

Championing the Future: Empowering Himalayan Guardians

Promoting Indigenous Champions: Protecting Nature and Empowering Himalayan Communities to Conserve Snow Leopards.

Capacity Building of Snow Leopard Conservation Committee and Local Hotels and Restaurants owners of Ghunsha Area

Introduction

The Ghunsha Valley, renowned for its pristine natural beauty and rich biodiversity, recently hosted a capacity-building training workshop to enhance the capabilities of local stakeholders in snow leopard conservation. This initiative was part of the project "Assessing a Multidisciplinary Framework for Human-Snow Leopard Coexistence in the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area of Nepal's Eastern Himalaya," generously funded by the Rufford Foundation. Held in a community building nestled within the valley's scenic landscape; the workshop saw the participation of 20-25 individuals representing various sectors crucial to the region's conservation efforts. Among the attendees were representatives from the Snow Leopard Conservation Committee, led by Penjolkla Sherpa, the chairperson, along with Chheten Sherpa and Dandu Sherpa.

More recently, this team observed snow leopards in the area after some time in a camera trap, which has encouraged them to play a positive role in promoting a viable population. They aim to circulate the lessons learned from this workshop to various stakeholders, including local governments, women, and other community members, according to Penjolkla Sherpa. Their encouraging development was covered in a national newspaper. Additionally, the workshop included representatives from local hotels and restaurants, reflecting a diverse range of interests and experiences. Their involvement highlights the broad community commitment to snow leopard conservation and the collaborative efforts needed to ensure the success of such initiatives.



Picture on the left: member of SCC and local stakeholders from various sectors in right at a capacity-building workshop

The primary objective of the workshop was to increase awareness about the importance of preserving snow leopards and to foster discussions on sustainable practices that can effectively support their conservation. Throughout the day, participants engaged in interactive sessions, presentations, and group discussions, delving into topics such as snow leopard ecology, human-wildlife conflict mitigation, and the role of eco-tourism in conservation efforts. A notable aspect of the workshop was the incorporation of pre-and post-workshop assessments, designed to gauge the effectiveness of the training in transferring knowledge and fostering behavioral changes among participants. These assessments provided valuable insights into the workshop's impact, allowing organizers to tailor future training programs to better meet the local community's needs.

Participants and Objectives

Participants from the Snow Leopard Conservation Committee and the tourism sector attended the capacity building workshop. The key objectives were:

1. To educate local stakeholders about eco-friendly tourism practices and the critical role of snow leopards in the mountain ecosystem. This includes highlighting how sustainable tourism can benefit both the environment and the local community and explaining the importance of snow leopards in maintaining the ecological balance.
2. To discuss the various issues affecting snow leopard habitats and the impact of climate change on these areas. This involves addressing habitat loss, human-wildlife conflict, and other threats, while also emphasizing how climate change exacerbates these problems and poses significant risks to snow leopard survival.
3. To emphasize the importance of community involvement in conservation efforts and raising awareness about eco-friendly practices. Engaging local communities is crucial for successful conservation, and educating them on sustainable practices can lead to more effective protection of snow leopards and their habitats.

Discussion Topics

Importance of Snow Leopard Conservation

The workshop began with a discussion on the ecological significance of snow leopards. These apex predators are vital for maintaining the balance of mountain ecosystems by regulating prey populations and ensuring biodiversity. Their presence indicates a healthy ecosystem, which benefits both wildlife and local communities. Various questions were raised by participants, and they shared their knowledge. Unanswered or less understood questions were explained in greater detail.

Issues Affecting Snow Leopard Habitats

Several pressing issues were discussed as threats to snow leopard habitats:

Livestock Population and Overgrazing:

The changes in livestock numbers leads to overgrazing, which degrades the habitat and reduces the availability of prey for snow leopards. This can escalate human-wildlife conflict as snow leopards may prey on livestock so special consideration and formulation regarding regulation and its importance's were shared among the stakeholders

Infrastructure Development expanding human foot print across landscape

The haphazard development of rural roads is gradually increasing from lower villages into the region and moving upward. Similarly, some hydropower projects are in the preliminary stages in parts of the region. These and other infrastructure developments may fragment the habitat, making it difficult for snow leopards to thrive in their home range. At this point, it is crucial to raise awareness and inform local stakeholders. Multiple levels of stakeholder consultation should be conducted, allowing you to voice your concerns in the decision-making process. Identify areas where development could have a negative impact, and suggest that such areas be avoided. Instead, alternative locations should be identified. During the workshop sessions, we discussed the need to raise awareness of these issues. Stakeholders discussed these concerns and developed the necessary capacities to address them effectively.

