them.

Please DO NOT fill in and submit this form until the project has been completed.

Complete the form in English. Note that the information may be edited before posting on our website.

Please email this report to jane@rufford.org.

Your Details	
Full Name	Gaurav Dixit
Project Title	Assessing Perception of the Local Community Towards Leopards in Order to Construct Effective Community-Based Conservation Models
Application ID	33922-1
Date of this Report	22 nd September 2025

1. Indicate the level of achievement of the project's original objectives and include any relevant comments on factors affecting this.

Objective	Not achieved	Partially achieved	Fully achieved	Comments
What is the nature and intensity of local perceptions toward leopards and other wildlife?			✔	Community perceptions were revealed to be highly heterogeneous—ranging from cultural reverence to practical resentment. Most interactions with leopards and bears were framed by fear, financial loss, and misinformation, though select individuals demonstrated profound ecological insight and empathetic outlooks.
What factors influence these perceptions, and how are they shaped by daily experiences and ecological realities?			✔	Perceptions were primarily influenced by proximity to forest, frequency of conflict (livestock depredation, crop raiding), prior exposure to failed conservation schemes, and degree of access to compensation mechanisms. A lack of formal environmental education and systemic corruption further compounded negative attitudes.
What are the viable pathways to rebuild trust and improve human-wildlife coexistence in the region?			✔	The most promising strategies emerged from within the community itself: education initiatives tailored for youth and women, involvement of positive deviant individuals in conservation storytelling, and development of livelihood-integrated conservation roles. These findings affirm the need for community-based conservation approaches based on local wisdom, cultural context, and economic justice.

2. Describe the three most important outcomes of your project.

a). Negative Interactions: Fire-setting, Hunting, and Exploitation of Forest Resources

The study revealed that several forms of **negative human-forest interactions** — including **intentional forest fires, hunting (primarily for meat), and illegal harvesting of wildlife, medicinal plants, and timber** — have significantly disrupted the ecological balance of the region. While **only a minority of the population** is engaged in **commercial-scale extraction**, the cumulative impact of everyday exploitation has triggered:

- Increased **livestock predation by Common leopards and Asiatic black bear**
- Escalation in **crop-raiding by herbivores**
- Intensification of **institutional mistrust** within and between communities
- Unregulated **grazing** and human interference in **alpine meadows**, causing **ecological stress**

Forest fires, though commonly reported as accidental or seasonal during interviews, were in some cases revealed to be deliberately lit—both by certain community members who believed it would encourage better grass growth, and, in a few instances, by local forest officials attempting to falsely claim fire-fighting duties — a phenomenon **observed directly by the research team** and corroborated by residents. These destructive practices have compounded the challenges of coexistence for both people and wildlife.

b). Vulnerability to Misinformation and Transformative Potential Through Nature-Integrated Education

One of the strongest findings was the community's **high susceptibility to misinformation**, particularly concerning carnivores. This was especially evident among **youth and women**, but also prevalent among other demographic groups. Misconceptions, folklore, and inherited fear-based narratives often fuel resentment toward wildlife and undermine conservation efforts.

For example:

- **12-year-old Suraj**, upon learning that bears primarily consume plant matter and not humans, felt visibly relieved — suggesting the power of simple, factual ecological education to counter fear.
- **An elderly respondent**, who survived two separate leopard encounters (believed to be with the same male leopard), continues to maintain a **non-retaliatory outlook**, advocating for tolerance.
- **Another respondent**, attacked by a black bear during an evening forest walk, has since become a **local ally for conservation**, even encouraging his son to join the project as a volunteer.

These cases demonstrate how, despite traumatic encounters, community members are capable of **resilience, understanding, and change** when given respect and knowledge.

Importantly, two key **community pillars** have independently identified over **100 species of birds, butterflies, and moths**, reflecting the **self-driven evolution** of ecological awareness in local conservation stewards. Their stories show the **transformative potential of grassroots education** rooted in traditional landscapes.

c). Structural System Failures and the Mistrust in Institutional Conservation

Across the 213 interviews, the **government’s compensation and conservation frameworks** were consistently critiqued for their **ineffectiveness, corruption, and lack of cultural understanding**.

