

THE MUD ON BOOTS PROJECT

IMPACT REPORT 2018



Sanctuary
NATURE FOUNDATION

**THE MUD ON
BOOTS PROJECT**

The Mud on Boots Project is a Sanctuary Nature Foundation programme designed to empower grassroots conservationists across India. Such individuals are identified by the Sanctuary team with support from a reliable network of wildlife conservationists from whom nominations are invited. Over a two-year period, the selected Project Leaders receive a monetary grant and other strategic support from Sanctuary. The Project has been developed to be flexible to the needs of each Project Leader and Sanctuary's support to each one is customised. This ensures that each project develops holistically. Nominations for the Mud on Boots Project are considered on a rolling basis, as and when funds become available.

Where are our Project Leaders?





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Anoko Mega



LOCATION: ROING DISTRICT, ARUNACHAL PRADESH

A member of the *Idu Mishmi* tribe, wildlife filmmaking enthusiast and nature conservationist, Anoko Mega is committed to the conservation of the incredible biodiversity found in his home district. His years of conservation work and community outreach have found him a place on the State Board for Wildlife, where he highlights pressing conservation concerns and lobbies for political intervention on these.

Documentation and Social Surveys

Through 2018, Anoko documented the biodiversity and landscape of the Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary, recording footage for his in-progress documentary on the Mishmi Hills hoolock gibbon. The *Idu Mishmi* tribe has a remarkable relationship with nature and so Anoko also interviewed forest officials, students and community members from Injonu, Cheta and Ezengo villages on this bond and their understanding of global issues such as climate change.

In the month of June, he also participated in an amphibian survey conducted by the Wildlife Institute of India to record any uncommon or new frog species. Anoko guided the team through the forest area in Lohit district for five days during this survey. No new species were recorded in this time.

State Wildlife Board Meeting

At the board meeting held in Itanagar in April 2018 and chaired by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (PCCF), Anoko appealed for a ban on air guns and guns in the district of Roing. Through his surveys and documentation work, he has found that guns are often kept on the pretext of self defence but are misused for hunting. The issue was noted by the PCCF and local forest officials were instructed to carry out an investigation on the matter. Anoko was also requested

Nominated by Rita Banerji

Founder, The GreenHub. A youth and community video documentation centre for recording environment, wildlife and people's biodiversity in Northeast India.



to conduct informal surveys in the district to uncover other issues.

In the subsequent months, Anoko discovered the rampant and illegal extraction of a wild medicinal herb from the Dibang and Mehao Wildlife Sanctuaries. The unregulated harvesting of *Paris polyphylla* for the international market has seen an influx of migrant labour that has increased anthropogenic pressure on the forest and impacted the population of this species. Anoko reported his finding to the PCCF and the local forest department, with a plea for action. The issue was also covered by local media and spurred police officials to keep a check on the illegal trade of *Paris polyphylla* in the Lower Dibang valley district.

Community Outreach

Through interactive workshops on subjects ranging from wildlife photography to gibbon biology, Anoko reached out to over 500 students and 25 teachers from nine villages in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. This outreach effort targets children and educators.

The Gibbon Corridor Project

In early 2018, Anoko identified six farms on which gibbon families are stranded in small patches of forest. Deforestation for agriculture has isolated these gibbons from the Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary. With no access to the sanctuary and limited food availability, these gibbons are doomed unless interventions are put in place.

With support from conservation anthropologist Dr. Sahil Nijhawan, and ethical tourism operator Iho Mitapo, Anoko has initiated a pilot conservation project on farm owner Eketo Mendo's land. Eketo has agreed to not just preserve the forest patch on his land that is home to a family of three gibbons, but to allow for gibbon-friendly plantation too. In October 2018, Anoko led 40 students from Jomen Tayeng Government Degree College on the first plantation drive. Eighty saplings of indigenous species that are part of the gibbon's diet were planted on Eketo's land. Anoko's long-term goal is to create a



corridor of trees that can connect the forest island to the Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary.

To further incentivise Eketo and prioritise gibbon conservation, Anoko is developing a low-impact tourism module. Tourists, in groups no larger than five individuals, are taken to see the gibbons at a per-head cost of INR 500 for common tourists and INR 1500 for those carrying professional photography equipment. Each tourist also plants an indigenous sapling at the end of their tour. The majority of the payment goes directly to the farmer, while the remainder goes towards maintaining a nursery of indigenous saplings and providing a stipend to Anoko. Sanctuary and Dr. Nijhawan are now creating literature and a code of conduct that will be distributed to each tourist to ensure that this experience remains regulated and does not cause stress to the gibbons.

The direct benefit to the farm owner from this initiative has been noticed by other members of the community, and two other farmers have expressed interest in collaboration along the same lines. Though in its early stages, this project has the potential to prove the might of community-led conservation initiatives.

Gibbons are the only non-human species of ape found in India. They are entirely arboreal and move through brachiation, swinging from tree to tree using only their arms.

In June 2018, Sanctuary organised for primate expert Dr. Narayan Sharma of Cotton College, Guwahati, to visit Abongo village and advise Anoko on the viability of the Gibbon Corridor Project.



The Flying Squad



**MEMBERS: ARPIT MISHRA, VIVEK MISHRA,
AND MUKESH TIWARI**
**LOCATION: SEONI DISTRICT, MADHYA
PRADESH**

The "Flying Squad" trio was brought together by IFS officer Sanjay Shukla during his posting in the Seoni Circle as the Chief Conservator of Forest in 2014. With the express purpose of tackling the severe human-snake conflict in the district, the team has grown over the past two years both in capacity and numbers. Apart from snake capture and release, the Flying Squad has initiated extensive awareness and outreach work.

Rescues

In 2018, the Flying Squad removed 390 snakes from human habitations and released them into the wild. 164 of these snakes were venomous. Additionally, 13 monitor lizards, three wild boars, four blackbucks, two spotted deer, one civet, 16 owls and one Yellow-footed Green Pigeon were rescued from residential areas in Seoni and released back into the wild. At the site of each rescue or capture, the team also dispelled myths and briefed the gathered crowd on appropriate behaviour when caught in human-wildlife conflict situations.

A third of globally estimated snakebite deaths occur in India. A path breaking project titled 'The Million Death Study' led by an international team of researchers found that about 50,000 Indians die from snakebite every year. Poor access to healthcare, lack of awareness measures, the low potency of anti-snake venom serum in India, and the prevalence of superstitions and unscientific treatments are amongst the drivers of this high death rate.



Community Outreach and Capacity Building

Through the course of the last year, the team both attended and facilitated numerous capacity building workshops and awareness programmes.

In February, the team conducted a workshop on ethical snake handling for the forest field staff. Later, in March, they participated in a training workshop conducted by Sanjay Shukla, Field Director, Kanha Tiger Reserve. During the workshop, participants were introduced to elements of the *Wild Life Protection Act 1972* that are relevant to snake rescue, removal and handling. In June, during a state level workshop on wildlife rescue conducted by Hosangabad Forest Circle in Panchmari, Project Leader Arpit gave a presentation on the work carried out by the Flying Squad, and also spoke about unethical snake handling practices. The workshop was attended by most state forest officials including the PCCF and APCCF of Madhya Pradesh. In the same month, the team conducted two snake identification and snakebite management workshops. One for the Seoni Police Department, and another for the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department. A similar workshop was conducted for members of the Rajiv Gandhi Institute in Lakhnadon in October. In August 2018, Sanctuary organised an intensive four-day workshop in collaboration with The Gerry Martin Project at the latter's field station in Hunsur,



While "snake rescue" has become a popular term in India, this most often refers to "snake removal". Scientific research is increasingly indicating that if a snake is removed from its "home range" and "released" elsewhere, it is likely to die. Thus, removing snakes from conflict situations and releasing them in sundry wilderness areas can not amount to "rescue". Unfortunately, limited research on the home range of different snake species and poor awareness amongst snake handlers dooms thousands of snakes every year. The Flying Squad was informed of this issue by Gerry Martin and now aims to displace as few snakes as possible.