Impact of Climate Change

Under this topic, participants were first briefed on what climate change is, how it happens, and how it is affecting our Earth. We then highlighted how climate change exacerbates issues concerning snow leopards: as temperatures rise, the tree line moves higher, reducing the alpine zones where snow leopards thrive and impacting their habitat and prey availability. Additionally, higher altitudes are experiencing a reduction in rangelands and forests, which are crucial for the prey species of snow leopards. This situation increases competition and conflict over remaining resources, potentially leading to conflicts that local people need to be prepared to address were also discussed.



According to residents, the snow cover on Seen Peak has drastically reduced in various parts during the snowing seasons. Similarly, the duration of snow cover days has also been observed to decrease, said Pema Chhombel Sherpa, a Buddhist priest of the region.

Community Involvement and Benefits

One of the key focuses during the training was on engaging local communities in conservation efforts. Successful conservation programs often involve these communities by sharing benefits, such as through eco-tourism. This not only generates income but also improves livelihoods, thereby motivating their active participation and support.

Moreover, empowering local citizens as scientists by enhancing their knowledge and skills fosters a sense of ownership towards conservation initiatives. Local expertise and engagement play a critical role in monitoring and safeguarding snow leopards. By directly involving community members, they become more invested in the success of conservation programs, leading to more sustainable and effective outcomes. Assessing the scenario and situation in the Ghunsha location, there is a high possibility of achieving a win-win situation where both snow leopards and the community benefit. This aspect was thoroughly discussed and clarified during the workshop session to ensure participants were well-informed about their role in conserving this species and its importance.

Promoting Eco-Friendly Tourism

Eco-Tourism Benefits:

Eco-friendly tourism can be a win-win situation, providing economic benefits to local communities while promoting conservation. Tourists attracted to the natural beauty and wildlife of the Ghunsha Valley contribute to the local economy various aspects on the topic were also discussed.

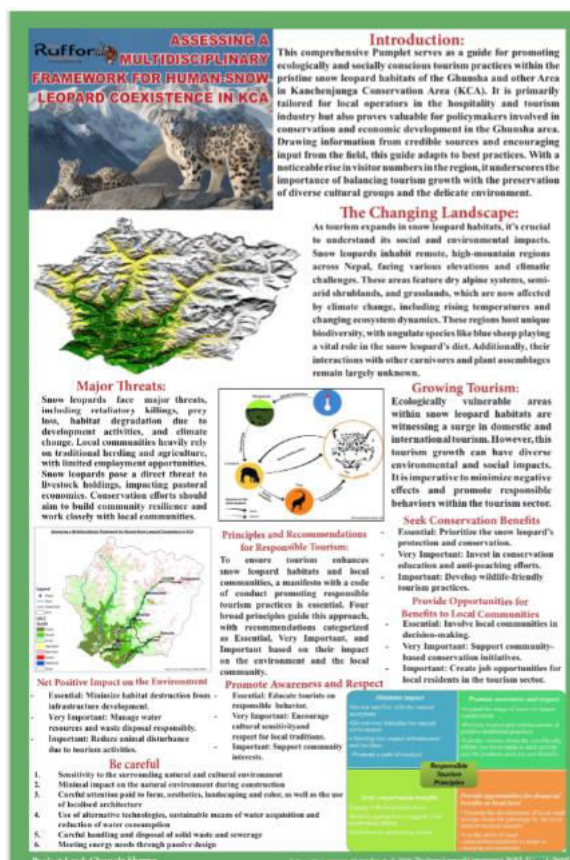
Sustainable Practices:

Stakeholders were educated on implementing sustainable practices in their hotels and restaurants. This includes minimizing waste, using sustainable resources, and offering eco-friendly services to tourists etc. was discussed. Educating tourists, visitors, and the local community about the importance of snow leopard conservation and responsible tourism practices can enhance their experience and support for conservation efforts. By raising awareness of the significance of protecting snow leopards and promoting sustainable tourism practices, individuals can make more informed choices during their visits to snow leopard habitats. This increased understanding can lead to greater appreciation for the conservation efforts underway and encourage active participation in initiatives aimed at preserving these majestic creatures and their habitats.

Endeavors during the discussion, we also shared some success stories demonstrating how conservation efforts can foster win-win cooperation. These examples highlighted the tangible benefits that can arise from collaborative conservation goings-on, showcasing how local communities, wildlife, and ecosystems can thrive in harmony when conservation principles are upheld. By illustrating these success stories, we aimed to inspire participants and emphasize the positive outcomes that can result from collective action and commitment to protecting snow leopards and their habitats.