Respondents reported incidents such as:

- Officials taking bribes to process claims
- Lack of timely or adequate livestock loss compensation
- Forest staff refusing access to forest areas or resources
- Deodar trees cut under the pretext of renovation by previous conservation initiatives like **Secure Himalaya**, while community members left unpaid or excluded

This combination of **historical neglect, exploitative interventions, and ongoing inaccessibility to healthcare, education, and income opportunities** has fostered an environment of institutional **mistrust**.

Many community members expressed feeling like **"abandoned guardians of the forest"** — held responsible for coexistence, yet lacking tools, respect, or support. These systemic gaps clearly highlight the **need for a community-based conservation model**, where power, knowledge, and responsibility are more equitably distributed.

Table 1. Emerging recurring themes from Thematic coding with their frequencies.

Theme	Frequency in Responses (%)	Illustrative Example
Negative Interactions (hunting, fire, bamboo extraction, logging)	~70%	"We need to set fire if we want greener grass next year—do you want our cows to go hungry?"
Vulnerability to Misinformation	~55%	"Do bears hunt humans to eat them?" (youth respondent, 12 yrs)
Institutional Failure and Mistrust	~80%	"These projects come and go, but for us, they only take our trees and give nothing back."
Positive Deviance and Local Stewardship	~25%	"I use only deadwood for building; living trees should be left for the forest."

Table 2. Linking respondents quotes with respective emergent themes

Theme	Illustrative Quotes (Field Data / Anecdotes)	Analytical Note
1. Negative Interactions with Forest & Wildlife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “We worship the forest goddess, but some villagers have learned wrong habits. I’ve seen forest fires increase in the last decade.” - “These animals ruin our farms in one night—bears eat all our work, langurs are our enemies.” - “I know people who were caught with leopard skin and nails. Everyone knows it happens.” 	<p>Recurring practices such as bushmeat hunting, retaliatory killings, timber extraction, bamboo cutting, and fire-setting undermine coexistence and increase livestock/crop losses.</p>
2. Vulnerability to Misinformation & Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 12-year-old Suraj: “Does a bear eat people? ... Oh, it eats fruits, honey, and roots? I feel relieved.” - Woman respondent: “We thought you came to help us from the animals. But instead you help animals from us?” - “Leopards are planted here by the government to keep us in control.” - Youth volunteer: “I never knew birds had so many names. Now I can identify more than 100.” 	<p>Folklore, fear, and mistrust fuel antagonism, especially among women and children. Yet, transformative learning moments show potential for conservation education.</p>
3. Institutional Distrust & Systemic Failure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “It’s a fool’s game to wait for compensation.” - “Forest officials cut Deodar trees to renovate their bungalows.” - “Secure Himalaya hired us, but never paid.” - “I saw forest guards light the fire themselves, then report they put it out.” 	<p>Corruption, failed projects, and broken compensation systems deeply erode trust, reinforcing hostility toward both wildlife and conservation authorities.</p>
4. Cultural & Spiritual Dimensions of Coexistence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elder herder: “The leopard is also made by God, as I am, or as my goats. So it will take its fair share.” - “We worship the forest goddess, but are sad to see wrong habits spreading.” - “We live like animals ourselves— 	<p>Deeply ambivalent views: reverence and kinship with animals coexist with resentment. Cultural narratives remain a strong channel for conservation dialogue.</p>

Theme	Illustrative Quotes (Field Data / Anecdotes)	Analytical Note
	no government help.” - Youth leader: “This knowledge is not only for us, it should be passed to our children as prayers.”	
5. Mixed Observations & Adaptive Strategies	- Shepherd: “Yes, leopards take goats, but they also keep langurs away from our maize.” - Positive bear-encounter respondent: “After fighting with the bear, I was helped by officials, and I now share forest knowledge with my son.” - Old villager with leopard scars: “The same leopard attacked me twice, but it is part of our forest. We both survived.” - “Some people now use bright clothes or strong smells to keep predators away from fields.”	Not all encounters are negative. Mixed experiences show coexistence can evolve through adaptive strategies, cultural resilience, and individual champions.

