Project Update September 2024

Rufford I.D.: 43589-1
Project Title: Socio-Ecological Practices and Medicinal Plant Conservation in the Western Himalayas

Update:
1. The field team completed 4 weeks of intensive fieldwork in June 2024, including a 125 km trek over 2 weeks in the remote alpine villages of the Gori Ganga valley in order to speak with medicinal plant collectors, village elders, local priests, healers, and forest council leaders.

2. A total of 38 respondents were engaged, and 28 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted based on the study's principal research questions. Interviews were conducted in a total of 11 villages in the region.

3. Between July and September 2024, the data collected in the field was analysed and written up into a dissertation towards the completion of my Master's degree. The analysis followed an inductive, ethnographic approach which built on our first-hand observations in the field, and patterns and points of interest which emerged from the fieldwork. Three key findings from the analysis are as follows, which add significantly to the pre-existing literature in the field:

3a. The concept of traditional practice in medicinal plant collection is not merely an accumulation of historical knowledge, but a living and changing entity which combines different ancient and contemporary forms of resource governance. This includes ecological, social, and spiritual guidelines which overlap significantly with and in places incorporate state-led governance such as forest councils. This lays the groundwork for defining a distinct "local world" or ontology within which plant collection functions, which may interact synergistically or antagonistically with mainstream conservation policy and governance.

3b. Changes in traditional practices are being caused by a variety of internal and external factors, including changing livelihoods and ambitions, a change in demographic of plant collectors, changes in spiritual beliefs, and an increasing exposure to and interaction with global and regional markets and economies. This

has important implications for the ways in which plants are collected, and the study reports on how these impacts may differ from previous assumptions.

3c. An important symbol and driver of systemic change in the landscape is the discovery of the high-value natural commodity Cordyceps, which is a parasitic fungus harvested exclusively for trade to international markets. By changing the belief system, traditional practices, and trade networks associated with medicinal plants, this singular factor may have disproportionate impacts on plant diversity and conservation in the region.

4. Presently, the field team is working on a dissemination plan for the findings of the study. This may include audio-visual material, as well as print material to be distributed to the communities, taking into account certain feedback received from communities during fieldwork.

5. For dissemination at an academic level, we intend to edit the work for submission to a journal by December this year. We are still narrowing down specific journals where the work may have the most impact and reach. In addition to this, the primary author will work on popular communication material to be published in science and conservation magazines in India and abroad. These will be published after the journal publication, to safeguard intellectual property interests.

6. The project team is in the process of discussing next steps in the project, and planning a field season for the following year. As we suggested earlier, this was intended as a pilot project to allow further research in the region, in both the natural and social sciences. We look forward to sharing these plans with you once they are fully developed.