Karnataka. Seven members of the Seoni Forest Department, including the three Mud on Boots Project Leaders, attended the camp. Under the guidance of expert Gerry Martin, the team polished their snake handling skills, addressed issues of crowd management, were introduced to aspects of snake biology and venom research, understood scientific methods of snake identification and took the opportunity to clear many of their own doubts. The majority of the team members are self taught snake handlers and do not have a scientific foundation to their skills. This workshop laid the basis of a more empirical and compassionate approach to snake removal, rescue and release. The team was fortunate to be able to attend another workshop conducted by Gerry Martin in December in the company of wildlife vets and forest guards of the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department.

Though Arpit Mishra, Vivek Mishra and Mukesh Tiwari are the original three members of the Flying Squad team, Sanctuary's support has extended to new members as and when they've joined the team.

As part of their outreach and awareness work, the team publishes an article related to snakes in Patrika newspaper every month.



Joydeb Pradhan



**LOCATION: HOWRAH DISTRICT,
WEST BENGAL**

Mentored by scientists and researchers from The Fishing Cat Project, retired government servant Joydeb Pradhan has successfully implemented a number of innovative conservation interventions over his two-year term as a Project Leader under the Mud on Boots Project. Most of these have worked to enhance community tolerance toward the fishing cat, which is seen as a competitor to fishermen and a predator of goats.

The Seed Goat Reserve

The "bank" of goats established by Joydeb in 2017 has proven undeniably successful. Using funds from the Mud on Boots Project, Joydeb has distributed pregnant goats to economically-challenged families that have in the past lost their livestock to the fishing cat. These families were given the goats with the understanding that any kids born to these would serve as a "seed bank" to replace others' goats in the event of future goat predation by fishing cats. Thus far 27 families have benefited from the programme. February is recognised as fishing cat month by scientists across the globe, and goats were presented to seven beneficiaries at a ceremony in February. Since the Seed Goat Reserve is essentially owned and managed by the community, there has been no false reporting of predation. It has also significantly reduced the community's frustration with waiting for government compensations for losses caused by wild animals.

Since the launch of the Seed Goat Reserve, a total of 39 goats have been distributed amongst 26 families from five villages.



The Fishing Cat Project is India's longest running conservation and research project on the fishing cat. It is a partner project of the Small Wild Cat Conservation Foundation as well as part of The International Fishing Cat Working Group. Since 2010, they have worked with conservation practitioners, activists, organisations, local communities and government departments to raise awareness on India's only wetland specialist felid and ensure its persistence.

The Fish Bank Project

Buoyed by the success of the Seed Goat Reserve, Joydeb is now working with his mentors to establish a similar project to diffuse resentment from fishing communities towards the fishing cat. Joydeb has identified 40 village ponds owned by 40 different fisher families. He proposes to stock each of these ponds with 10 kg. of fish fingerlings which cost INR 1400/- . The fishermen are free to harvest these fish on the condition that they return INR 1400/- from fish sales to the project every year. This money is reinvested into the community by stocking new ponds with the same amount of fish fingerlings. The fishing communities and the fishing cat are both expected to enjoy the profits of this venture. And what is this profit? It's fish! Joydeb has consolidated the instalments of his grant to take this forward, and the first fish fingerlings will be released into the selected ponds in May 2019.

Community Outreach

In April 2018, two primary school programs were held in Amta Block II at Sarada Primary School and Tajput Primary School. Various ecological concepts such as the web of life and the importance of wetland ecosystems were introduced to the students through games, quizzes and interactive sessions. Joydeb and his team members also showed video clips and shared audio notes of the biodiversity found in the Howrah district as part of a wildlife identification quiz. Each of these sessions concluded with a drawing competition on the topic of wetland ecosystems.



In 2010-11, the Fishing Cat Project documented 27 unnatural deaths of fishing cats within an 18 month period. These included deaths by poaching, being run over and retaliatory killings. Joydeb's community initiatives help address all these threats in a small way.

Roadkill Prevention

Linear alignments such as highways and railway tracks are proving to be deathtraps for wild animals. In Howrah, the fishing cat too is vulnerable to vehicles speeding on roads that cut across their wetland habitat. In early 2018, Joydeb identified a section of the highway in Amta Block II where fishing cats are exceptionally vulnerable to being run over. He recorded three fishing cat deaths here within a six month period and suggested creating cautionary road signage to erect along the stretch to indicate to vehicles to slow down. On Sanctuary's request, artist Smriti Choudhary volunteered her skills to this task and illustrated a wonderful sign that was sent to Joydeb. With funds from the Mud on Boots Project, Joydeb was able to print and erect nine of these boards along the highway. No fishing cat deaths have been reported here since.

The fishing cat is West Bengal's state animal. In 2018, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature down-listed the fishing cat from Endangered to Vulnerable, much to the ire of conservationists who believe the species and its habitat are under severe threat and deserve attention.



Manoj Gogoi



LOCATION: GOLAGHAT DISTRICT, ASSAM

A self-taught wildlife rehabilitator and an inspiring mentor to the youth from communities that live around the Kaziranga National Park, Manoj Gogoi's life-saving work has made him something of a local hero. Working with support from The Corbett Foundation and Sanctuary's Mud on Boots Project, Manoj tirelessly conducts dozens of wildlife rescues and community outreach workshops every year. Manoj now dreams of building a small but well-equipped conservation education centre on his land where he can expand his community outreach work.

Wildlife Rescues

In 2007, Manoj founded a one-man conservation organisation called NRSB (Naturalist for Rehabilitation of Snakes and Birds). Under NRSB he has created a network of over 100 community volunteers who alert him to wildlife in trouble and assist him during rescue operations. With their support, in 2018, Manoj was able to rescue 229 animals and birds that were in distress or conflict on the fringes of the Kaziranga National Park. A majority were nursed back to health and released into the wild.

Raktim Hazarika and Dhritiman Kakati, two student filmmakers from Assam, created a poignant short documentary film on Manoj and his relationship with the animals he rescues. "The Man Who Speaks Nature" is just over eight minutes long and can be viewed on YouTube.



On a sultry June day, Manoj received a rescue call from Bokakhat about a huge snake that had entered the house of Mr. Amrit Kumar Nath. Manoj rushed to the spot and found a monocled cobra trapped inside a bed. He assured safety to the panic-stricken family and carefully executed his rescue operation. He shifted all household items which the snake could take shelter in outside the house and also closed all possible escape routes. He then caught the snake using a hook and immediately released it in the nearby forest area.

Community Outreach and Awareness

In September 2018, Manoj conducted a wildlife awareness workshop for 100 residents from the village of Dumjaan. A wildlife documentary on the biodiversity of the Kaziranga National Park and an informative presentation on snakes were shown. Later that month, Manoj rescued an ornate flying snake from the school premises of Kaziranga High School after which he held a snake awareness program for 150 students. During this workshop Manoj busted myths about snakes, introduced the kids to the venomous and non-venomous snakes of the region, and shared important information about snakebite prevention and management. On September 22nd, on the occasion of World Rhino Day, Manoj, with members of NRSB and The Corbett Foundation held a rally for around 25 schools located near the Kaziranga National Park. A life-sized bamboo model of a rhino was taken from school to school during this rally. At each school, a representative placed an *Assami gamcha* on the rhino as a gesture of respect. In each case, this was followed by an interactive workshop on the Indian rhino.

In October, Manoj conducted a wildlife awareness program at the TG resort, Bogorijuri for 35 students from Guwahati. During this workshop Manoj spoke about the value of Kaziranga's biodiversity and the need to conserve this. He spearheaded a similar programme in November for 50 students of the Siljuri Tea Garden LP School.



In March 2018, Manoj collected an abandoned owlet that was found near a restaurant in the village of Rangajan, Kaziranga National Park. Hari Prasanna Gogoi, the gentleman who found the bird, had heard of Manoj's rescue work and thus reached out to him. As the owlet was only a few days old, it could not be identified immediately. At Manoj's rescue centre in Dumjaan, the bird was kept on a diet of small fish and pieces of meat. Over the next 35 days of close monitoring and intensive care, the owlet grew bigger and was soon recognisable as a Brown Fish Owl. In the fourth week of April, the owl was released and slowly trained to catch live prey. It now lives by the rehabilitation centre and can often be seen catching fish in the nearby creek.