3. Explain any unforeseen difficulties that arose during the project and how these were tackled.

The project encountered several challenges during its implementation:

- Geographic Barriers and Weather Extremes:** Seasonal snowfall and monsoon rains periodically cut off access to remote high-elevation villages. Rains often washed away bridges or rendered paths unusable, while snow made transportation and communication nearly impossible in some stretches. Many villages were also outside consistent network zones, with frequent electricity outages complicating coordination and device charging. Despite these logistical issues, field teams—often relying on motorcycles and help from locals—managed to maintain operational continuity.
- Pandemic-Era Social Caution:** The ongoing impacts of COVID-19 created hesitation among some community members, especially elders, toward engaging with outsiders. However, this barrier was gradually overcome through support from local field assistants who acted as intermediaries and trust-builders during interviews and outreach during the initial phase of the study.
- Reluctance Among Commercial Resource Exploiters:** Individuals involved in wildlife poaching, bushmeat trade, or timber extraction were initially evasive or dishonest in their

responses. Several respondents downplayed or outright denied involvement, likely due to fear of exposure. Triangulation with indirect data sources and long-term engagement helped the team gain better access to these segments. In some cases, individuals with deep forest knowledge—initially known for hunting—were later engaged as local tracking and interpretation guides. Eventually, replacing binoculars with the guns they held in their hands before engaging in this project.

- **Institutional Resistance:** At the outset, forest officials were uncooperative and denied access to important areas, including previously forest-used trails and settlements. In one notable case, a Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) known for corrupt practices actively obstructed research, though was eventually transferred. Later collaboration with sympathetic officials helped resume data collection.

Field-Verified Incident: Forest staff were observed by the team and local informants setting forest fires to fabricate emergency duties, an act that not only destroyed critical wildlife habitat but also eroded local faith in official conservation practices.

Community Feedback on Past Projects: Many respondents cited frustration with past efforts like **Secure Himalaya**, where local labourers were unpaid, community needs were sidelined, and forest bungalows were renovated using timber cut from sacred deodar trees. These practices have seeded mistrust that continues to hinder new conservation efforts.

4. Describe the involvement of local communities and how they have benefited from the project.

The project strongly emphasized participatory research and community engagement.

Table 3. Project timeline

Date	Activity
20 March 2021	Arrival at Govind National Park (GNP) and preliminary site familiarization
18 April 2021	Official start of the Rufford-funded project
April–September 2021	Community engagement, field visits, interviews, ecological observations
28 September 2021	Completion of primary field phase and community data collection
02 October 2021 onward	Qualitative data analysis and interpretation
08 October 2021 onward	Continued community engagement and post-project development through community pillars in Dhatmeer village.

Table 4. Sampling Distribution Across Villages and Demographics

Village	Households Sampled (% of total)	Male Respondents	Female Respondents	Youth (12–16 yrs)	Key Occupations Represented
Dhatmeer	~34% (highest response rate)	38	28	8	Shepherds, farmers, shopkeepers, students
Gangad	~26%	28	21	6	Farmers, shepherds, teachers, students
Osla	~22%	22	16	7	Shepherds, farmers, forest dwellers
Pawani	~18%	21	13	5	Shepherds, farmers
Total	213 respondents	~109 (52%)	~78 (36%)	26 (12%)	Broad mix, shepherds over-represented due to high exposure

Key aspects include:

- **213 respondents** were interviewed across four different villages in the Barasu Valley, covering approximately **30% of households per village**. Each sample included diversity across gender, age, occupation, and proximity to the forest edge. For example, **shepherds and forest-dwelling families**, who interact frequently with wildlife, were prioritized due to their higher ecological exposure.
- Gender distribution among respondents was roughly **36% female and 52% male**, while roughly **12%** individuals aged **12 to 16** were included. Each village contributed **5–8 adolescent voices**, reflecting youth perspectives and vulnerabilities.
- **Youth Engagement:** Young community members were engaged not just as respondents, but also as **co-researchers and field assistants**, contributing to surveys, wildlife tracking, and local education efforts.
- **Experiential Outreach:** Activities included **public murals, puppet shows, forest tracking walks**, and **nature-based art sessions**. These interactions were tailored to promote understanding and empathy toward wildlife, especially among children.
- **Community Co-Design of Solutions:** Locals contributed suggestions such as:
 - **Using solar fencing** to prevent crop-raiding
 - **Restricting dwarf bamboo extraction**, which destabilizes predator movement corridors
 - **Constructing watchtowers** for collective monitoring during peak agricultural seasons
 - **Creating a seed bank of Native trees** for sustaining native ecology amid growing trade of forest produce.
- **Cultural Integration:** Local religious leaders and cultural advisors helped frame wildlife as part of a shared spiritual ecosystem. One elderly shepherd aptly stated:

“The leopard is as much God’s creation as I am, or my sheep. If it takes one, it is only taking what belongs to the same creator.”

This level of cultural sensitivity proved essential for re-establishing trust and long-term engagement.

5. Are there any plans to continue this work?

Following the conclusion of the Rufford-supported project in October 2021, the momentum carried forward into a broader community conservation initiative— After October 2021, the work evolved into a long-term initiative under the Not-for-Profit NGO, **WildBuck Conservation Foundation** (registered under Ministry of Corporate Affairs MCA, India, in November 2024), focusing on:

Strengthening Community-Based Conservation Frameworks:

The name and long-term direction of this work are inspired by the vision of bringing back the native Sambar deer (*Rusa unicolor*), once the region’s apex herbivore and a species of cultural reverence that has largely migrated away over the past decade. Occasional reports from nearby valleys and a few firsthand signs have strengthened the belief that their return is still possible. Going forward, our plan is to continue community-based conservation efforts that positively reshape local interactions with the forest, reduce extractive pressures, and gradually restore the ecological conditions needed for Sambar—and other threatened species—to naturally recolonise and recover.

- Several other threatened species native to this landscape—including the **Western Tragopan**, **Satyr Tragopan**, **Himalayan Serow**, and **Himalayan Musk Deer**—are facing sharp population declines. These declines are driven by habitat degradation, forest fires, and unsustainable hunting practices. Alarming evidence suggests that some of these species have already vacated their historical ranges in search of safer habitats. Reviving these populations requires immediate habitat restoration efforts and a fundamental shift in human behavior toward coexistence and ecological stewardship.
- **Nature Clubs and Education Access:** A nature-focused educational program titled “**Pahaad ki Paathshaala**” (“Mountain Classroom”) was launched to deliver ecological education to children and adolescents. Activities emphasize curiosity, empathy, and real-world nature interaction through weekly or biweekly forest walks, nature games, and storytelling. The slogan guiding this initiative is:
“Padhein aur padhayein, prakriti bachayein” (Let us learn, teach and save nature together)
- **Herbal Health Knowledge and Women’s Circles:** Recognizing the central role women play in ecosystem care, a grassroots women’s collective named **Svasthya Khidki (The Healthcare Window)** was initiated. This platform promotes sharing of medicinal knowledge, self-health practices, and intergenerational transfer of forest wisdom.
- **Community Monitoring and Anti-Poaching Networks:** A **local intelligence-based approach** is being developed, drawing on the deep forest familiarity of elders, shepherds, and youth. The goal is to reduce both opportunistic and commercial-scale forest violations through village-monitored surveillance.

