

Sanctuary

NATURE FOUNDATION

**Mud on Boots Project
Impact Report 2023-24**







SAHEBRAM BEDIYA

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Where are our Project Leaders?

- 7 years since inception
- 16 states and 1 Union Territory
- 34 Project Leaders
- 4 Small Grantees



MAP NOT TO SCALE. BORDERS NEITHER AUTHENTICATED NOR VERIFIED.

The Mud on Boots Project is Sanctuary Nature Foundation's unique booster programme designed to recognise and support grassroots conservationists across India. The project focuses on supporting those individuals whose conservation leadership potential and contributions to biodiversity conservation are overlooked because of a lack of affiliations, educational qualifications, language barriers, and other mainstream opportunities. Over two years, Project Leaders receive a monetary grant and strategic support from the Sanctuary team. Such support can include field trips, expert input, troubleshooting, publicity, and more! Since its inception in 2017, the Mud on Boots Project has supported over 34 grassroots conservationists from 16 different states and one Union Territory in India.

Beyond this, the Mud on Boots Project extends solidarity and resources to grassroots organisations, and lends support to numerous environmental campaigns. Over the years, we have stocked rural libraries, sponsored apprenticeship programmes, enabled native nurseries, organised field trips, lobbied for conservation causes, designed and conducted workshops, and also raised medical aid for frontline forest staff. We keep our support flexible and bureaucracy to a minimum.

“The fact that the Mud on Boots Project is designed specifically to connect with and support grassroots conservationists across India makes it unique and special.”

– Nandini Velho
Conservation Biologist and Project Lead, Canopy Collective (Assam)



“I have had the privilege of working with Chamru and Saheb for the past four years through the Ekastha Foundation. I am so proud to see them grow as community leaders, wildlife filmmakers and conservationists. The Mud on Boots fellowship has had a profound impact on Chamru and Saheb: in the last year, I have seen them grow more confident and develop remarkable leadership skills. They have taken the initiative to conduct nature classes, mobilise communities for sustainable livelihood programmes and foster environment conservation in the region. On behalf of the Ekastha Foundation, I am thankful for this collaboration, and look forward to supporting community-led conservation in Jharkhand for years to come.”

– Rishabh Lohia
Founder, Ekastha Foundation

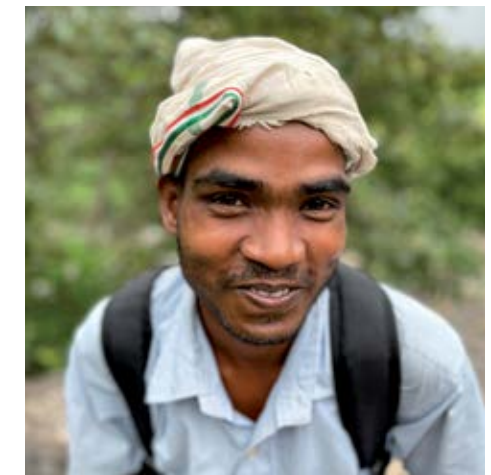
PROJECT LEADER:
CHAMRU BEDIYA AND SAHEBRAM BEDIYA

Location: Ranchi district, Jharkhand

Described as “a ray of hope for community-led conservation” by their associates, Project Leaders Chamru Bediya and Sahebram Bediya have excellent knowledge of the forests that surround their home, Koynardih village in Jharkhand’s Ranchi district. Both are graduates of Green Hub’s Central India Fellowship. They lead Ekastha Trails, a homegrown ecotourism initiative that introduces tourists to nature via guided treks and trails. As members of the marginalised *Bediya* community, Chamru and Sahebram want to highlight Jharkhand’s wildlife, provide green jobs for their community, and garner their support to reduce the rate of deforestation and hunting in and around their village.