Participants Before and After Capacity Building Knowledge Assessment

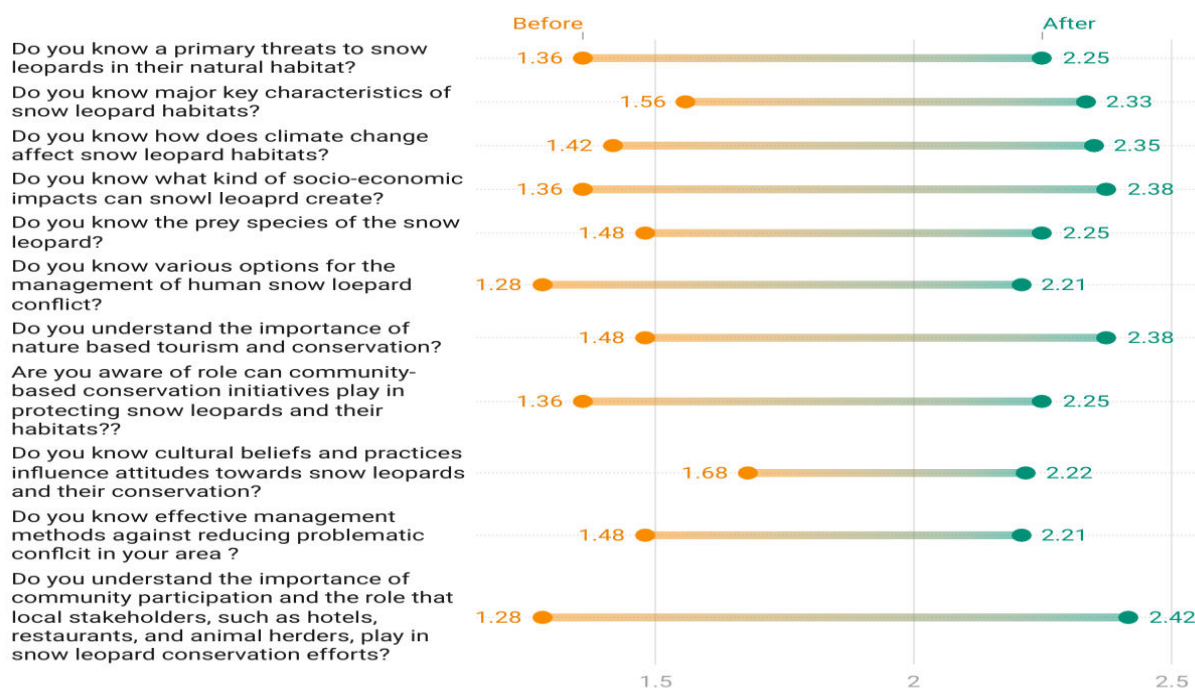
All participants were instructed to complete a questionnaire both before and following the capacity-building session. The questionnaire, distributed in print format before and after the session, required participants to assess their level of comprehension, they were asked to choose/tick in the questionnaire. They were presented with three options:



Resource pamphlet

"Well," "Fairly," or "Little/None," corresponding to scores of 3, 2, and 1 respectively, indicating their depth of understanding or awareness. The results are shown in below graph.

Capacity Building of Snow Leopard Conservation Committee and Local Hotels and Restaurants of Ghunsha Area



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Capacity Building Assessment Result

Conclusion

The capacity-building workshop in Ghunsha Valley was a significant step towards empowering local communities and stakeholders in snow leopard conservation. By addressing the critical issues affecting snow leopard habitats and promoting sustainable tourism practices, the workshop aimed to foster a collaborative approach to conservation. The active participation and enthusiasm of the attendees indicate a strong foundation for future conservation initiatives in the region. The success of such workshops lies in continuous engagement and support for local communities, ensuring that they are equipped with the knowledge and resources to contribute to and benefit from conservation efforts. The region with its rich biodiversity and vibrant community, has the potential to become a model for snow leopard conservation and sustainable development in the Himalayas.

Education and Awareness of Snow Leopard Conservation in Schools

A pivotal classes and capacity development session took place at Ghunsa Lower Secondary School as part of a comprehensive stakeholder capacity assessment.



Participants:

Twenty students, comprising 12 males and 8 females, ranging from grades 4 to 7, actively participated in the program. Their capacity was built through a variety of engaging activities including pictures, drawings, quizzes, and booklets related to snow leopards and their conservation. The students eagerly engaged in drawing and colouring activities that helped them learn about the unique features and habitats of snow leopards. Through interactive quizzes, they tested their knowledge and deepened their understanding of the threats facing these magnificent animals. Additionally, informative booklets provided detailed insights into the importance of snow leopard conservation, further enriching the student's learning experience.

