

Rufford's

Strengthening Traditional Forest Management Institutions of
the Communities (Van Panchayats) for Biodiversity Conservation
in the Himalayas

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Executive Summary

The traditional system of management of forests around villages by communities through institutions called Van Panchayats in Uttarakhand State of India is, over the period of time, withering away due to indifference of bureaucracy, decreasing interest of the people in community management of resource and lack of knowledge about rights and responsibilities.

Rufford Laing Foundation has supported a pilot project “Strengthening Traditional Forest Management Institutions of the Communities (Van Panchayats) for Biodiversity Conservation in the Himalayas” to Nature & People, Research and Support Group (N&P), Delhi, India, to make a difference.

The project has been implemented with networking of important stakeholders including the State Forest Department. N&P collaborated with the Centre for Forestry and Natural Resource Development, Forest Training Institute, Government of Uttarakhand, for preparing a management plan for the selected Reethia Van Panchayat, Gairsain, District Chamoli, Uttarakhand, India.

Informal interaction and formal meetings with the community associated with the Reethia Panchayati Van, were regularly conducted for awareness and sensitization about the need of sustainable use of flora resources and conservation of fauna resource of the Community Forest.

A field study revealed that Reethia Panchayati Van has been managed so far in adhoc manner, with no management plan! It was the responsibility of the Forest Department to assist the Management Executive in preparing the management plan but the department could never attend to this responsibility. No improvement or development work has taken place in the forest. Merely two very small plantations were carried out during last 25 years. Management executive on their own decided about the sub-rules from time to time to carry out sustainable utilisation of the forests. In an assessment of the dependence of the people on forest for fuel wood, fodder, grazing and Non-Timber Forest Produce, the overall survey statistics indicates less than average dependence of the people on forest. As far as issues related to management and forest are concerned only five per cent of the people have good knowledge of Rules and Regulations while the rest have only limited or average knowledge; forest fire and encroachment problems are of limited nature; and negligible problem of poaching of wild animals in the forest.

As a capacity building tool for the stakeholders, a Rufford’s Guide to Management of Community Forests (Van Panchayats) of Uttarakhand State of India has been developed under the project. The Rufford’s Guide explains the rules and regulations, and the structure of management planning for Community Forests besides dealing with other relevant issues.

A landmark achievement of the project was, the people associated with the Community Forest agreed and passed a resolution about setting aside 212 ha of the Community Forest

(20 per cent) as a voluntary community conservation reserve in February 2006, initially for five years. People decided that nobody would disturb or damage the reserved area!

Final outcome of the project is a five year (2006-2011) management plan, called macro plan for Reethia Community Forest. It incorporate elements such as plantations to fill the gaps where unsustainable harvest had taken place in the past, control of soil erosion, water conservation, trainings and exposure tours and protection of forest and wildlife.

Next step forward to organise two trainings in this Joshimath block, in Chamoli district for the heads of the executives of the Community Forests to cover 97 persons here.

Secondly, 1500 copies of the capacity building book the Rufford's Guide to Management of Community Forests (Van Panchayats) of Uttaranchal State of India can be reprinted and distributed - one copy each to 1037 community forests in the district and to other relevant stakeholders.

Background

The Himalayan State of Uttaranchal has been immensely rich in biodiversity. Among fauna, the big cats, tiger and leopard, Himalayan black bear and Sloth bear, herbivores including Sambar, Spotted Deer, Musk Deer, Hog Deer, reptiles including King Cobra and Monitor Lizard, more than 500 species of birds, etc, and among flora vast stretches of deodar, pine and sal forests and highly valuable and important NTFPs including medicinal plants are found here. The world famous, Corbett Tiger Reserve lies in the State, besides several other national parks and sanctuaries. The State has 34661.52 sq km of forests which is 64.81 per cent of its geographical area.

A close look at the management of the forests in Uttaranchal reveals that while around 70 per cent of the forests are managed by the State Forest Department, 15 per cent of the forests are Community Forests and another 15 per cent are somewhat semi-degraded and degraded forests (called Civil and Soyam forests) managed by Revenue Department of the Government according to the Forest Statistics, 2001, published by the Forest Department.

Except for the wildlife protected areas - national parks and sanctuaries, in the 70 per cent forests managed by forest department, in the remaining 30 per cent forests virtually there is no focus on wildlife conservation!