Eco-Trailblazers

Chamru and Sahebram have been leading Ekastha Trails, an ecotourism programme by [Ekastha Foundation](#) in Koynardih village, with the support and mentorship of Rishab Lohia (Founder, Ekastha Foundation). Between September and December 2023, Chamru and Sahebram led 10 nature trails and trekking events for 364 visitors, generating over one lakh rupees in profits! This directly benefited 26 members of the local community. Their success has sparked overwhelming support as locals have now become active participants in the ecotourism programme. As their ecotourism model is garnering their community’s interest and scaling up, the team has created a ‘Responsible Tourism Committee’ based on the ethos of equitable profit sharing and accountability. The long-term goal of the committee is to promote nature conservation through responsible ecotourism in the region. Additionally, Chamru and Sahebram led five village clean-up drives with the participation of 125 local residents to boost their ecotourism initiative.



Chamru Bediya



Sahebram Bediya



Project Leaders Chamru Bediya and Sahebram Bediya, members of Ekastha Foundation, and visitors during a nature trail in Koynardih village, Jharkhand.



Chamru and Sahebram with visitors during a nature trail in Koynardih village.



Project Leaders Chamru Bediya and Sahebram Bediya led 50 nature walks and education sessions for children in and around Koynardih village, Ranchi district, Jharkhand.

Eco-lavatories

As their responsible ecotourism initiative is picking up pace, the team at Koynardih is welcoming an increasing number of guests. In November 2023, the team constructed eco-lavatories as part of their eco-tourism model with support from locals using a mixture of locally available resources, except for the tin roof.



A White-capped Redstart photographed in Koynardih village, Ranchi district, Jharkhand.

COURTESY SAHEBRAM BEDIYA

Biodiversity Stories from Koynardih

In October 2022, during a morning birdwatching excursion, Sahebram photographed a White-capped Redstart at Jonha Falls, close to Koynardih village. Unable to identify the bird, he shared the images with his mentor Rishab Lohia. Sahebram was delighted to learn that he is indeed the first person to document and report the sighting of this species from Jharkhand on eBird! Encouraged by this incident, Sahebram routinely visits the region's forests, rivers and waterfalls. He photographed a Plumbeous Water Redstart in February 2023, achieving yet another first-time sighting on eBird. With Sahebram leading biodiversity photography, the team has collectively made 567 entries on eBird and documented 98 native trees, 25 plants with local medicinal values, 20 insects and four mammals in 2023 alone.

Learning Under the Canopy

Nature education walks and classes for local children form an integral part of Chamru and Sahebram's conservation approach. The children in the region spend ample time either commuting through or collecting non-timber forest produce within the forest. They are well-versed in identifying fruit trees and other common bio-resources found here. To complement the traditional knowledge among children and nurture their curiosity of the natural world, this year Chamru and Sahebram led 50 nature walks and education sessions for local children.

Through fun and participatory games, nature-themed arts and crafts, story-telling sessions and bird walks, children were provided the opportunity to create diverse interactions with forests. Chamru and Sahebram envision building a strong conservation ethos among local children through these sessions, giving them a head start toward becoming aware and conservation-minded citizens.

A Mini Movie Festival in Koynardih

Chamru and Sahebram, with support from colleagues at Ekastha Foundation, organised a village film festival, screening seven documentaries on rural life and culture that were created by fellows of their alma mater Green Hub India. Sahebram's movie *Gaj Dhoond Rahe Galiyara*, which highlights the rising human-wildlife conflicts in Jharkhand amidst mining, deforestation, and urbanisation, was also screened. The duo finds that screening movies is a fun way to initiate community discussions on complex but pertinent social and environmental issues.

The enthusiastic duo also routinely engaged with locals by attending five Gram Sabha meetings and 10 parent-teacher meetings, where important local issues such as ecological and social impacts of deforestation, causes and ways to mitigate forest fires, banning wildlife hunting, benefits of forest conservation, and nature-based livelihoods such as mushroom farming, leaf plate making, and ecotourism were discussed.

Giving the Right of Passage

On September 19, 2023, a herd of 40 migrating elephants visited the residents of Koynardih village. To the dismay of locals, the herd spent five days there, feeding on the paddy crops. Hailing from farming families, Chamru and Sahebram understood the plight of the nervous locals, and led them in peacefully creating an exit route for the elephants, away from their village. The duo's leadership ensured that no human or elephant was harmed in the process. They also documented this incident and facilitated compensation claims by the locals from the Forest Department.