Assessment Questions:

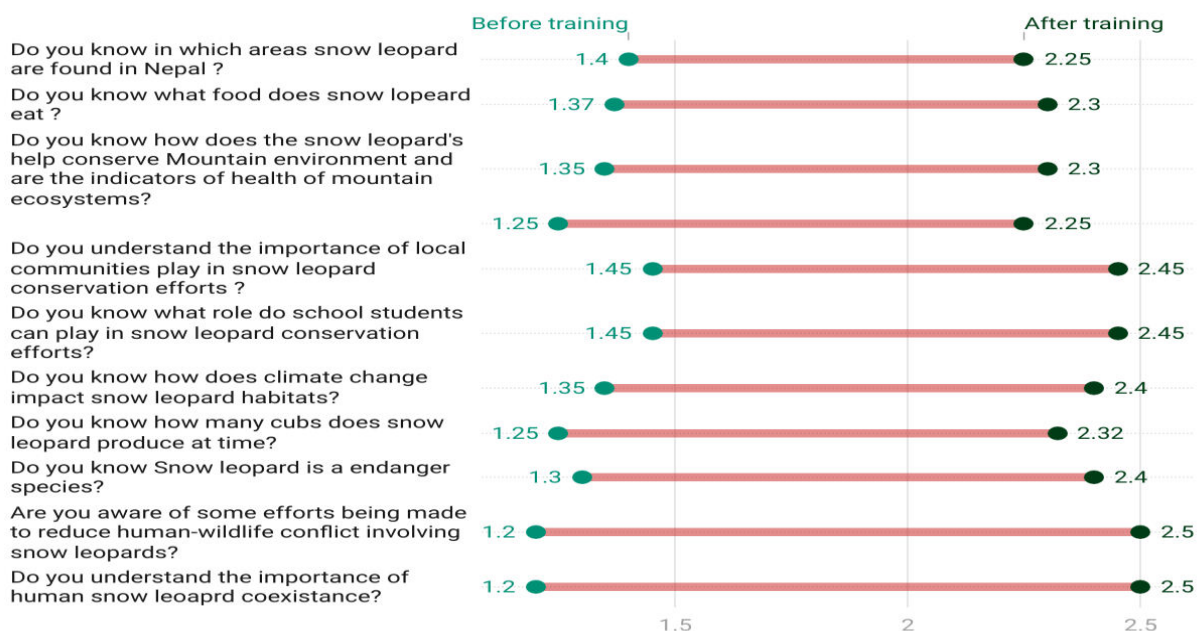
The knowledge assessment was conducted both before and after the interactive class/workshop training session. The questionnaire, translated into Nepali to ensure understanding, asked various questions about snow leopards and how to protect them. The questions addressed several topics, including the basic information snow leopards face, their habitats, etc. The questionnaire also inquired about the influence of snow leopards on the local area, their diet, and strategies for mitigating conflicts between snow leopards and humans. By asking these questions, the assessment aimed to understand what school students knew and thought about snow leopards and to measure the knowledge they gained after the program. This information is crucial for developing effective conservation plans and enhancing educational efforts.

Assessment Methodology:

All participated students were asked to respond to the questionnaire both before and after the training session. In the printed questionnaire provided before and after the training, students were prompted to indicate their level of understanding by choosing from three options: "Well," "Fairly," or "Little/None." These options were associated with scores of 3, 2, and 1 respectively, to signify their level of understanding or awareness and result are shown in below figure

Education and Awareness of Snow Leopard Conservation in Schools

The training sessions took place at Ghunsa Lower Secondary School as part of a comprehensive stakeholder capacity assessment



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Conclusion:

The interactive classes and capacity development effort highlighted the critical role of conservation education in enhancing knowledge and fostering positive attitudes towards snow leopards among students in the schools of Ghunsa Valley. This underscores the importance of targeted educational interventions in promoting coexistence between humans and snow leopards while advancing conservation efforts in the area. It is recommended to expand and sustain conservation education initiatives, aiming to engage a broader spectrum of community members. School children, in particular,

serve as a valuable audience who can not only absorb this knowledge for personal use but also disseminate it within their homes and potentially integrate it into their future professions. Furthermore, continuous monitoring and evaluation of these initiatives are essential to assess their effectiveness and guide future interventions.

The assessment revealed a significant improvement in students' understanding and awareness of snow leopard following the session. This progress signifies a positive step towards fostering harmony between humans and snow leopards in the region. The findings underscore the ongoing need for education and student engagement initiatives to ensure the sustained success of conservation efforts in the area. These efforts not only enhance understanding but also instill a sense of stewardship and responsibility among students. By sharing their knowledge in various places, including at home where some parents may be illiterate, students can extend the reach of conservation awareness.