- **Cultural–Religious Narrative Integration:**
Since many villagers respond more strongly to religious and traditional teachings than to formal scientific explanations, coexistence messages are now framed using references from local spiritual and historical texts. For example, portraying leopards as protective gatekeepers or forest guardians, as described in local traditions, has proven effective in improving attitudes toward wildlife and reducing fear-based reactions.
- **Predator-Resilient Livelihoods:** Based on community ideas, trials have begun around:
 - **Turmeric and asafoetida-scented cloths** placed around livestock pens to deter predators
 - **Bright-clothing walks** by community volunteers around farms to reduce crop raids by langurs
 - **Daytime farmland watch-walks** conducted on a rotational basis by trained community members to reduce livestock depredation
 - **A shepherd volunteer team** trained in basic conservation principles to act as a bridge between herders and other villagers, while maintaining simple diaries to document livestock losses and wildlife encounters
 - **Digital Outreach and Nature-Based Tourism:** An online platform is under gradual development to attract low-impact travellers, connect them with conservation-themed village experiences, and empower locals with storytelling, guiding, and ecological restoration skills.

6. How do you plan to share the results of your work with others?

To ensure that findings reached both scientific and non-scientific audiences, the project used **multiple platforms** for dissemination:

- **Visual storybooks and illustrated posters** were created in local dialects and shared in:
 - Schools
 - Temples and village councils
 - Homes of participating families
- **Community murals** were painted by youth volunteers to depict animal signs, plant uses, and messages of harmony.
- **Presentation and dialogue** sessions were organized with:
 - **Uttarkashi Forest Division**
 - Interested NGOs
 - Local conservation stewards

- **Planned publications** include:
 - Regional-language magazines
 - A manuscript in progress for submission to a peer-reviewed journal on community-based wildlife conservation
- **Digital documentation** was initiated through:
 - **Short video snippets** in terms of a documentary of field interviews, mural-making and other community activities which is awaiting publishing rights.
 - Informational content for social media platforms under the name **Wildbuck Trails** (e.g. YouTube, Instagram, Facebook)

Future podcasts and eco-tourism storytelling under a knowledge-sharing banner

7. Looking ahead, what do you feel are the important next steps?

Building on the trust and networks established during the initial phase, the following strategic steps are being planned to strengthen and scale the impact of community-based conservation:

- **Digital Tool for Grievance and Compensation Tracking:**
A mobile-based interface or community portal will be designed to help locals transparently report livestock losses, crop damage, or wildlife sightings. This will bridge communication gaps between the forest department and villagers, thereby reducing the misinformation-driven hostility toward wild animals and institutions.
- **Seasonal Ecological Monitoring Camps with Schools:**
Short-term nature camps are being conceptualized in collaboration with both **local and urban schools**, allowing cross-learning. These will expose students to wildlife tracking, plant identification, ecological ethics, and land-based stewardship.
- **Development of Ethical Trade Alternatives:**
Responding to community feedback, plans are underway to initiate **cooperative-based medicinal plant farming** and **local wool-based artisan platforms**. These will create sustainable income opportunities and reduce the pressure on wild harvests.
- **Partnership with NGOs and Technical Collaborators:**
To extend this model across other regions of the **Garhwal Himalayas**, formal partnerships with established conservation organizations and agro-ecological initiatives will be sought.
- **Formal Recognition of Community Conservation Stewards:**
A **Conservation Fellowship** program is under development to support youth leaders, experienced shepherds, and traditional knowledge holders to become resource persons in their own communities.

8. Did you use The Rufford Foundation logo in any materials produced in relation to this project? Did the Foundation receive any publicity during the course of your work?

Yes — the Rufford Foundation logo was visibly and appropriately used throughout the project in the following ways:

- **Awareness Materials:**
Pamphlets, illustrated booklets, and public flyers distributed in schools, temples, and Gram Sabhas carried the Rufford identity, along with attribution to the grant support.
- **Community Events and Murals:**
The logo was painted on public wall murals and boards during awareness events and festivals.
- **Educational Storybooks and Posters:**
Materials produced for children and youth as part of the “Pahaad ki Paathshaala” initiative and tracking workshops also credited the Rufford Foundation visibly.