Project Leaders Chamru Bediya and Sahebram Bediya organised two village film screenings in 2023, with support from colleagues at the Ekastha Foundation.

COURTESY EKASTHA FOUNDATION

PROJECT LEADER:**JESU DAS****Location:** Mandya district, Karnataka

A gifted fisherman with immense knowledge of fish, fish behaviour, and traditional fishing techniques, Project Leader Jesu Das has been working as a field operative with the [Wildlife Association of South India \(WASI\)](#). His understanding of river ecology, keen observation skills, and accurate species identification have paved the way for the rediscovery of fish that were once believed to be locally extinct. His enthusiasm and zeal have led him to serve a crucial role at the Humpback Mahseer Repository Facility set up by the Karnataka Forest Department at Bheemeshwari. With support from the Mud on Boots Project, Das is working to protect the humpback mahseer by contributing to research projects and a captive breeding initiative underway in the Cauvery basin.

Raising Humpback Mahseer

In January 2023, Project Leader Jesu Das safely captured 18 wild mahseer using cast netting techniques; 11 of these were confirmed as humpback mahseer. Since then, Das has been contributing to the monitoring and study of this Critically Endangered fish by conducting water testing protocols and maintaining daily feeding routines at the Humpback Mahseer Repository (Bheemeshwari).

In May 2023, an outbreak of fin rot disease (caused by a disruption in water change cycles owing to an extended power outage), affected nearly 50 per cent of the stock. Through daily water changes and antibiotic treatments, Das and his team at WASI brought the situation under control within three weeks without losing any of the mahseer.

Following this, on December 8, 2023, on invitation from the Deputy Conservator of Forest (Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary), Das provided inputs on the safe transfer of the humpback mahseer stock to Harangi Fish Hatchery in Kodagu. After completing all formalities and genetic screenings, eight humpback mahseer were safely transported to the mahseer hatchery by February 2024.

As the second phase of the programme commenced in January 2024, 18 new mahseer were stocked at Bheemeshwari to be raised by Das and his colleagues from the Karnataka Forest Department.



Jesu Das

COURTESY WASI



Project Leader Jesu Das conducts a cast net survey in the Hemavathi river.

COURTESY WASI



Project Leader Jesu Das demonstrates water quality tests to Karnataka Forest Department personnel at the Mahseer Repository at Bheemeshwari.

COURTESY WASI

Training Peers

An expert in his craft, Project Leader Jesu Das has been redefining the use of the cast netting technique by deploying it to survey and monitor fish species for scientific studies. In 2023, he trained 12 interested local fisherfolk and 55 trainees, workshop attendees and Forest Department staff, and freely shared the specifics of safety measures, cast net tying, reading the signs of the river, casting, retrieval, and net repairing. Through his inclusive approach, Das is paving the way for other fisherfolk in the region.



Project Leader Jesu Das trains a peer as part of the Mahseer Radio Telemetry Survey.

Chasing Mahseer in the Cauvery

In 2023, Jesu Das monitored the movement of two mahseer fitted with Very High Frequency (VHF) radio transmitters by recording their GPS locations and their behaviour across 24-hour tracking cycles. During these exercises, Das documented the fish's movement patterns concerning changing environmental parameters. This exercise is part of a state-level programme initiated by the Karnataka Forest Department to conserve the Critically Endangered humpback mahseer. Das worked closely with associates at WASI to execute the project, making several management recommendations based on his field observations.

Unfortunately, after two months of work, the signal from one fish was lost while that from the other went static. However, the information gathered from the two fish has been critical in setting data collection protocols. Between January and March 2024, Das led a team of 22 volunteers, capturing seven wild mahseer weighing between 10 and 23 kilogrammes! These fish were released at the site of capture after fitting them with radio transmitters for the study. This development has breathed new life into the project.

