Final Evaluation Report

Your Details	
Full Name	Pravin Giri
Project Title	Niche Overlap and Awareness Initiatives for the Conservation of Smooth-coated Otters and Fishing Cats in the Lowland Region of Far-western Nepal
Application ID	43042-2
Date of this Report	June 27, 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
1) Spatial, temporal and dietary niche overlap between the Smooth-coated otters (SCO) and Fishing cats (FC).			■	A sign survey was conducted in the major lakes of Suklaphanta National Park (ShNP) and Ghodaghodi Lake. Following this, we deployed 10 camera traps for 22 days in Suklaphanta National Park, establishing 12 stations for data collection. Similarly, we deployed five camera traps for 7 days in Ghodaghodi Lake. In total, camera traps were deployed in the field for 29 days. In between our survey, the ShNP administration opened the park for almost 10 days in different areas for local people to collect grasses, wood, firewood, and other resources, which disrupted our camera trapping survey. Although we had planned to install 15 camera traps in the field, due to shortages of camera traps and some being dysfunctional, we couldn't install all the camera traps in the field. Through a camera trapping survey, over 30 images of Smooth-coated otter and four pictures of Fishing cats were captured. Our observation indicates a temporal segregation and spatial overlap between the two species in Suklaphanta National Park. However, we were unable to study the dietary overlap between species due to the insufficient scat samples (n<30).

2) To identify the threats to both the species and their habitat and find the potential measures to mitigate them.				Two focus group discussions (n=42) and a questionnaire survey (n=49) were conducted involving 91 local people to identify the threats to SCO and FC. In the Suklaphanta National Park, wetland shrinkage and habitat degradation due to invasive species were identified as the major threats. In Ghodaghodi Lake, human intrusion for fodder, wood, picnics, and gatherings were reported as the major threats. Overfishing or unsustainable fishing practices can be the other prevalent threats in both the areas; however, local respondents were reluctant to disclose such information.
3) To promote community-based otter and fishing cat conservation and build stewardship towards the species and their habitat conservation.				We installed four informational hoarding boards at prominent locations (outside the main gate of Suklaphanta National Park and Ghodaghoidi Lake). We printed (n=4000) posters on fishing cats and smooth-coated otters. It was the main highlight of the project as it is an efficient approach for reaching the local people to disseminate the information. Stickers (n=200) containing a conservation slogan about both species were printed and affixed in public vehicles and prominent public locations such as in Division forest office, community centres, and tea shops. FC and SCO conservation knowledge were shared with 600 people, including students, directly

				through five community outreach programs and eleven school awareness programs. Additionally, T-shirts (n=20) were printed with the conservation slogan on both sides, and they were used during conservation awareness programs by the PI, volunteers, and locals. Although the installation of hoarding boards and the preparation of conservation stickers were not planned in the proposal, following the focus groups discussion, participants suggested to install the hoarding boards as they remain in the particular location for the long time, making sustainable impact to otter and fishing cats conservation. Therefore, considering their effectiveness in conservation, we planned to set up hoarding boards. After the completion of the awareness programs, we conducted a quiz program among students to assess the effectiveness outreach program. Similarly, an informal pre-and post-survey questionnaire was conducted among participants of community outreach program to assess it's effectiveness.

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

a). Instalments of informational hoarding boards.

We installed four informational hoarding boards in four different locations for each SCO and FC, in Kanchanpur and Kailali Districts. They were placed in the most prominent spots, easily visible to pedestrians and local people. The hoarding boards display important information about the ecology, conservation measures, the significance of conservation, and threats to both species in the Nepali Language. These can be instrumental in spreading conservation messages to local

communities, visitors, and other people for a long period of time. Thus, this can have a long-lasting impact in SCO and FC conservation in the study site.

b). Publication of awareness materials and conduction of extensive community and school awareness programs.

Through the community outreach and school awareness programs, we reached out to more than 600 local people and youths directly, disseminating conservation knowledge about the SCO and FC. In addition, posters (n=4000), stickers (n=200), and t-shirts (n=20) were printed with the conservation information and distributed among local people and students.

These programs have make people aware about the existence of SCO and FC in their locality. They have also helped participants recognize the importance of natural resources and surrounding wildlife. As a result, these initiatives are expected to foster positive behavioural changes among the participants and potentially reduce human-induced threats to these species and their habitat.

c). Identification of threats to Smooth-coated otters and Fishing cats, and potential threats reduction measures.

We held two focus group discussions and questionnaire surveys (n=49) to document threats, knowledge, and perception of local people about both species in Kanchanpur and Kailali Districts. We identified lake shrinkage and habitat degradation due to invasive species as the major threats in Suklaphanta National Park. We shared these threats with the park authority and have asked them to include the habitat management activities prioritizing SCO and FC in their management plan.

In Ghodaghodi Lake, a community outreach and awareness program targeting visitors and local people was identified as an urgent conservation priority. In addition, promotion of eco-tourism activities and alternative livelihood opportunities such as homestays and nature guides were recognized as key strategies for reducing human-induced threats to both the species and their habitats.

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

The threat of wildlife, primarily of the Tiger and Elephant, was the major challenge that was experienced during the survey in Suklaphanta National Park. We encountered Tigers more than three times during the field work inside the park. Moreover, the grass inside the national park was tall, and more often, the things lying ahead were completely invisible. In such circumstances, there could be a chance that we may have encountered Tiger, Rhino, Elephant, or other animals hiding behind the grass or shelter. Fortunately, we safely completed the field work without such incidents.

