

“Volunteers for Nature: Developing and training local volunteers for nature education”



Bird Watching with children from Government school, Liyo Photo Credits: Deepshikha Sharma

Project Team:

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<https://www.ncf-india.org/>

Submitted To:

Snow Leopard Training Grant Program 2022
Snow Leopard Network



Project title: Volunteers for Nature: Developing and training local volunteers for nature education

Country & region where work will be carried out: India - Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh

Context:

More than 50% of the area of Himachal Pradesh, a northern Indian state, forms a part of the Great and Trans-Himalayan tract. Humans and wildlife have coexisted in these mighty landscapes, each playing their part in maintaining its ecological balance. The life of the people living here is deeply intertwined with ecological systems of the landscape. However, living in proximity with wildlife can pose certain threats to the agro-pastoral livelihoods, which can result in loss to both farmers and wildlife.

With an aim to conserve the rich fauna that these ecosystems rightfully boast of, while also working towards safeguarding people's livelihoods, Nature Conservation Foundation, (NCF), has been implementing conservation interventions with partner communities in Spiti valley of Himachal Pradesh for over two decades.

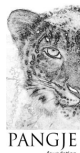
Educating the young minds about their landscape, biodiversity and linkages has been one of our key interventions for over fifteen years. We have been engaging students from 6th to 8th grade and supplementing their mainstream education with knowledge of local biodiversity and natural history. We have developed relevant education modules that deepens curiosity in children and youth about local flora and fauna and in the process, creates nature champions of the future.

Pre-pandemic modules involved our team interacting and conducting nature-related activities with school students frequently. However, post-pandemic, the travel restrictions and safety concerns have posed a challenge in reaching out to the children of remote parts of the valley. Most of these locations do not have stable cellular networks, limiting our online engagement as well. To continue our engagement with the children, we piloted the "Volunteers for Nature" program in Spiti Valley, where we developed and trained local volunteers to conduct nature activities within their village/region. We facilitated them with education toolkits which had resources and materials, easily customisable to their landscape.

Having received a good response from the volunteers and the students in Spiti, we want to develop and train a similar network of volunteers in the neighbouring eight villages of Hangrang Valley, Kinnaur. Hangrang Valley, like Spiti valley, is a crucial snow leopard habitat and faces similar challenges to education outreach. Here too, we will develop and train the volunteers to engage students of 6th to 8th grade, facilitated by education toolkits.

Training objectives:

With the aim to increase conservation awareness and appreciation for wildlife among youth and children, we aim to achieve the following objectives:



Snow Leopard Training Grant Program 2022



Objective 1: Develop and train 5 volunteers

Objective 2: Facilitate volunteers to conduct activities in all 8 villages

The trainings that will be offered to the volunteers are:

- Season Watch: Guided by a questionnaire, observing local plants and trees across seasons
- Bird Watching: Increase awareness of local bird species and their migration patterns, etc.
- Storytelling: Effective communication techniques to result in better engagement with children
- Journaling: Focusing on techniques to enable the children to capture their reflections and insights clearly
- Using Foldscope: Using foldable paper microscope to observe the miniature world

Approach:

The target audience are youth/teachers from Hangrang valley, Kinnaur of Himachal Pradesh. In- person training workshops will be held where they are guided on how to conduct the activities mentioned in training objectives (point 1 and 2). A toolkit, which consists of bird and seasonwatch booklets, landscape relevant story books, foldable microscope (Foldscope) and stationery, will help the volunteers conduct the activities independently and effectively.

We will be collaborating with a local NGO – Let's open a Book (LOAB) for training volunteers on storytelling skills. We will also work with internal resource persons who specialize in season watch and journaling. Our local teams are highly proficient at bird monitoring and they will train the volunteers to conduct the same.

Main expected results:

Output

- 5 volunteers trained
- Number of students engaged

Outcome:

- Has the perception of children changed towards nature?
- What is the retention rate of volunteers?

