

Project Update: July 2023

Under the 1st Rufford Booster Grant, I am working in mixed savanna-agriculture landscapes in western Maharashtra, India on the links between land use change, pastoralism and biodiversity conservation.

Our goal is to invest in research in open natural ecosystems outside protected areas in India to develop a framework for sustainable and just conservation policies.



Between January and June 2023, my team and I conducted data collection activities for 3 months as planned. Similar to the first 6 months of the project, we collected two types of data with a subset of older households and new ones. This included socio-economic data on household dependence on semi-arid savannas and livestock movement and land use data. We used custom made GPS trackers which we deployed on livestock, and this helped us collect fine scale temporal and spatial data on how they move on a daily basis.



Image 1: A female goat with the GPS tracker tied around its neck.

Post-monsoon, our study site turns dry and surface water and fodder becomes scanty. A lot of pastoral households leave the landscape in this season and migrate to irrigated agricultural areas or hilly and thickly vegetated landscapes. However, we engaged with 39 households who do not migrate out in the dry season. We were able to understand their practices of pastoralism as well as monitor their livestock herds closely. We now have data on 108 herding days from 44 families.



Image 1. Livestock herds walk through fallows to get to harvested onion farms in western Maharashtra.

Secondly, we were able to conduct 16 in-depth interviews with middle and old age pastoralists where we noted the land use history of this pastoral landscape and how pastoralist institutions have changed over time. We especially collected information on the '*kurann*' system of management where collective access to fodder and water was historically present in two village clusters in the study area. These interviews gave us important insights into what could be more realistic conservation interventions in this landscape.



Image 2: Discussions with older pastoralists about history of land use and pastoralist institutions.

In February 2023, I presented the work done under this Rufford project as a part of a student annual seminar at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bengaluru, India.

There was an unprecedented gap of 3 months in the project duration starting April 2023 because of medical reasons. The project activities were delayed considerably due to this.

Upcoming work

During the next phase of this project, I will be conducting the following activities:

1. Mapping land governance in the study area based on available data from savanna mapping exercises, the Revenue and Forest departments.
2. Engagement sessions with pastoralists where knowledge exchange in the form of group discussions and participatory mapping will be attempted. The aim here is to validate or critically look at our project findings through the pastoralist community's perspective.
3. Continue our collaborations with regional NGOs like The Grassland Trust and work in advisory capacity on conservation projects in the landscape.