Two months later, Manoj received a rescue call from Durgapur village about a chick that had fallen from its nest during a storm the previous night. The little bird was weak and close to death, but steadily recovered under Manoj's care. He was able to identify the chick as that of a Black-shouldered Kite, and released it into the Kaziranga National Park after 75 days of nurturing.



Though most of his rescues involve snakes and birds, occasionally Manoj also plays mother or nurse to abandoned or injured wild mammals. In November 2018, Manoj received news of four orphaned jungle cat kittens whose mother had been hit by a speeding vehicle on the notorious NH37. The little ones had not eaten in two days and were starving by the time they were found and rescued. Under Manoj's care, the four wild kittens have flourished and are now learning to hunt in the isolated, landscaped enclosure that he has built for them.

Rajeev Chauhan



LOCATION: ETAWAH, UTTAR PRADESH

A zoologist and the founder of the nonprofit Society for Conservation of Nature, Rajeev has a special interest in applied conservation, obstructing the wildlife trade, river conservation and freshwater turtles. Other than leading and assisting conservation research projects, Rajeev helms a group of volunteers called 'Chambal Mitras' who are engaged with community outreach, and work to monitor and report illegal activities in and along the Chambal river.

Community Outreach

Since February 2018, Rajeev and his team have reached approximately 2000 students from 16 schools in Etawah and three in Agra through conservation and wildlife awareness workshops and nature trails. The objective of these activities is to create a generation of children who are aware of, and invested in the health of the Chambal river ecosystem.

As a part of this school awareness program, Chambal Biodiversity Information Centres, an exhibition of posters and interactive charts on aquatic life and biodiversity of the Chambal river, have been established in 20 schools around the National Chambal Sanctuary.

Each of these government schools has also participated in the creation of mini-forest patches within their school premises. A total of 165

Amongst other rare species, the Chambal river is home to two exquisite endemic and endangered animals – the gharial and the Gangetic river dolphin. During a visit to Rajeev's field sites in December 2018, Sanctuary was able to see viable populations of both.



The Chambal river runs for a length of 965 km. through the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh before converging with the Yamuna river. Illegal sand mining and rising pollution are the major threats to the river system's biodiversity.

saplings of indigenous species have been planted and the students have taken charge of nurturing these.

In 2018, awareness workshops on the state of the environment, the various conservation issues that plague the Chambal landscape and the need for vigilance against illegal activities were conducted by Rajeev and his team of Chambal Mitras in 21 villages around the National Chambal Sanctuary. In the past six months, eight new Chambal Mitras from eight different villages have also joined the Chambal Mitra network.

Vigilance and Rescues

Last year, 11 snakes, one monitor lizard, three civet kittens and one black buck were rescued from the villages around Chambal in the district of Etawah by community members and Chambal Mitras. The rescued animals were handed over to the forest department for appropriate care and rehabilitation.

Rajeev and the Chambal Mitras are also trying to combat the illegal but powerful sand mining mafia by reporting the illegal movement of JCBs and



Rajeev was nominated to the Mud on Boots Project by award-winning conservationist Purna Singh Bindra. He is a member of the IUCN-Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, IUCN-Crocodile Specialist Group and IUCN Commission on Education and Communication. He is now also serving as a Conservation Officer on the Biodiversity Conservation and Ganga Rejuvenation, WII-NMCG project.

trucks on the river bank in the Etawah district. The forest department is well acquainted with the issue, and has responded to the complaints by taking action on 15 tip-offs. As a result, they have seized over 100 trucks of illegally mined sand. In October 2018, the forest department arrested two men with one quintal of illegally caught fish on the basis of information shared by Rajeev.



S. Chandrasekaran



LOCATION: NILGIRI DISTRICT, TAMIL NADU

A retired bank executive, Chandru went from being a hobby birdwatcher to leading a survey on the status of vultures in the Moyar Valley with a little help from the Mud on Boots Project. Since February 2017, Chandru and his team of volunteers have been walking the harsh landscape of Sigur plateau in the buffer of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and areas of Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. Here, they survey roosting and nesting sites of four vulture species and document indigenous knowledge of the landscape. Chandru also serves as a resource person for numerous workshops and consultations organised by various government and non-government bodies.

Vulture Surveys

Chandru and his team surveyed potential nesting areas in Jagulikadavu, Araikadavupatti, Kallampalayam, Tengumarahada and Siriyur from January to May 2018. They observed a decline in the nests of White-rumped Vultures in 2018, as compared to 2017. Eighteen nests were found in these sites; a poor number against the 27 nests that were found in the same areas just last year. The team also observed two nests of the critically endangered Long-billed Vulture on a cliff on the north eastern slopes of the Nilgiris. This year too no active nests were found in Siriyur area which has been inactive since 2016 for unknown reasons.

Vulture surveys were again conducted in Aadicombar, Jagulikadavu and Sigur plateau,

The presence of wild elephants is a major factor that affects the viability of vulture surveys in the Moyar Valley as the vulture nesting sites can only be accessed by foot. The team often encounters wild herds of elephants when they're in the field and have to remain on high alert to avoid confrontation.



In December 2018, Chandru's team provided tables and chairs donated by well-wishers from Mumbai to the Government Tribal Residential School in Aanakatti, and sports equipment donated by Y's Men Club of Sathyamangalam to the Government Tribal Residential Schools in Kallampalayam and Hallimoyar. Many of the schools in these tribal hamlets, from where the majority of forest watchers are employed, lack the most basic equipment and willing teachers.

(the buffer zone of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve) from July to December 2018. Visits were also made to Kotagiri, Ebbanad and Udthagamandalam (Ooty) to identify any new locations of vulture nests that could be surveyed during the breeding season. During these surveys, a few old Indian Vulture nests were observed on the Ebbanad slopes. The team sighted seven White-rumped vultures and one Red-headed Vulture in the Araukadavu valley near Aadicombari and eight White-rumped Vultures in the Jagaulikadavu Anti-poaching Camp. On the second day of the survey in August, Chandru and his team reported a congregation of 22 White-rumped vultures near this area.

In the month of September and October 2018, the team conducted a survey in Mangalapatti of Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve and found that vultures use this as a foraging site. This was expected as the Moyar Valley is believed to be the last stronghold of Gyps vultures in southern India. This landscape, with its unique location and features, supports a stable, albeit small, population. More than 20 vultures were seen here. During another visit to the Anaikal beat in Mudumalai Buffer Zone, the team encountered six Red-headed Vultures and 11 White-rumped Vultures feeding on a chital kill. The next day a congregation of over 37 vultures including 31 White-rumped Vultures, four Long-billed Vultures and two Red-headed Vultures were seen near the mountain slopes opposite to the Anaikal temple.

The team also reported a sighting of a juvenile Himalayan Vulture in Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve near Bannari in 2018. Over the last two years the team has reported a decline in the number of nests of White-rumped Vultures while also observing changes in their nesting site preferences. On a positive note, the team was happy to report that there were frequent wild kills due to presence of large predators in the area and that there is no dearth of food for vultures here.



Community Outreach

In February 2018, Chandru and his team interacted with individuals from the schools at Kallampalayam and Hallimoyar on the north-eastern slopes of the Nilgiris, with the indigenous residents of Aanakatti village and school, and community members from Pudukkadu in Mudumalai Buffer Zone. These members of the local community said that they have not observed any major change in the vulture population in recent years.

After the end of the breeding season in May, the team conducted vulture surveys and interactions with indigenous communities in the Sigur range of Nilgiri North Region, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. In August, Chandru and his team conducted questionnaire surveys with locals and forest staff members from the tribal hamlets of Bokkapuram and Tiruchikadi. These interactions continued through September, October and November.

Various insights regarding habitat choices, nesting preferences and perceived changes in vulture population and behaviour were gathered during these discussions. The community members who were surveyed also spoke about changes in the forest and climate over the years.