The fact is that there are more than 12000 Community Forests in Uttaranchal and the State Government has made a policy that every village should have a Community Forest, which would be achieved by converting the semi-degraded and degraded forests (Civil and Soyam forests) to Community Forests and if need be even Reserved Forests too would be handed over to the communities. Thus, there would be at least 30 per cent of the State's forest under the management of the communities!

Community management of forests (Van Panchayats) is unique to Uttarakhand. The history of Van Panchayats goes back to early part of 20th century, when during 1910s a programme of Forest Management was launched, in which local population was debarred from using the forest resources. Consequently, there was much resentment amongst the local people as a result of which the British government agreed in 1931 to give back the forests around the villages to people for utilisation and management. Thus the concept of Van Panchayat was born.

Some of the Community Forests are also critically important wildlife habitats. It is known that many of the communities have done exemplary work in the past in protection of forests. Chipko movement (hug the tree so that a contractor cannot cut it!) has been a globally acclaimed conservation movement originated in the Uttarakhand region. Studies have concluded that several community forests are often in better condition than some of the Government controlled Reserved Forests.

Over the period of time, the management of forests by communities has weakened due to bureaucratic interference, indifference on the part of communities and lack of proper management planning. Unsustainable utilisation has resulted in loss and degradation of habitat and biodiversity, resulting at times, in animal-man conflicts.

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 of India was amended so that two new categories of protected areas have been introduced with significant community participation. These two categories are Community Reserve and Conservation Reserve. The Community Reserve aims at conserving not only wild flora and fauna but also the communities' conservation traditions and practices.

Project

Strengthening Traditional Forest Management Institutions of the Communities (Van Panchayats) for Biodiversity Conservation in the Himalayas

Objective

Wildlife Conservation and sustainable utilisation of flora resources in Community Forests in Uttarakhand State of India.

Methodology

1. Strengthening management of a selected Community forest through capacity building by literature and training
2. Focusing on wildlife conservation and facilitating creation of Community Conservation Reserve

Planned Activities

- Sensitisation and motivation of community through meetings to manage the Community Forest for conservation and sustainable utilisation.
- Review of specific issues of the selected community forest
- Institutional strengthening, capacity building and skill development in management through training and information dissemination. Creation of resource material and distribution to the community and other stakeholders.
- Training in micro-planning and, facilitating development of micro-plan which would include formation of Community Conservation Reserve and sustainable utilisation plan

Achievements

Networking with Forest Department

The State Forest Department is headed by Principle Chief Conservator of Forests. He was briefed about the project at the outset. He suggested that we may collaborate with the Centre for Forestry and Natural Resource Development, Forest Training Institute, Government of Uttaranchal, for preparing a management plan for the selected Van Panchayat.

The collaboration with the Centre for development of a Panchayat Van Management Plan materialized in July 2004. It is important to note here that a management plan so prepared would be acceptable to the government because one of its institutes is party to it.

Sensitisation and motivation of community

Informal interaction with the community associated with the Reethia Panchayati Van, Block Gairsain, district Chamoli took place at beginning of the project, in April 2004 with the purpose of knowing each other and introducing the project briefly. A formal Awareness and Sensitisation Meet (with the participation of the Community Forest Management Executive Members and other Stakeholders, e.g. Forest Department, Revenue Department, Research Institute, NGOs, and other Community Based Organisations) took place in July 2004. People were happy that for the first time somebody had thought of the Reethia Van Panchayat institution.

Subsequently, four on-site meetings with villagers were conducted in September 2004 in different parts of the project area. People were told about the importance of the rich biodiversity of the Community Forest which, was generally taken for granted.

Regular contact with people in general, and the Community Forest Management Executive members particular was maintained through telephone and personal meetings.

Field Study

A field study to (a) Review of Management of the Community Forest during last 25 years and (b) Assessing people's dependence on forest, perception of issues, role in management, views about conservation of wildlife etc, was initiated in June 2004 with the development of questionnaires and deputation of a field investigator. Ninety interviews were carried out (approximately 20 per cent sample) at the site for the primary research. The management history during last 25 years was culled out from the records of the management.

Research was completed in March 2005. The field study report was finalized in December 2005 and was subsequently shared with stakeholders. The summary of the study is as follows.