Resource team's expertise:



Nature Conservation Foundation has an experience of working with the communities of this landscape for over 25 years. Our local field staff, some of whom have been with us since inception, have a very strong understanding of the work we do and help us contextualise our interventions for the landscape. They have built good working relations with the communities and local administration. With their support we have been able to develop education modules relevant to the landscape and conduct nature related activities and camps each year since 2007. Our field team will be integral for facilitating the volunteers and executing this project on-ground

Results:

Under this project we were able to engage 80 children across 6 government schools, and have distributed 3 toolkits. Four teachers were also participated in the activities. Following schools participated in nature activities, exhibition and camp:

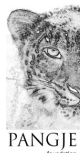
- i. Senior Secondary School, Nako (given toolkit, exhibition)
- ii. Primary School, Nako (in school activities, exhibition)
- iii. Senior secondary School, Liyo (given toolkit, held one day camp)
- iv. Middle school, Hango (given toolkit, in school activities)
- v. Govt. Senior Secondary School, Chango (exhibition)
- vi. Govt Primary School, Chango (exhibition)

When planning for this project, we were unsure how the pandemic was going to affect the schools in the landscape this year. We anticipated schools to be shut for most of the year (as it was last year) if the Covid cases did not subside. Thus, we planned for limited interactions with schools and primary engagement at village level by involving local volunteers in upper Kinnaur. Fortunately, the situation in the landscape improved and we were able to travel freely to the remote villages and conduct nature education activities with the help of our much-experienced team and local conservation leaders. The teachers from various schools also participated in most of the activities.

We conducted the following activities in 4 schools:

- i. Read aloud story telling
- ii. Snow leopard Quiz
- iii. Documentary viewing and discussion (Mountains | Hostile Planet & No water, No Village | Munmun Dhalaria)
- iv. Bird watching
- v. Seeing the miniscule world through foldscope
- vi. Viewing camera trap images (primary school children and exhibition)

We also held the exhibition on regional wildlife diversity in Kinnaur during the second week of November (15th Nov to 18th Nov 2022). It was a 4-day event held in Nako and Chango



villages. Along with a floating crowd of over 430 people, we also specifically engaged 4 schools. We held sessions with 50 children and 10 teachers, showed them the camera trap pictures, and informed them about the local names of the species and other conversations on where all these species are found in their own region, which pasture, which mountain range, which villages etc. A group of college graduates in Nako were curious about snow leopard behaviors, home range, diet, etc. The overall event was very interactive and it also piqued the interest of local news media that covered the whole event in for their channel News12 Live which garnered 12K views on the social media platform.

Since Kinnaur is a new landscape, we had to ensure permissions with schools and the process was a bit slow as it was very new for the schools to participate in nature activities and clubs. Because we could not get permission from one of the schools, we could not hold the day camp with them. However, next year onwards we expect the process will be much smoother as we have built networks with teachers and school heads this year.

Discussion:

As the pandemic situation improved this year, we changed the activities from the ones proposed under this project to better suit the situation and reach out to children more effectively. The initial idea was to train local volunteers to conduct the activities with children. However, our local teams were able to conduct the training themselves and engage students under various activities. Since this was a pilot intervention in this landscape, it was a learning curve for us as well. We had to build school contacts from scratch and get necessary permissions from the school authorities. We modified the content slightly to ensure the teaching material was relevant to the students. Having done similar children's engagements in Spiti, our team borrowed from their past experience in the field.

Some key learnings from this intervention have been:

1. Getting children's feedback/reflection to understand their interests is useful in planning future activities
2. Involving locals and teachers in executing the activities is highly beneficial for creating a smooth experience and safe space for children
3. Having women trainers can motivate girls to participate actively in the process

Some aspects we could do better:

1. Involving teacher coordinators in the planning stage for timely permissions and their school schedule
2. Developing robust evaluation parameters for future which can involve pre and post assessment methods. In this project we have taken students' reflections as a way to measure impact.

Next steps:

We engaged 6 schools in 4 villages. The landscape consists of 8 villages. There is scope to involve more schools in the future. We also need to engage teacher coordinators in the planning process so that the execution can be more streamlined. We have built the contacts with teachers and we will involve them early on in the process.

With the schools we engaged this year, we will continue to engage those schools in the coming years and hope to conduct more activities and day camps with them.

Photographs:



Kalzang Gurmet explaining the documentary to primary school children of Hangrang Valley School, Nako – Photo Credits Chunnit Kesang



Discussions on birds and Quiz activity with Government School, Liyo Photo Credits: Deepshikha Sharma



Chemi Lahmo engaging students and teachers during exhibition held in Nako, Photo Credits – Kalzang Gurmet



Tanzin Thuktan explaining about different species found in the Kinnaur landscape to students and teachers during exhibition held in Nako, Photo Credits – Kalzang Gurmet