Stakeholder Management

In January 2018 Chandru coordinated with the Government Arts College, Ooty, Raptor Research and Conservation Foundation and the Tamil Nadu Forest Department to draw up a plan for a synchronised Vulture Census for all the southern states in 2018. He also assisted the Forest Department to draft a plan for vulture conservation for Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve, which includes concrete measures to enhance the habitat niche for vultures. In June 2018, Chandru and his team visited the new forest officers in Erode and Udthagamandalam. During these meetings, the team provided a synopsis of their work and shared suggestions with the new



administrators. In August, the team also met with the new Field Director, Mr. Ulaganathan of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and introduced him to their work.

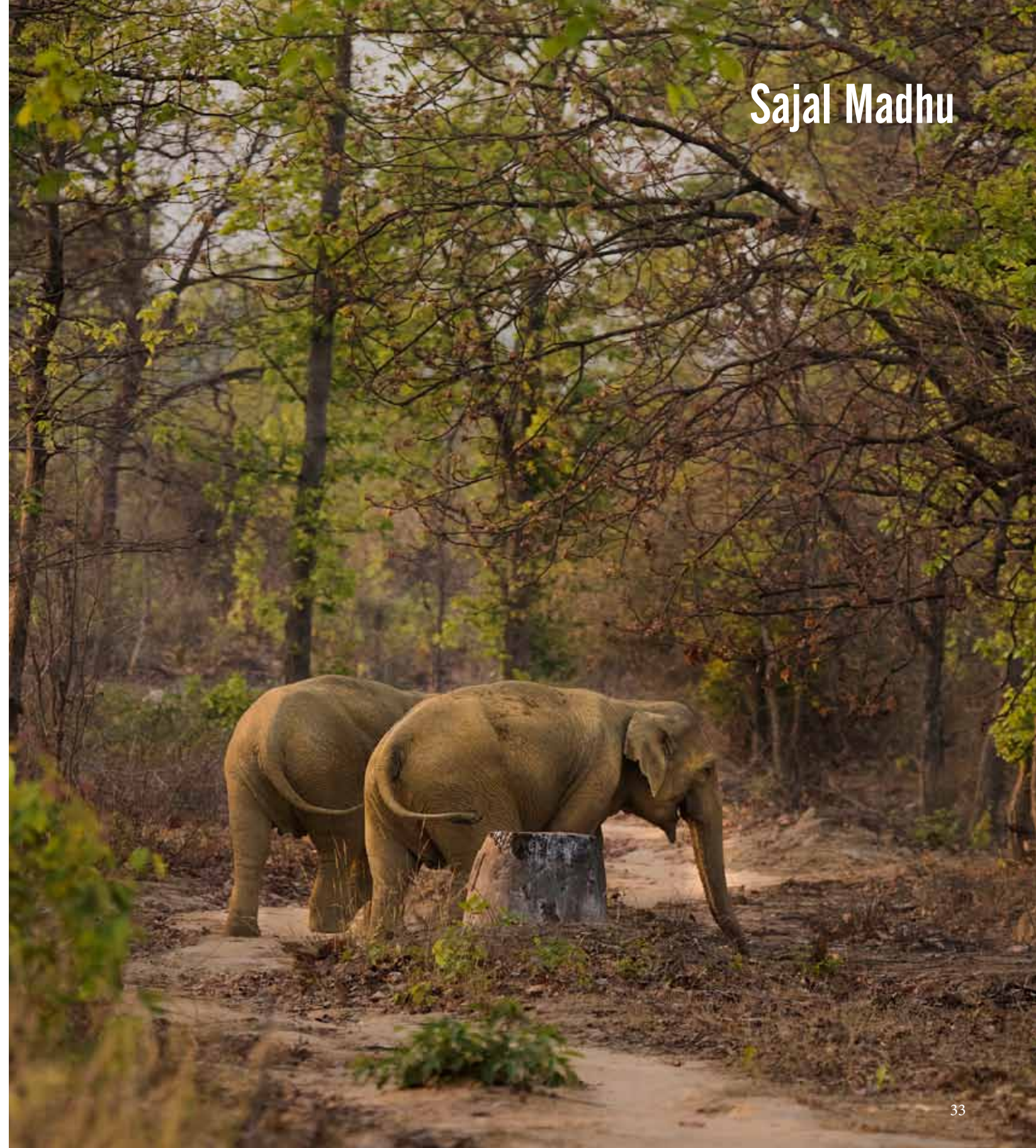
In the last week of December 2018, the team interviewed locals in the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve to learn of the presence of vultures in the area located on the border of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, and also conducted a nest survey of White-rumped Vultures in Jagulikadavu.

In January 2018, Chandru attended a workshop, 'Securing Vulture Population of Southern India-2018', organised by Government Arts College Ootacamund in collaboration with the Tamil Nadu Forest Department and sponsored by Raptor Research and Conservation Foundation, Mumbai (RRCF). During this workshop Chandru presented a paper on the significance of "sweep surveys" in estimating population of vultures confined to a single but vast area.

In February 2018, Chandru gave a lecture on the importance of the Moyar Valley from the perspective of vulture conservation efforts to the National Tiger Conservation Authority evaluation committee during their visit to Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve.

In June 2018, Chandru gave a talk on the significance and strategic importance of Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve in Conservation of Critically Endangered Species (including vultures) at a seminar organised by TRAFFIC in collaboration with Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. The talk was well received.

Sajal Madhu





LOCATION: RAIGARH DISTRICT, CHHATTISGARH

A homegrown activist, Sajal Madhu is a critical link between communities impacted by human-elephant conflict (HEC) and the state machinery. Over the years, he has won the confidence of villagers across the Dharamjaigarh block of the state by assisting them with compensation claims, helping them protect their fields and relentlessly fighting for their rights. He has similarly proved an asset to the forest department by serving as a link between them and the community. On the basis of Sajal's reports, Sanctuary has labeled the ongoing conflict between humans and wild elephants in Chhattisgarh as nothing short of a crisis. With a mounting death toll, negligible response to pleas for help from the central government, and absence of big NGOs, Sajal's work is undoubtedly life-saving.

HEC Mitigation and Reporting

Since 2017, Sajal has been working with Project Coordinator Maitreyee Mujumdar to file Right to Information (RTI) applications on HEC in Dharamjaigarh. According to the data acquired through these RTI applications, 16 humans and five elephants were killed in human-elephant conflict in the Dharamjaigarh block in 2018 alone. Sajal personally reported most of these incidents and guided the victims' families through the government compensation process.

Distressed by government apathy to the death of their loved ones and the damage caused to crop and property by wild elephants, around 800



In 2018, Sajal filed compensation claims with the government on behalf of around 60 families. He was also felicitated with the 'Neelkanth Samman' in New Delhi on November 26, 2018. The award was bestowed upon him by Kabir Ke Log, a local organisation from Patna and Centre for Dalit Studies, India Foundation, for his "outstanding contribution towards a democratic ethos and constitutional commitment".

villagers blocked parts of the National Highway passing through Sithra and Khargaon on October 6, 2018. This "*rasta roko*" protest received local media attention and only came to an end when members of the forest department promised to take stronger steps to mitigate the conflict. Sajal supported the villagers during the protest but also cooperated with the forest department to find a way to end the agitation and put new mitigation measures in place.

Based on Sajal's detailed reporting on the HEC crisis in Chhattisgarh, Sanctuary wrote to India's Ministry of Environment and Forest and Project Elephant requesting urgent intervention and action. An insipid response to this letter came from an official of Project Elephant but follow up queries were not answered or acknowledged.

Community Outreach and Vigilance

Through January 2018, Sajal stayed in contact with Forest Rangers from six ranges in Dharamjaigarh about the movement of elephants that had entered the district. He passed this information on to the relevant villages to warn them of potential encounters.

In April 2018, Sajal conducted an awareness programme for 700 residents of Narkalo village. The programme included a film screening followed by tips on how to avoid conflict and an interactive session. One thousand residents attended a similar program in the village of Baisa.