The study revealed that Reethia Panchayati Van has been managed so far in adhoc manner, with no management plan! It was the responsibility of the Forest Department to assist the Management Executive in preparing the management plan but the department could never attend to this responsibility. No improvement or development work has taken place in the forest. Merely two very small plantations were carried out during last 25 years. Management executive on their own decided about the sub-rules from time to time to carry out sustainable utilisation of the forests. In an assessment of the dependence of the people on forest for fuel wood, fodder, grazing and Non-Timber Forest Produce, the overall survey statistics indicates less than average dependence of the people on forest. As far as issues related to management and forest are concerned only five per cent of the people have good knowledge of Rules and Regulations while the rest have only limited or average knowledge; forest fire and encroachment problems are of limited nature; and negligible problem of poaching of wild animals in the forest.

Rufford's Guide on Management of Community Forests (Van Panchayats)

As a capacity building tool for the stakeholders, a Rufford's Guide on Management of Community Forests (Van Panchayats) of Uttaranchal State of India has been developed under the project. The Rufford's Guide explains the rules and regulations, and the structure of management planning for Community Forests. It also underlines other important laws of relevance to community forest. The final chapter of the Guide talks about the issues related to the community forests and suggests solutions. There is annexure on wild animals involved in man-animal conflict. Importance of these animals in the scheme of nature and reasons of conflict has been explained here.

The draft of the book was completed in March 2005 but it was decided that some important stakeholders should review the document. Useful suggestions resulted in incorporated in the document two new chapters

1. Community Forest Management Issues and suggested solutions
2. Wildlife Protection Act and why should people conserve wildlife.

Finalisation of the book was to be kept on hold because an amendment of Community Forest Management Rules was proposed to be legislated. This took place at the fag end of 2005 with the legislation, Panchayati Van Niyamavali 2005. The amended rules were incorporated in the book. The book was translated in local language (Hindi) and was published in May 2006.

Wildlife Conservation: Exposure Tour

Field visit of nine members of the executive of Community Forest Management and two officials of the Forest Department to Corbett Tiger Reserve was planned for May 2005. This could not materialize due to preoccupation of the people. Subsequent efforts to organize the exposure tour too did not succeed. Now the exposure tour has been scheduled and arranged for Mid-December 2006 and funds have been transferred from the Project to the management for use.

Management Planning Training

Management Planning Training and Management Planning Exercise were scheduled for June –July 2005. This could materialize in May 2006. Forest Department organized a one day training programme for the members of community forest management executive to explain the elements of forest management planning and how to go about it.

Management Plan

A five year (2006-2011) management plan, called macro plan for the Project Site, Reethia Community Forest has been prepared. It incorporate elements such as plantations to fill the gaps where unsustainable harvest had taken place in the past, control of soil erosion, water conservation, trainings and exposure tours and protection of forest and wildlife.

Centre for Forestry and Natural Resource Development, Forest Training Institute, and Forest Department of Government of Uttaranchal are trying to find funds to implement the plan.

Community Conservation Reserve

At several meetings with the people at the project site, importance of conservation of wildlife was impressed upon. People at large agreed that they do not hunt wild animals and thus they have no problem in conservation. But there was reservation among the communities regarding constitution/creation of Community Conservation Reserve under the law. They did not want any more government involvement in the Community Forest. They were afraid that it might result in losing flexibility in management. People were much more agreeable to voluntary conservation measures.

Finally the landmark development took place on 16 February 2006 when the people associated with the Community Forest agreed and passed a resolution about setting aside 212 ha of the Community Forest (Simar Tok in Compartment No 2) as a voluntary community conservation reserve, initially for five years. People decided that nobody would disturb or damage the reserved area!

Challenges and Solution

| Challenges | Solutions |
|--|---|
| Limited accessibility of the project site during monsoon and winter | Staggering the project activity and extension of project completion time |
| People's preoccupation round the year in one or the other agricultural or livestock activities | Staggering the project activity and extension of project completion time |
| A researcher hired for data analysis and preparation of report turned out incapable. | Principle investigator took the job in his hands and with the voluntary assistance of his wife prepared the report. |
| Management plan for the community forest was to be prepared in collaboration with Centre for Forestry and Natural Resource Development, Forest Training Institute, Government of Uttaranchal. The Center had low priority for the activity and kept postponing the activity. | Persistent follow up. |
| Reservation among the communities regarding constitution/creation of Community Conservation Reserve under law | Creation of voluntary community conservation reserve |
| Forest Management training and Wildlife exposure tour was scheduled twice but did not materialized due to people's preoccupation with their day to day activities. | Funds have been provided to the management. Training and exposure scheduled to Mid-December 2006. |

Changes

Community Mobiliser was not hired. The budget was used to pay Centre for Forestry and Natural Resource Development, Forest Training Institute, Government of Uttaranchal as institutional fee and field research.