9. Provide a full list of all the members of your team and their role in the project.

The project brought together a blend of local wisdom, academic experience, and creative outreach. The core team consisted of:

- **Gaurav Dixit** – Lead Researcher: Project conceptualization, field strategy, execution and thematic analysis, post-project community engagement, training young minds, storytelling
- **Vijaypal Rawat** – Field Logistics & Local Coordination (Community member)
- **Roop Singh** – Indigenous Tracking Specialist and Community Interpreter (Community member)
- **Ankit Kaintura** – Field Assistant and Forest-Edge Outreach (Native to Himalayan region)
- **Shubhendru Laal** – Local Forest Guide (Community member)
- **Rahul Verma** – Data Documentation and Archiving
- **Barkha Yadav** – Visual Storytelling, Mural Coordination, and Child Engagement
- **Samarth Verma** – Musician and Creative Outreach Support
- **Kapil Shekhawat** – Community Outreach
- **Sonu Kanwar** – Indian Classical Vocalist and Awareness Performer
- **Gaurav Saluja** – Documentary Filmmaking and Visual Media Editor

Plus 8–10 trained community volunteers who supported field interviews, data collection, and local engagement events, to name a few – Manoj, Sanju, Dinesh, Jaichand, Yogesh, Khushiraam Rawat, Nisha, Hiramani, Manisha, Ayush and other part time volunteers.

10. Any other comments?

This project was more than a research exercise—it was a foundational chapter in a long-term, evolving community conservation journey. The Rufford grant helped initiate honest, culturally sensitive conversations in an area previously disengaged or misrepresented in conservation dialogues.

Key field anecdotes revealed the emotional and ecological complexity of human-wildlife coexistence:

- A **12-year-old boy, Suraj**, who was terrified of bears, felt relieved after learning about their mostly herbivorous diet—highlighting the power of simple ecological literacy.
- An **elderly woman**, who initially believed the team was there to protect her from wildlife, later expressed anger when realizing the conservation focus—underscoring the need for fair dialogue and support.
- A **black bear encounter survivor** expressed no resentment, citing support from forest staff and personal growth through forest knowledge. His son is now a conservation volunteer.
- A **man who twice survived leopard attacks** continues to speak in favor of coexistence—his story stands as rare but powerful testament to reconciliation and resilience.

The project also **exposed widespread disillusionment** due to:

- Prior forest-related schemes (e.g. Secure Himalaya) that failed to deliver promised outcomes
- Illegal bushmeat hunting and illegal commercial trade routes of forest products
- Community members exploited for labour without compensation
- Observations of forest officials engaging in destructive practices such as setting forest fires for personal credit

Such revelations stress the **urgent need for community-led, transparent, and locally informed conservation models.**

Moreover, The Barasu Valley (Govind Pashu Vihar National Park) is a biogeographically sensitive transition zone between temperate broadleaf and alpine coniferous forests, recognized as habitat for several IUCN-listed species:

- **Critically Endangered:** White-rumped Vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*), Red-headed Vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*), Himalayan Quail (*Ophrysia superciliosa*)
- **Endangered:** Himalayan Musk Deer (*Moschus leucogaster*)
- **Vulnerable:** Leopard, Snow Leopard, Asiatic Black Bear, Serow, Western Tragopan, Cheer Pheasant
- **Near Threatened:** Satyr Tragopan

These species are directly impacted by anthropogenic pressures documented in this study—especially forest fires, retaliatory killings, hunting for meat, and habitat degradation. Community-based interventions thus become central to safeguarding the survival of both apex predators and forest-dependent avifauna. Additionally, apex and large-bodied species such as the **Grey Wolf** (*Canis lupus*) and **Brown Bear** (*Ursus arctos*)—though listed as Least Concern globally—require localized attention due to shrinking prey bases and rising human conflict in the region.

Moving forward, this project acts as both a **dataset** and a **framework**—from which better policy, deeper trust, and scalable community engagement can grow.

ANNEX – Financial Report
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