Awareness and Orientations

One of the crucial tasks that Das has been undertaking to conserve the humpback mahseer is conducting orientation sessions for visitors at the Mahseer Repository Facility (Bheemeshwari, Karnataka). In 2023, he communicated with over 2,000 individuals, including the District Collector (Chamarajanagar district), officers of the Karnataka Forest Department, eminent scientists, researchers and students from schools around the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. He confidently demonstrated water quality tests, fed the fish, and discussed the mahseer conservation action plan with this audience.

Ancient Technique, New Uses

In 2023, Project Leader Jesu Das participated in several research projects underway in the Cauvery River basin, sampling a total area of 18,136 sq. m., identifying 46 species of indigenous and/or invasive fish caught through 800 casts! Cast netting has evolved into a useful technique in documenting the density and abundance of all varieties of fish found in the Cauvery river and her tributaries.



Project Leader Jesu Das with colleagues and friends at the Shiva Fish Sanctuary during an exposure visit.



A scenic view of Chipiya wetland in Maharashtra's Gondia district, which houses the region's flora and avifauna.

COURTESY KANHAIYALAL UDAPURE

PROJECT LEADER:
KANHAIYALAL UDAPURE AND SHASHANK LADEKAR

Location: Gondia district, Maharashtra

In Maharashtra's Gondia district, Project Leaders Shashank Ladekar and Kanhaiyalal Udupure are working towards conserving wetlands that are the home of the Vulnerable Sarus Crane. These young conservationists started as volunteers with a local organisation, Sustaining Environment and Wildlife Assemblages (SEWA), and are now field assistants to a Ph.D. researcher, who is identifying opportunities for waterbird conservation in central India. Shashank and Kanhaiyalal are committed to working with Gram Panchayats in Gondia district to strategise wetland management techniques that can support wildlife and provide livelihood to people.

Wetland Wonderlands

In Maharashtra's Gondia district, wetlands are socio-ecological habitats that house diverse aquatic flora and avifauna, including the Sarus Crane (an IUCN-designated Vulnerable indicator species), and are sources of sustenance and livelihood for locals.

Commencing work on wetland conservation, between January and February 2023 Kanhaiyalal and Shashank, along with their mentor Shivona Bhojwani, selected 10 wetlands where their conservation work would be focussed. These wetlands were selected based on 11 parameters, including sites being habitats or having the potential to house Sarus Cranes, the potential for hosting migratory birds, being appropriate sites for aquatic vegetation, and resilience in the face of degradation. Simultaneously, they also received training on collecting and storing seeds, with the vision of establishing a 'seed bank'. They were trained by Shivona's doctoral guide Dr. Susan Galatowitsch, a wetland ecologist and researcher from the University of Minnesota (USA).

During their initial surveys, Kanhaiyalal and Shashank discovered that many villages lack biodiversity committees, and those that exist were defunct. Therefore, the duo concentrated on strengthening the existing biodiversity committees at villages bordering wetland sites and facilitating the creation of new committees with Gram Panchayats wherever necessary.

Following months of work and discussions in different locations, in November and December 2023, the duo collaborated with SEWA and the Forest Department. They conducted four meetings with Biodiversity Committees at Zhilmil and Shivni wetland sites to understand their composition, capacity and functioning. Based on these discussions, people with long-term information and dependence on wetlands for their livelihood such as rozgar sevaks and fisher folks have now been made core members of the biodiversity committees!

2023 IN THE FIELD



Kanhaiyalal Udupure and Shashank Ladekar

COURTESY SHIVONA BHOJWANI



Project Leaders Kanhaiyalal Udupure and Shashank Ladekar led a nature education session for the students of Parasward School, Gondia district, Maharashtra.

COURTESY KANHAIYALAL UDAPURE AND SHASHANK LADEKAR

Wetland Seed Banks

On August 10, 2023, Kanhaiyalal and Shashank commenced work on their long-term plan of creating a Seed Bank of wetland plants. The team planted four plant species on self-made pilot plots, but to unsatisfactory results. In 2024, the team plans on growing selected species on lake shores using small plot methods for better results. This work is guided by Shivona Bhojwani.



A pair of Sarus Cranes found nesting within the human-managed landscape in Gondia.