The camera traps that were deployed near to the buffer zone areas faced a high risk of stolen by local people. Additionally, there was a possibility of the camera traps being destroyed or damaged by wildlife such as Rhino or Elephants.

However, the difficulty was tackled through precautions, working in large group, and staying in close connection with each other during the survey inside the National

Park. Moreover, regular communication with Nepal Army deployed for Park security was maintained for the safety.
We frequently monitored the camera traps that were deployed in the close vicinity of buffer zone to reduce the chances of lost or theft and destruction by wild animals.

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

Local people actively participated in every phase of our project activities, including focus group discussions, questionnaire surveys, and awareness programs. Throughout the different stages of the project, we directly engaged with over 600 local individuals. Their involvement was integral to the success of each activity, reflecting the project's strong emphasis on community participation and collaboration in SCO and FC conservation.
Local people have benefited in many ways during the implementation of project activities. They gained valuable ecological knowledge about two species and their conservation importance through awareness programs.
They also benefited financially. For example, we stayed in a local Tharu Home Stay instead of hotels and cottages to support and promote local businesses. Moreover, we hired a few local nature guides during the fieldwork and paid them daily wages. We also hired a four-wheel vehicle from a local person for travel inside the park. We frequently used the local autos or taxis for travel during our stay at the field site.

5. Are there any plans to continue this work?

Our effort has laid the strong foundation for the SCO and FC conservation in the far-western region of Nepal. However, ensuring the long term conservation of these species require active participation of local people and continue support of the conservation stakeholders. Therefore, I am looking forward to scaling up this work in collaboration with the national park, NTNC and ZSL for their long term conservation. I am also interested in expanding awareness programs to a large number of people while informing them about the conservation importance of SCO and FC.
In addition to it, Chitwan National Park and Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve were both historically important habitats for SCO and FC. However, their number is decreasing, and sightings have been infrequent (specifically of SCO). Unfortunately, conservation efforts targeting these species remain minimal. Therefore, I aim to expand my research and implement extensive conservation initiatives in other potential habitats across the lowland Terai, including these protected areas.

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

I shared my field experience, including local people's perceptions and knowledge of these species and the potential threats they are facing, through a blog post. The blog was published in Nepali language and featured in Setopati, one of Nepal's most reputable online news platforms. It was shared by over 1,100 users on Facebook, significantly increasing the visibility of our work and helping raise awareness among a broad audience.

This is the link to blog published in Setopati. (https://www.setopati.com/ghumphir/ghumphir-experience/349613?fbclid=IwY2xjawLId7FleHRuA2FlbQIxMQBicmlkETFvcnplZ2ZtV3dFYkVlYU1iAR4pv-FppFrTth22vBWZKWOy-RndpAJqd-8FafyflaHi5ClHr27CJRhThMqwxg_aem_a4nFXqSf4vF6GEB5n7TQAg).

I have also submitted a short summary of the project activities and results to the Himalayan Otter Network newsletter, which will be available online on the website of the Himalayan Otter Network. Moreover, we are currently working on a manuscript, which is targeted to be published in peer-reviewed journal.

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

Species-focused management and conservation interventions are essential for the long-term conservation of Smooth-coated otters and Fishing cats. In Suklaphanta National Park, we have observed significant wetland shrinkage and encroachment by invasive plant species, resulting in the degradation of critical habitats for these species. Therefore, as a next step, targeted habitat management interventions are essential for the protection of healthy otter and fishing cat populations. Furthermore, regular population monitoring is essential to track their status over time and to design evidence-based, species-specific conservation strategies.

Unlike protected areas managed by the army or government authorities, the Ghodaghodli lake is not strictly regulated, hence local people are allowed to enter the lake for fishing, picnic, social gatherings, and the extraction of wood and timber. As a result, unregulated influx of people may pose significant threats to sensitive species like otters and fishing cats. Therefore, raising extensive awareness among local communities about the ecological importance of these species and need for their conservation can help mitigate these threats. Additionally, a long term camera trapping survey is recommended to obtain verified evidence of the presence and behaviours of otters and fishing cats in the area.

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, we used the logo of Rufford Foundation in each and every awareness material prepared and printed in relation to this project such as in presentation, posters, stickers, and banner.

Besides it, we also acknowledge the financial support of the Rufford Foundation at the end of every awareness and community outreach program among local people and students.

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

1) Shree Krishna Devkota: He served as a research assistant in the project. He assisted in a sign survey, a camera trapping survey, a focus group discussion, and managing other informal meetings. He also helped with data collection and data entry.

2) Upadesh Bhatta: He served as a research assistant in the project. He helped during the sign survey, a camera trapping survey, a focus group discussion, and managing other informal meetings. He also helped with data collection and data entry.

3) Utsab Rayamajhi Chhetri: He assisted in organizing and facilitating community outreach and school awareness programs. He led the school awareness programs and conducted awareness class regarding SCO and FC for students. Additionally, he also contributed in designing the posters.
4) Kushal Shrestha: He assisted in designing the project activities, refining the awareness materials, and provided guidance during the implementation of project activities.

5) Sera Pariyar: She assisted in designing the project activities, refining the awareness materials, and provided guidance and suggestions during the implementation of project activities.

6) Mahananda Joshi: He is a nature guide by profession. He helped us during the sign survey and camera trapping survey.

10. Any other comments?

We are thankful to the Rufford Foundation for providing us with the financial support for the project. We are hopeful for the similar support and collaboration in the futures for the Otters and Fishing cat conservation in Nepal.