

Project Update: July 2021

First, I should inform you that, amidst the pandemic, myself and all the team members associated with the project are doing well and are progressing well towards our project objectives. Even though the early arriving monsoon, along with the country-wide lockdown, imposed during the May 2021, did cause some difficulties at the beginning. However, since June 2021 we have made gradual and steady progress in the interviews, and I am glad to report that we are now nearing our 100th respondent.

Mostly, it has been a busy and hectic field due to heavy rains, which arrived a month early this year. Along with the harvesting routines of the villagers, my productivity also got hampered in May 2021.

Due to early and heavy rains, I had to improvise on certain aspects of our data collection and sampling techniques. I decided to cover the entire scope of a village at once, instead of following their harvesting and festive schedules. Starting with the villages, which will become inaccessible after few months of heavy rains. Villages, such as, Osla, (last village on route to Har ki Dun), ca. 150 households and Pavani, ca. 75 households. Due to the remoteness of these villages and the challenging terrain connecting them, I could not trek down in the network zone any earlier.

In terms of data, we are getting some interesting insights in the lives of these remote communities, their century-old traditions and cultures, their challenges daily challenges and about their interactions with the surrounding biodiversity. Even though most of the findings so far are aligned with our project hypothesis, there are some new discoveries as well. Also, with the help of our local volunteers, I have been able to learn some of their language, enough to communicate with older people and the infants of the community. This has helped me greatly in earning their trust and to make them understand the importance of sustainable coexistence with the environment. Moreover, thus far I have been successful in adding a team of 8-10 volunteers from these four villages, which are under our project scope, to our team of "future pillars of the community". Through these volunteers we will be able to remain in touch with the community and get updates on the mitigation controls which we will implement in future.

So far, we have recorded many indirect signs of the presence of leopards and Asiatic black bear, among other wildlife. Few of these signs were in the very close proximity of the villages. There are also numerous signs of negative interactions between locals and the surrounding biodiversity. Due to the lack of motorable roads in the region, most of these villagers depend on nearby forests for timber and firewood. The practice of hunting has also been an integral part of their community from centuries. Even though, reducing with time, it is still appalling to witness it, in existence inside a 60-year-old national park. But sticking to my current project objectives, I am only observing and recording the data without wearing a condemnatory hat.

Finally, I would like to propose a mitigation control and a community awareness tool, that I would like to implement, with your permission, in the villages under my project scope. I plan to paint some of the material about wildlife conservation on the public walls of the village after taking permission from the respective village heads, or in local, called as the "Pradhan" of a village. Some of my local team members have volunteered their house walls to be painted with permanent colors. One of my old

friends, who is also a collaborator in the project, is a good painter and is willing to paint some of the interesting material that we are preparing on awareness for wildlife conservation. I would share the materials with you, once prepared, for your approval. I believe this could work well in spreading our word of awareness about wildlife conservation in the region, as these villages are visited by over thousands of tourists per year. Moreover, the villagers would also not throw away the otherwise used paper-based materials after the project is over, and our word of awareness will reach more and more ears with time. In addition to spreading awareness on wildlife conservation, we can use this to engage more people to our cause and in turn use it for the development of these local communities. I will be eagerly waiting to hear your thoughts on this.



Figure 1 Leopard Scat



Figure 2 Leopard Pugmark



Figure 3 Witnessing century-old culture



Figure 3 Having fun with village kids



Figure 5 Group session with villagers



Figure 6 Interview in session