COURTESY KANHAIYALAL UDAPURE

Friends of Sarus

While working as volunteers with SEWA, Kanhaiyalal and Shashank have been monitoring Sarus Crane nests in paddy fields since 2016. Trusted allies of the Forest Department, they have helped conduct several programmes on crane conservation awareness in several villages in North Gondia in the past.

As Mud on Boots Project Leaders, the duo has built on these collaborations and participated in the annual Sarus Crane Census held at Balaghat district (Madhya Pradesh) and Gondia district (Maharashtra), which was organised by the Forest Department and SEWA. The duo recorded a total of 17 Sarus Cranes during this event, which was held on June 17 and 18, 2023.

Shortly after, in July and September 2023, they monitored 13 Sarus nests in both districts. The support and cooperation of farmers is crucial to Sarus Crane conservation efforts in the region. Having earned the goodwill and trust of farmers through years of work, Kanhaiyalal and Shashank ensured secure environments for nesting pairs in agricultural fields. Once all the pairs successfully fledged their young, the duo helped farmers file compensation claims for setting aside parcels of their fields to house the nesting birds.

Taking Nature to Schools in Gondia

Kanhaiyalal and Shashank believe that conservation awareness sessions are an important tool in enabling children to become nature-loving citizens. Given that Gondia district is home to over 2,000 wetlands, they focused on sharing the ecological, economic and cultural role of wetlands by highlighting birds found in such habitats.

With the support and participation of teachers and the Forest Department, they engaged with 1,127 students through nature education and conservation awareness sessions in schools. They sensitively led birdwatching sessions for students in areas that are active Sarus Crane nesting and foraging sites, presented slideshows highlighting wetland avifauna, organised nature-themed games, conducted drawing and rangoli-making competitions and taught children to conduct bird counts while on nature walks around wetlands.

Summer Bird Count in Gondia, Maharashtra

In June 2023, Kanhaiyalal and Shashank led a first-of-its-kind local summer bird count at Zhilmil and Shivni lakes in Gondia district. This event was an extension of the annual winter bird count that the duo has been organising since 2016. During this one-day event, which was attended by 30 participants including members of the Gondia Forest Division, NGOs, and bird lovers, a total of 25 species including breeding pairs of Sarus Cranes were recorded.



Project Leaders Kanhaiyalal Udapure and Shashank Ladekar led a nature education session for the students of Parasward School, Gondia district, Maharashtra.

KANHAIYALAL UDAPURE AND SHASHANK LADEKAR



A blackbuck lekking site was documented within a wetland habitat in Gondia district, Maharashtra.

COURTESY KANHAIYALAL UDAPURE



A herd of barasingha in Jhilmil Jheel Conservation Reserve, where they face threats of hunting.

COURTESY ARUN SAMI

PROJECT LEADER:
SADDAM HUSAIN

Location: Haridwar district, Uttarakhand

Trained in birdwatching, plant identification, and bat research, Project Leader Saddam Husain is an inspiring community conservation leader. Having initially worked daily wage jobs in apple orchards, poultry farms, and chemist shops, he went on to become a brilliant field assistant to various researchers conducting studies in his district. With support from the Mud on Boots Project, Saddam is leading local youth in monitoring populations of swamp deer and birds in the Jhilmil Jheel Conservation Reserve and surrounding areas, where the former is hunted. Using his association with [Mae](#), he is educating *Van Gujjar* children and youth from Gujjar Basti and Gaidikhata, Haridwar.

Van Gujjar Youth for Green Jobs

Noticing the trend of *Van Gujjar* youth moving to cities to find a decent income, and following a demand for trained nature guides within the Rajaji National Park, Project Leader Saddam Husain and his friends at Mae organised two three-day-long nature guide training programmes. These interactive trainings held in June and September 2023 were attended by 41 youth from seven villages around the [Rajaji National Park](#) and [Jhilmil Jheel Conservation Reserve](#).