In June, following elephant disturbance in the villages of Jaldega, Kumarta and Kuma that saw severe damage to 28 households, Sajal facilitated the villagers' plea for voluntary translocation under the Pradhan Mantri Atal Awas Yojana. With Sajal's help, eight families from the three villages visited the Panchayat Bhawan in Chapkachar to put forth their request and meet with the District Collector. Sajal attended this meeting and then took the proposal forward to Divisional Forest Officer Pranay Mishra, with whom alternate sites for relocation were also shared.

An initial analysis of the 12 RTI responses received by Sajal indicates that human deaths (from human-elephant conflict) in Dharamjaigarh have risen over a ten-year period. In 2009, three people were killed in the conflict, while in 2018, 15 people were killed. Elephant deaths have remained more or less the same in this time frame, with an estimated 35 elephants lost to conflict in the past decade.

In October 2018, he also helped the community of Jaldega village submit a written request for safe relocation and compensation for damages made by elephants to the Sub-divisional Officer. These requests are still being processed by the system.

In August 2018, Sajal collaborated with the Forest Department to organise a plantation drive in the fragmented forest patch of Medharmar in Dharamjaigarh on the occasion of Van Mohotsav.

In November 2018, subsequent to the previously mentioned "*rasta roko*" protest, Sajal along with officers from the forest department conducted an awareness camp under the former's campaign – Haathi Sabka Sathi - in the village of Baisa.



Amongst the many deaths and incidents of damage that Sajal has recorded and reported to relevant authorities, two stand out:

A villager named Sukalu Rathiya was injured in an elephant attack on November 30, 2017 in Kosabwadi. Sajal admitted Sukalu in Dharamjaigarh Civil Hospital where he received treatment for a month. Unfortunately, Sukalu did not make a full recovery from his injuries and was readmitted to the district hospital where he lost his life on July 6, 2018. Sajal went to the police station to inform the police that the death was caused by the elephant attack that took place the previous year and assisted Sukalu's widow with the paperwork to apply for compensation.

On the evening of April 28, 2018 a family of four, comprising two children and their parents, was killed by an elephant in the village of Koylar. Sajal took charge of the situation by being the first responder to the site, calling the police and seeing to it that the dead bodies were brought back to the community on the same night. He also personally apprised the Chief Conservator of Forest of the incident and ensured that the surviving family members received prompt compensation.



**Tsuseki Yimchunger and
Limthure Yimchunger**



LOCATION: KIPHRE DISTRICT, NAGALAND

Bhutan Glory Eco Club

The Founders of the Bhutan Glory Eco Club, Tsuseki and Limthure are both alumni of The Green Hub. Growing naturalists, engaging educators and dedicated photographers, the two have nurtured a culture of conservation in their village of Fakim that abuts the Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary. Over the past two years, Tsuseki and Limthure have organised and conducted workshops, nature trails, plantation drives, lectures and camera-trapping exercises, often in collaboration with the state forest department.

Community Outreach and Awareness

Alongside the regular, monthly activities of the Bhutan Glory Eco Club, the Project Leaders extended their sphere of influence within the community.

On June 4, 2018, the Bhutan Glory Eco Club in collaboration with the Nagaland Forest Department distributed 4000 saplings of native trees such as alder and wild neem to six villages on the fringe of the Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary. These saplings were planted the next day, World Environment Day, by eco clubs in each of the villages. Later that month, Tsuseki and Limthure took 15 college students to the Community Conserved Area around Fakim village for a biodiversity appreciation trail. In August 2018, Tsuseki led 34 women from Fakim village on a day-long cleanliness drive through the entire village during which they understood and then explained problems of plastic pollution to residents. In the same week, 68 students from the town of Pungro also visited Fakim to meet with Tsuseki and learn about the importance of wildlife conservation. Tsuseki was also invited by the forest department to give a talk on conservation to a small gathering of residents, including a few members of the village council, of Thanamer village.



Their unflagging spirit and incessant community outreach work has made Tsuseki and Limthure local heroes. In 2018, they reached out to approximately 250 people in the Kiphire district through their workshops, trails and other events.

In September, the Project Leaders held an interactive workshop on bird calls and bird behaviour for 24 students of the Government Primary School in Fakim. Later in the month, they also led 54 students from MT Horeb School in Pungro on an eco-educational tour and nature trail.

On October 8, 2018 the Bhutan Glory Eco Club, along with the Wildlife Division of Kiphire celebrated wildlife week. On this occasion, Mr. Joseph, a member of the club, gave a lecture on big cats and the threats they face. Seventy four people, including club members, *gaon burras* (village elders) and forest guards attended this session, which was followed by a traditional game of khoh and volley ball.

To combat excessive logging in the unprotected forest areas of Fakim during winter, Tsuseki conducted a preventive workshop on "Disturbed Forests" in November 2018. During this session he explained the importance of preserving trees for the long-term health of the land. At the end of the workshop, participants pledged to use natural resources judiciously.

A fresh influx of tourists to Fakim has created hospitality opportunities for the community but also led to a surge in plastic waste. With this in mind, the Project Leaders arranged a workshop on plastic



waste management for students and an intensive workshop on housekeeping and hospitality for community members who are opening homestays in the village.

Biodiversity Documentation

In March 2018, the Project Leaders spearheaded a project to document the biodiversity of the Community Conserved Area that surrounds the Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary through the Bhutan Glory Eco Club and in collaboration with the village council of Fakim. Six members from the Fakim village council participated in this project and were taught basic photography. Following this, Tsuseki, Limthure and the volunteers placed camera traps in delineated areas of the Community Conserved Area in the months of March and June. The camera traps recorded species such as barking deer, yellow-throated marten, clouded leopard and stump-tailed macaque.

Tsuseki also independently participated in a number of surveys conducted by the state forest department. He was involved with the Blyth's Tragopan Census in March, a Tiger Population Estimation Survey in April, the mapping of the Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary in May, and the delineation of an eco-sensitive zone around the sanctuary in October 2018.



Uras Kha



**LOCATION: JAISALMER DISTRICT,
RAJASTHAN**

An unschooled goatherd from the village of Nimba that lies within the vast Desert National Park (DNP), Uras Khan was introduced to the joy of bird watching and the impending extinction of the Great Indian Bustard by Dr. Pramod Patil in 2015. Soon after, he committed himself to bird conservation initiatives and began to assist Dr. Patil, who then nominated Uras to the Mud on Boots Project. Unfortunately, due to personal matters the former was unable to mentor Uras through the project period. As a result, Uras' work has been restricted to community outreach and patrolling of Great Indian Bustard enclosures within the Desert National Park.

In March 2019, Uras spent a week with Sanctuary Wildlife Service Award Winner Govardhan Meena in Ranthambhore! Govardhan runs Sanctuary's Tiger Express, a conservation awareness van that he takes from village to village in a community outreach initiative that includes workshops, movie screenings, health camps and nature trails. Sanctuary believes that spending time with Govardhan will encourage Uras to undertake community outreach measures within his own village.

Without a mentor and with the constraints posed by illiteracy, Uras' future has been a cause of concern for us at Sanctuary. In November 2018, Project Coordinator Maitreyee Mujumdar was able to secure a position as a Research Assistant with the Wildlife Institute of India for Uras. However, during Sanctuary's field visit to the Desert National Park, Uras expressed a keen interest in ecotourism and displayed a sharp eye and knowledge of birds. Following this field visit, Sanctuary has been able to secure a six-month paid apprenticeship for Uras with the head naturalist at a leading conservation tourism camp in Rajasthan. With the skills he learns through this experience, we hope that Uras will be able to establish himself as a qualified and ethical nature guide for the increasing number of tourists and photographers who are visiting the Desert National Park every year. Uras' apprenticeship is slated to start in April 2019.



Though he is a spectacular bird watcher with keen eyesight, Uras did not own a pair of binoculars. In January 2019, supporters responded to the Mud on Boots Project's call for equipment donations and a pair of second-hand Nikon Aculon binoculars was sent for Uras by storyteller Pankaj Singh.

Uras also owns a DSLR camera that was gifted to him. Though he's a good photographer, he faces a challenge when it comes to transferring images from his camera as he does not have access to a computer. As a result when Sanctuary visited Uras in December 2018, he had two memory cards full of images and was unable to take any more pictures. Our Project Coordinator brought these back to Mumbai, downloaded the images and sent the donated binoculars and the memory cards back to Uras with a friend who was travelling to Jaisalmer.