An additional activity was the field study to (a) Review of Management of the Community Forest during last 25 years and (b) Assessing people's dependence on forest, perception of issues, role in management, views about conservation of wildlife. This was clubbed in Meets/Workshops

Project Budget

| Head of Expenditure | Cost/Number in £ | Total in £ | Equivalent in INR at the time of receipt |
|---|------------------|-------------|--|
| <i>Honorarium</i> | | | |
| Team Leader | 100 X 12 months | 1200 | 95400 |
| Community Mobiliser | 40 X 12 Months | 480 | 38160 |
| Travel & Subsistence | 80X 12 months | 960 | 76320 |
| Meet/Training /Workshop including creating and distribution of information book, Rufford Resource Book on policy and regulations related to community forests in Uttaranchal in local language & Resource Persons' honorarium | 600 X 3 | 1800 | 144000 |
| Communication | | 200 | 15900 |
| Computer time, photocopy, stationery and Report | | 200 | 15900 |
| Over head and contingencies | | 100 | 7950 |
| Total | | 4940 | 393310 |

Project Expenditure

| Head of Expenditure | INR |
|---|----------------|
| <i>Honorarium</i> | |
| Team Leader Centre for Forestry and Natural Resource Development, Uttaranchal Government | 86083 10000 |
| Travel & Subsistence | 81406 |
| a. Meets b. Field Study c. Rufford Book d. Resource Persons' honorarium e. Funds for Van Panchayat for protection and exposure tour | 176859 |
| Communication | 18428 |
| Computer time, photocopy, stationery and Report | 20534 |
| Total | 393310 |

Where next?

Capacity building in forest management for the head of the Executives of Community Forests (Van Panchayat) of all the Community Forests (Panchayati Forests) in the State comes out as of primary importance. The State is politically and geographically structured as State → Districts → Tehsils → Blocks → Villages. There are more than 12000 Community Forests in the State (Each of the 15000+ villages have/or are proposed to have their own Community Forest).

In the present project, we have worked at one community forest, Reethia, in Gairsain Block, Chamoli district, Uttaranchal State of India, for strengthening forest management.

Next higher level of the State is 'Block'. Thus to move up the ladder, we should work at the block level. We have obtained the statistics of community forests in the six blocks of the district.

Community Forests (Van Panchayats) in Chamoli District of Uttaranchal State of India

| Sl.No | Development Block | No. of Van Panchayats | Total Area in ha |
|--------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Pokhari | 116 | 3052.008 |
| 2 | Chamoli | 214 | 14258.957 |
| 3 | Karnaprayag | 189 | 5508.122 |
| 4 | Gairsain | 179 | 11380.773 |
| 5 | Tharali | 242 | 20560.359 |
| 6 | Joshimath | 97 | 133594.961 |
| Total | 6 | 1037 | 188355.180 |

Here, we find that Joshimath block has only 97 Community Forests but more than two thirds of the total area of the Community Forests in the district. It would be useful to target this block for capacity building.

Training is one important tool for capacity building. Thus, **it is advise-able to organise two trainings in this block for the heads of the executives of the Community Forests to cover 97 heads of the Executives of Community Forests (Van Panchayat) in the Joshimath block.**

Secondly, a capacity building book, the Rufford's Guide to Management of Community Forests (Van Panchayats) of Uttaranchal State of India, has already been created in the present project. This has been well received. Thus **for capacity building at the District level about 1500 copies of book can be reprinted and distributed - one copy each to 1037 community forests and to other relevant stakeholders.**

How will this take you forward?

The training and consequent capacity building would activate the management executives of the community forests to explore the possibilities of managing the forests in sustainable manner and to find funds for rejuvenating them, where there is need. They would know their rights and responsibilities better.

In the long run it might activate the indifferent Forest Department and Revenue Department to fulfil their responsibilities towards Community Forests. Even little attention to Community Forests would be a help.