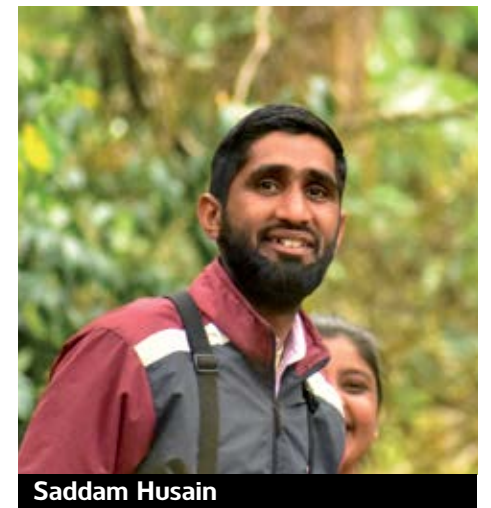
During the sessions, the team trained participants in bird identification and monitoring, methods of bird data collection, butterfly identification, and different aspects of leading nature trails. Seasoned local nature guides were invited to share their experiences with the participants, providing insight to the practical aspects of nature-guiding. During the September 2023 training, online sessions focusing on birds and the biodiversity of Uttarakhand and amphibians of the region were respectively led by members of the Forest Department (Haridwar) and [Kalpavriksh's](#) Sanjay Sondhi. Through such training, Saddam hopes to empower local youth to earn a dignified income through green jobs, as opposed to migrating to cities for meagre work.

Re-wilding Children

Coexisting with nature has been at the core of the *Van Gujjar* culture in the past. However, Saddam observed that the children of his Gujjar Basti possess limited knowledge about nature, and are losing their connection with nature and natural spaces. With this in mind, Saddam safely led children into the mixed forests, grasslands, and riverine habitats near his village through 33 nature education sessions.

In addition to teaching children methods of identifying birds, butterflies and trees, he encourages discussions on locally relevant topics such as conserving native trees, sustainable harvesting techniques, roles of forests in the lives and livelihoods of locals, and highlighting the impacts of plastic pollution. In July, Saddam

2023 IN THE FIELD



Saddam Husain

COURTESY ROHIT CHAKRABORTY



Project Leader Saddam Husain and his friends at Mae organised two three-day-long nature guide training programmes in 2023.

COURTESY MAEE

Conservation Spirit Amid Local Festivities

As part of the yearly [Harela puja](#) in July, Project Leader Saddam Husain and his team at Mae led the youth and elders of Gujjar Basti in planting 170 saplings of 20 native tree species while sharing about the importance of wildlife conservation. Additionally, they also guided the children in sowing 200 seeds of four native tree species as part of the [puja](#) celebrations.



In 2023, Project Leader Saddam Husain conducted 33 nature education sessions for *Van Gujjar* children in Haridwar district, Uttarakhand.

COURTESY MAEE

also helped the children raise butterflies to observe their life cycles. Through these fun, exploratory sessions, Saddam believes he can instil a conservation ethos among the children.

Birds and Barasinghas of Haridwar

The *Jhilmil Jheel Conservation Reserve*, near Saddam's village, is home to the only surviving population of barasingha (swamp deer) in Uttarakhand. Even here, the population faces dangers from hunting! In April 2023, following months of visits to the office of the Uttarakhand Forest Department (Haridwar), Saddam received permission to monitor the barasingha and birds in and around the reserve area.

Since then, Saddam has been leading youth volunteers to monitor and gather information on the population's habitat preferences, diet and behaviour. The team plans on using this knowledge for future conservation awareness events led by Mae. Their findings will also be shared with the Forest Department to inform approaches for the conservation of the shy cervid.

Saddam's team also diligently gathered information on resident and migratory birds, documenting over 123 species in a mere eight months! In addition to preparing a checklist of birds in the region, the team has been working towards creating a pamphlet that showcases the birds of the Jhilmil Jheel area. The pamphlet will be used as part of awareness and outreach approaches aimed at locals and tourists alike.

The Great Backyard Bird Count in Haridwar

In February 2023, Project Leader Saddam Husain devoted time to the *Great Backyard Bird Count* by preparing a checklist of birds sighted in 17 hotspots around Gujjar Basti and Gaidikhata. During the four-day annual survey, he, along with members of Mae, documented a whopping 123 species of birds including the Ruddy Shelduck, Orange-headed Thrush, and Eurasian Hoopoe.