Enclosure Patrolling

The Rajasthan Forest Department has erected enclosures within the Desert National Park for the safety of the Great Indian Bustard. These keep out stray cattle and stray dogs from the villages within the park and control encroachments. Over the past year, Uras has dedicatedly patrolled 14 of these enclosures, walking upto 20km. a day on foot. Breaks in the enclosure and any suspicious activities were reported to the forest department. Uras has also recruited three young men from his village to join him in patrolling.

Given his interest in natural history, Uras has been documenting the biodiversity of the Desert National Park. He now has a wonderful repository of wildlife images, some of which will be published in Sanctuary Asia magazine in 2019.



The critically endangered Great Indian Bustard (GIB) is the flagship species of the Desert National Park. Fewer than 150 individuals survive in the world, with the only viable population, of about 100 birds, found in DNP. Collision with overhead powerlines is the most immediate threat to the survival of the species. In December 2018, the Sanctuary Nature Foundation launched a campaign to save the Great Indian Bustard in collaboration with The Corbett Foundation and Conservation India. The campaign asks that India's Ministry of Power place the overhead powerlines that cut across GIB habitat underground. Since the campaign was launched, over 11,000 people have signed the petition and the issue has received wide national coverage in newspapers, magazines and web portals. The attention generated by the campaign has also spurred action in the corridors of power. The Ministry of Environment and Forest has sent urgent Demi-Official letters on the issue to the states of Rajasthan and Gujarat, as well as to the Ministries of Power, and New and Renewable Energy. Simultaneously, the Rajasthan High Court has issued a notice to the central and state government on the matter.



Zakhuma Don



Writer Sejal Mehta chose Zakhuma as the protagonist of her children's book "Walking In The Wild". This digital book was illustrated by Barkha Lohia and published by Pratham Books. You can read the book on www.storyweaver.org.in

LOCATION: WEST PHAILANG DISTRICT, MIZORAM

As quiet and elusive as the rare wildlife he documents and protects, Zakhuma Don is a forest guard in the Dampa Tiger Reserve. Like several of our Project Leaders from the Northeast, Zakhuma is an alumni of The Green Hub. Along with the anti-poaching patrols that he carries out with his colleagues, Zakhuma also documents the biodiversity of this lesser known Protected Area.

Video Documentation

In January and February 2018, Zakhuma visited Shivnagar and Silsury, two *Chakma* villages located on the border of India and Bangladesh. Here, he documented the life and culture of the resident *Chakma* tribe, including their indigenous architectural style.

Zakhuma also spent five days in the core area of the Dampa Tiger Reserve documenting the reserve's wildlife. He captured various species such as the small-clawed otter, Striated Heron, Slaty-backed Forktail and Bay Woodpecker.

In March, Zakhuma concentrated on anti-poaching initiatives, spending 12 days at Malpui, Thaichang and Chika Anti-Poaching Camps. According to Zakhuma, these areas have been vulnerable to poaching since 2012 and have lost much of their wildlife. However he was still able to document a number of species, including the hoolock gibbon and Great Hornbill.

In the latter half of 2018, Zakhuma's patrolling duties took him to Anti-Poaching Camps near Lallen and Sazuk, where he was able to add new images



to his repository, including capped langurs, Pallas' squirrels and a number of amphibians brought out by the rains.

Community Outreach and Surveys

In January 2018, Zakhuma attended the Gram Sabha meeting regarding the voluntary relocation of Serhmun village. Serhmun comprises of 120 Mizo households and is situated at a distance of about five km. from the Dampa Tiger Reserve. Villagers insisted on the relocation due to scarcity of water in their village. The meeting was attended by the community and the Divisional Forest Officer, DC and Assistant Conservator of Forest of the reserve. Zakhuma took up the duty of measuring the village area and agricultural lands of the residents in order to draft the relocation package.

In May, Zakhuma undertook the challenging task of the Tiger Estimation Survey with scientists from the Wildlife Institute of India. This involved scientific grid mapping of 890 sq. km. area of the Dampa Tiger Reserve, including the core and buffer area, creating transects, and filling data sheets with records of carnivore scats, pug marks and hoof prints. The survey will continue through March 2019. In June, the survey team became stranded at an Anti-Poaching Camp for four days due to heavy rain. Zakhuma used this time to conduct awareness camps for the students of the Baptist Church in West Phaileng. During this workshop, Zakhuma held painting competitions for the younger children and an orientation on the basics of photography for the older children.



The plight of forest watchers and forest guards in India is no secret. Many work for decades on a daily wage basis, receive no benefits or security, and are grossly underpaid. In September 2018 we found that salaries had not been paid to Dampa's field staff for over six months. There is an urgent need to simplify the complicated allocation and release of funds to India's Protected Areas to ensure that the frontline of our conservation movement do not suffer because of bureaucratic inertia.

The nature of Zakhuma's job and his remote location make him a difficult person to stay in touch with. The Mud on Boots Project operates on good faith and trust, so in the weeks when Zakhuma is unreachable, we simply touch base with his mentor and colleague, scientist T.R. Shankar Raman to ensure that Zakhuma is alright!



Marina Juliet and Sandhya Rani



MARINA JULIET AND SANDHYA RANI MYSORE DISTRICT, KARNATAKA

Marina Juliet and Sandhya Rani are young women from Rathnapuri village in Karnataka and are working under the guidance of The Gerry Martin Project to address human-snake conflict as well as bring conservation awareness to their community. The two are learning how to handle venomous and non-venomous snakes, curating workshops for children and learning about the epidemiology of snakebite in order to assist with a long-term study on Russell's viper bites in India.

Community Outreach and Awareness

In June, Sandhya and Marina conducted the first of a series of awareness camps for children from Rathnapuri village. During this camp, the 21 participants undertook a cleanup of the banks of the Devikere lake, which is a community common, and discussed the problem of plastic in the world.

In September, they conducted a day-long workshop on snake bite management for 30 students from Rathnapuri. The two Project Leaders gave a presentation on common snakes of India, snakebite prevention and management, and introduced the kids to customised games on the issue. The children were also encouraged to enact different scenarios revolving around snakebite and create skits on how to handle situations of conflict.

In November, Sandhya and Marina conducted a follow-up camp on plastic recycling. During this workshop the kids from Rathnapuri were taught to make various useful items from plastic waste such as plastic bottle brooms, chairs and dustbins.



Public speaking was initially an intimidating task for the two Project Leaders. As the two developed workshop modules with Chandini Chhabra, they also began to practice their presentation skills. They now confidently conduct workshops and give presentations in Kannada on various conservation issues to their community.

In December, the young women organised another snake bite awareness workshop for around 40 children from three villages near Rathnapuri. The workshop introduced the kids to various species of snakes through slide shows and memory games. Skits on snake bite management were also directed and performed by the kids during this workshop. Each participant also received a solar lamp, sponsored by Humane Society International - India and the Gerry Martin Project, at the end of the workshop.

Marina and Sandhya's workshop modules are created under the supervision of educator Chandini Chhabra. These workshops are conducted at the sprawling Centre for Conservation and Education which is the headquarters of The Gerry Martin Project (TGMP). The centre lies on the banks of the Devikere lake, houses a number of animals, is a functional farm and the site for several new herpetological studies being developed by TGMP.

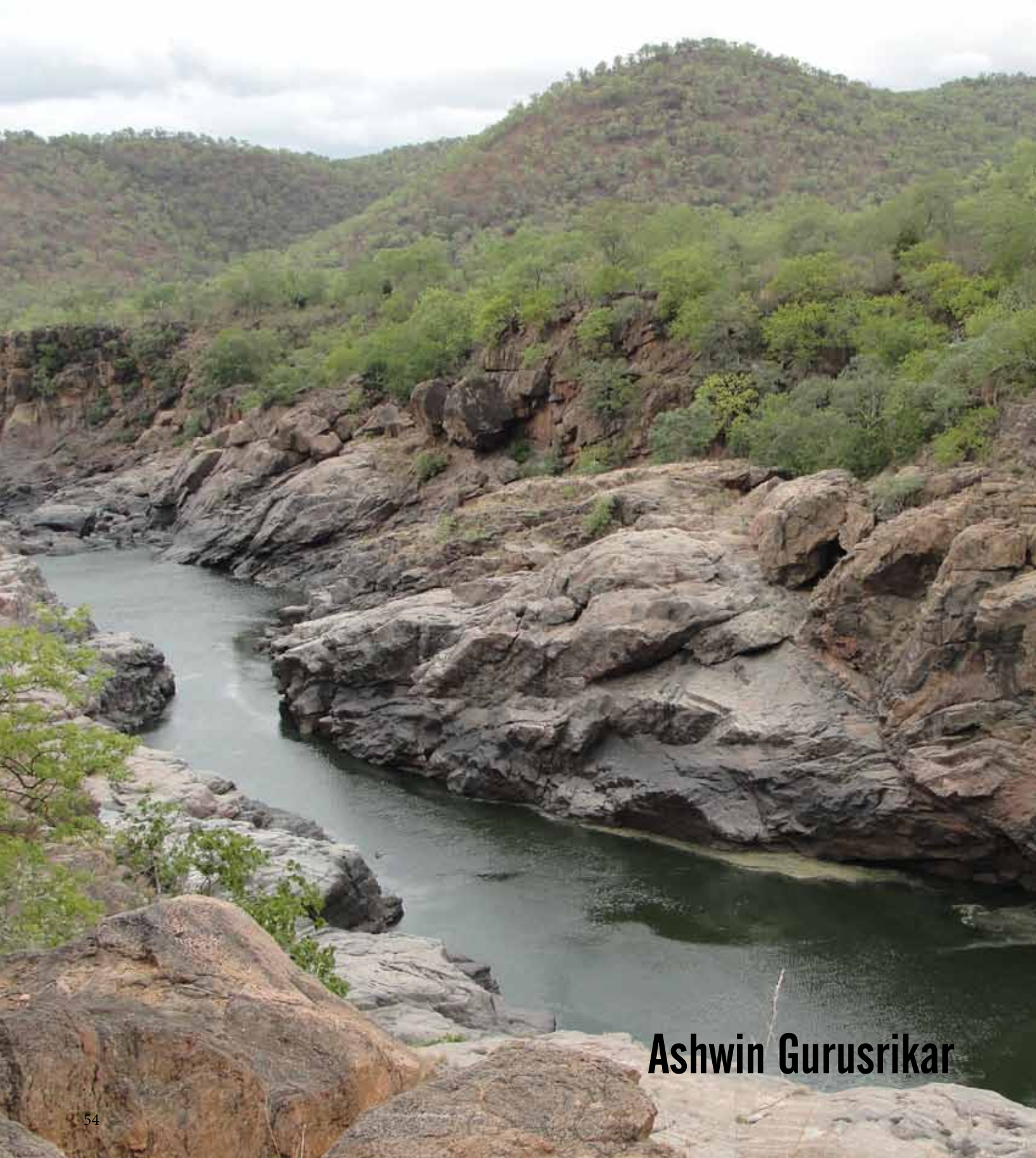
Social Surveys

As part of The Gerry Martin Project team, Sandhya and Marina were given the task of conducting a sociological survey on snakebite occurrence in Rathnapuri. The survey was designed by scientists working with TGMP. Through November and December, the Project Leaders surveyed 3,000 households in and around Rathnapuri.

Through this vertical of TGMP's expansive snakebite mitigation work, scientists hope to understand people's perception of snakes and quantify the extent of snakebite while involving the community in addressing human-snake conflict. Since Marina and Sandhya are a part of the Rathnapuri community, their engagement with the survey has inspired and encouraged their neighbours to participate in the study and learn about conflict mitigation.



Marina and Sandhya started working under the mentorship of Gerry Martin in February 2018. Neither of them had any prior conservation experience but were eager to learn. For the first few months, the two learnt the basics of non-venomous snake handling, snake biology and ecology, and snakebite management. In June 2018, the two had advanced enough to learn how to handle venomous snakes. They now look after all the rescued snakes that are housed at the Centre for Conservation and Education.



Ashwin Gurusrikar



Vanodaya's local volunteers keep vigil even when Ashwin is not around. Over the year, they reported various illegal activities to the forest department, including illegal constructions, poaching, unregulated road widening and encroachment on forest land. The volunteer network was also able to trace the location of an ensnared leopard on the basis of a vague tip-off. Unfortunately, the leopard succumbed during rescue efforts.

**ASHWIN GURUSRIKAR
RAMNAGAR, CHARMARAJANGAR AND
MANDYA DISTRICTS, KARNATAKA**

At the helm of an extraordinary volunteer initiative called the Vanodaya Wildlife Trust, Ashwin and Chandni Gurusrikar have been working in and around the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary for over a decade. Ashwin, along with his team of able volunteers, focuses on community conservation through intensive awareness workshops, multi-level stakeholder engagements, wildlife research, conservation training for youths and initiatives to mitigate Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC) in the region. Under his leadership, Vanodaya's volunteers have also been assisting the Forest Department with waterhole mapping, anti-snare drives, and patrolling during major festivals when poaching activities peak.

Ground Patrols

Through the year, Ashwin led his team members on regular ground patrols conducted in collaboration with the Karnataka Forest Department. The information on encroachments and other illegal activities that was collected during these patrols was shared with the forest department. The 31 volunteers cover the three ranges of Muggur, Sangama and Halaguru in seven teams during these patrols.

The Vanodaya team also kept vigil during festivals and *jathras* that witnessed a major influx of people into the forest. Poaching activities peak during these periods, and so the team joined the forest department on night patrols to deter poaching.

Ashwin also single-handedly surveyed the vulnerable areas of Soligere, Konagundhi, Gundapura, and



Basavanabetta in May. In this time, he interacted with forest watchers and guards and took note of their complaints and suggestions. In June, he surveyed a 60 km. route from Buhally to Taalavadi and observed unregulated tourist activity in this area. In the same month, a team of Vanodaya volunteers assisted the forest department staff with a clean-up drive to clear plastic waste left behind by tourists in the area.

Stakeholder Meetings

Ashwin serves as a bridge between the local community, Vanodaya volunteers and the forest department. In March 2018, Ashwin held meetings with RFOs, DRFOs, forest guards and forest watchers of all check posts of the Sangama and Halaguru Range of the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. The objective of the meetings was to receive feedback from the forest staff about the volunteer support extended during two crucial *jathras* during Chikalur and Shivaratri, when a large number of citizens entered the forest to visit the temples within. The forest department appreciated the work of the volunteers in helping with crowd management. Later that month, Ashwin also met with the DRFO and forest guards at the Taalavadi check post to discuss issues related to tourism and find solutions to manage these.

On April 8, 2018, Ashwin held a meeting with two prominent political leaders in the Dhuntur area to seek their support on conservation issues. During the discussion, special requests were made by them to help farmers in their constituencies to understand and mitigate Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC). In May, local volunteers informed Ashwin about the illegal manufacture of crude bombs used for hunting in Nallahali village. Ashwin took this information to the Police Sub-Inspector of the region and an FIR has been filed against the offenders. In June, the team conducted meetings with the new RFOs of



On April 26, 2018, a forest watcher named Mahadev died while trying to drive elephants back into the sanctuary. As a token of respect towards Mahadev and support to his family, Vanodaya crowd-funded and then granted an LIC policy to the wife of the deceased. Ashwin also helped her secure a job as a cook with the forest department.

Sangama and Halaguru to understand the allotment of new ranges and plan further training of the front-line staff. Ashwin was also invited by the PCCF of Karnataka to share his opinion on allowing 100 ha. of land adjoining the forest to be converted to private conservancies. In the following month, the PCCF visited the Vanodaya field station in Dhuntur village and chaired a consultation with about 40 villagers affected by human-elephant conflict. While the farmers aired their grievances, the Vanodaya team members offered solutions and were reassured of support from the state towards their work.

In August, Ashwin and volunteer Anand Narayanswamy travelled to Gopinatham, the southernmost range of the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. Here, they conducted meetings with the area's RFO, DRFO, DCF, forest guards and local villagers in order to plan activities in the southern range of Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary.

Human-Elephant Conflict Mitigation

Vanodaya in collaboration with Foundation for Ecological Research, Advocacy and Learning (FERAL) has been mapping wild elephant movement, interacting with villagers and surveying the landscape of Dhuntur village under the "Elephant In Town Commons" programme for the past nine months.

During the surveys, the team observed multiple breakages in the elephant-proof trenches created by the forest department. The team also visited the Nayakanahalli elephant-proof trench and took photographs of its depth and width to explain to the department that this level of excavation and periodical maintenance could probably stop elephants from entering vulnerable villages. The team also visited two farms to document and report on the damage caused to crops by wild elephants. Vanodaya volunteer Chandni Gurusrikar and Nishant



Srinivasan from FERAL interacted with over 50 villagers from Dhuntur in order to address and share their findings from the surveys conducted over the past nine months. The volunteers attempted to discuss common solutions for conflict mitigation but were met with resistance towards the long-term solutions that they suggested.

Community Outreach and Awareness

On June 5, 2018, the Vanodaya team conducted an awareness program on wildlife conservation at a local school on the occasion of World Environment Day. During this program local Vanodaya volunteers shared stories and experiences with over 200 children. The students engaged the volunteers with a number of questions regarding wildlife and conservation. The following day, the volunteers distributed posters on the birds of Cauvery to schools and colleges in Sathanur town. Later that month, Ashwin addressed 200 students from the Sathanur Rural College. The event included a documentary screening followed by an interactive discussion on human-wildlife conflict, forest fires, poaching and logging.

Eco Club activities were also conducted in three schools in July. Over 150 students attended the event that included a documentary screening, wildlife



Ashwin places much importance on capacity building within his volunteer network. Over the year, special activities such as birding walks, forest safaris, and other exposure field trips were conducted to familiarise volunteers with the landscape and improve their knowledge of natural history.

quiz and discussion. During a second session with these schools in September, Vanodaya introduced the students to the importance of the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. In another session in December, students from these three schools were taken out on a nature and bird watching trail. Various habitats and threats were introduced to the students through a software called "Nali Kali".

Ashwin also extended his outreach efforts to the village of Netkal. A talk was organised in the village temple compound that was attended by about 35 community members. The importance of the Cauvery landscape was discussed in this interactive session, which ended with the Gram Pradhan of the village promising 100 volunteers to Vanodaya's conservation work.

For the past five years, Vanodaya has been conducting awareness campaigns, about the threat posed by forest fires, in local schools near the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. This year too, the Vanodaya team successfully reached out to around 4,798 students from 47 schools across six ranges of Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. Staff members from the Karnataka Forest Department also participated in the campaign this year.



Finding Hope

As Cara and I sit together to compile the huge amount of work being silently carried out in different parts of our country, I realise that there is still so much more lived and done that will not fit within the parameters of this report. I often find myself at a loss for words when people ask me what impact the Mud on Boots Project creates. At these moments, I find “impact” too deficient a word to define what the project enables.

Over the last two years, having traveled across 12 project locations in nine different states, humans have charmed me as much as the rest of the natural world. I remember watching Anoko angrily snatch an air-gun from a local hunter in the forests of Arunachal, only to leave him after an hour long brainstorming session; Manoj whispering soothing words to an injured, rescued bird, while feeding it at his rescue center in Kaziranga; and I have revelled in Uras’ memory of sighting 12 Great Indian Bustards at one spot in the grasslands of Jaisalmer. With each field visit, I have realised that there is a beauty in the way conservation efforts take place when they are not imposed by outsiders, but come from within the human community.

While the approach of communities towards conservation in different parts of our country is influenced by many factors ranging from the landscape to survival challenges, political will to cultural norms, our Project Leaders are those rare individuals who survive the test of these pressures each day to protect the biodiversity of their land. Through my association with these

grassroots wildlife conservationists, I am reminded that conservation efforts can only be sustainable if they are inclusive of local communities and local governance bodies. The disciplined network of local volunteers that assist the forest department with forest patrols, under the mentorship of Project Leader Ashwin Gurusrikar, in the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, is a great example of a community inclusive conservation model. Efforts as small as creating awareness about the natural world have a great role to play in changing mindsets. One of the best examples of this is the ban on hunting during the breeding season of mammals imposed by the Fakim Village Council in 2016. This ban was the result of a decade of awareness building within this remote tribal community by Project Leaders Tsuseki and Limthure Yimchingur. Simplistic as it may sound, conservation success is highly dependent on this approach, along with good leadership from forest authorities and a commitment to science.

While these small efforts to protect the remaining wilderness of our country inspire me, issues such as rampant deforestation, blatant encroachments in Protected Areas, illegal mining, unregulated polluting of our elements and the resulting loss of biodiversity is impossible to ignore. This would be entirely disheartening if I were not aware of the quiet but impactful work of our Project Leaders. It is these few individuals and their tireless efforts that the Mud on Boots Project strives to recognise, protect and nurture, with the hope that they will inspire many more along the same path.

Maitreyee Mujumdar
Project Coordinator, Mud on Boots Project

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- Nature in Focus
- Rajasthan Forest Department
- Tamil Nadu Forest Department
- The Corbett Foundation
- The Green Hub
- The Gerry Martin Project
- Uttar Pradesh Forest Department

Our Collaborations

The TINA Grant

The Tina Abraham-Sanctuary Initiative for Nature Action (TINA) was launched in 2015 by banker Paul Abraham and Sanctuary in memory of Tina Abraham, who was a staunch wild-life defender. It set the blue print for the Mud on Boots Project which was established two years later, in 2017. The TINA Grant empowers three grassroots conservationists through the Mud on Boots Project.

The Hemendra Kothari Tiger Defenders Fund

Investment banker Hemendra Kothari is widely-recognised as the single largest individual donor to wildlife conservation efforts in India. In 2016, in honour of Mr. Kothari's 70th birthday, his friends and colleagues pooled their resources to establish the Hemendra Kothari Tiger Defender Fund to be disbursed through the Mud on Boots Project. Currently, three Project Leaders, each of whom is working in tiger landscapes, is supported via the fund.

Kādu Wines

In December 2017, Sula Vineyards Pvt. Ltd. launched Kādu, a brand of premium wines made entirely in Karnataka and sold exclusively in the state. Sula has generously committed a percentage of proceeds from each bottle of wine that is sold to the Mud on Boots Project. Sula currently supports the work of Project Leader Ashwin Gurusrikar.

Acknowledgements

At Sanctuary, good intent and expertise are always at hand but funds are often evasive. The Mud on Boots Project still struggles to stay afloat but nonetheless survives on the generosity of individuals who recognise the worth of this unconventional programme. There are many people to thank, the first of whom is Paul Abraham for sowing the seed of this idea and watering it through the years in memory of his late wife Tina Abraham. Three exceptional women have taken the project into its second innings, and we are touched by the faith placed in us by Dia Mirza, Anushka Singh and Geetika Jain. Amit Chandra's financial reassurance and network of well-wishers including Andrew Holland, Ashish Gumashta, Nozer Shroff, Raj Balakrishnan, Rajan Mehta and Saurabh Agrawal has enabled us to spread our reach under the banner of the Hemendra Kothari Tiger Defender Fund. The John L. Bissell Foundation provided an early boost to the project, one which was independently mirrored by Shuchi Kothari and funded important conservation interventions in 2017 and 2018. Sula Vineyards continues to willingly provide fuel for crucial work in Karnataka's largest protected area. Jaisal Singh from Sujana Luxury has long upheld a culture of conservation philanthropy. The hand he has extended to us will benefit people as far as Chhattisgarh. We cannot thank enough Denzil Sequeira, Rajdhani Investments & Agencies pvt. Ltd., Amita Gadhi, Deepika Gandhi, Harmeet Rana Desert Friendly Camps Pvt. Ltd, Ram Gopalakrishnan, Anish Andheria and the Wildlife Conservation Trust for their support.

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