An Oriental Pied Hornbill pair spotted by Project Leader Saddam Husain and his friends at MAEE during birdwatching events in and around the Jhilmil Jheel Conservation Reserve, Uttarakhand.

COURTESY MAEE



Saddam organised the celebration of wildlife conservation days for students in and around Gujjar Basti, Haridwar to encourage appreciation of nature among children.

PROJECT LEADER:
**ASUKHOMI COMMUNITY RESERVE
 MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE**

Location: Zunheboto district, Nagaland

Spread across 280 hectares of forest, the Asukhomi Community Reserve was notified in 2020 with the consent and support of residents of Asukhomi village. This lush forest ranges in elevation from 600 to 2,200 m. above sea level, and boasts a wide diversity of wild species. Through their persistent outreach programmes and using their strong social bonding, the members of the Asukhomi Community Reserve Management Committee (ACRMC) have cultivated conservation practices that include the nurturing of native plants, sustainable collection of non-timber forest produce, and wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. Allies and collaborators of the Nagaland Forest Department, the committee is trusted with awareness programmes, livelihood initiatives, and community outreach. Dedicated to building an inclusive culture of community-based conservation in Asukhomi, the committee is now working on creating a local biodiversity register in both the Sumi dialect and the English language. This invaluable document will be used to develop agendas for conservation action in the region.

Asukhomi Conservation Diaries

In March and April 2023, members of the Asukhomi Community Reserve Management Committee documented 20 plants, 14 bird species, seven mammals, and 22 lepidopterans and insects during an annual trek. The committee's mentor Dr. Hutoka Jakha simultaneously organised a training on handling and setting camera traps for wildlife documentation for seven interested committee members. The members were delighted and encouraged when the two camera traps (borrowed from the Forest Department, Nagaland) revealed photographs of barking deer, yellow-throated marten and Burmese red serow, upon their retrieval in April 2023!

Following this, the committee members spearheaded income generation and livelihood diversification initiatives in Asukhomi village as a strategy to effectively implement the ban on hunting wildlife and promoting conservation initiatives. As part of this, trials for the cultivation of three apple varieties were started by distributing 300 saplings and 1,220 piglets and poultry chicks to twenty households. These income generation approaches were organised with the support of the Forest Department (Wildlife Division), Dimapur. Meanwhile, members also ensured the maintenance of four salt licks in strategic locations within the reserve area to encourage good health among resident wildlife.

**Drawing Conservation
 in Asokhomi**

As part of their conservation awareness initiative with children, members of the Asukhomi Community Reserve Management Committee organised a nature-themed drawing competition for students of Government High School, Akuloto (Zunheboto district, Nagaland). This event, which was part of the World Environment Day Celebration on June 5, 2023, was a success among students and teachers alike.



Members of Asukhomi Community Reserve Management Committee (ACRMC).



Three Burmese red serows were photographed by the camera traps installed in the Asukhomi Community Reserve, Zunheboto, Nagaland.



Members of ACRMC during a biodiversity documentation exercise within the reserve.

New Leaders on the Rise

Most members of the Asukhomi Community Reserve Management Committee are daily wage earners, and are unable to work full-time towards the Mud on Boots Project without hampering their incomes. This resulted in the suspension of field work between June and October 2023, when the members considered handing over the leadership of the Mud on Boots Project work to those members who could take on the responsibilities of the project on a full-time basis.

Following months of deliberations, in November 2023, two youth members – Ghokivi Yeptho and Katoshe Chishi, took on the leadership mantle. Following their nomination, Ghokivi and Katoshe have led forest patrols, and started biodiversity documentation work, yet again.

Looking Forward

In addition to leading biodiversity documentation and forest patrols, in 2024, Project Leaders Ghokivi Yeptho and Katoshe Chishi plan to work with local youth in creating fire lines to protect the reserve, plant native fruiting trees for wildlife, document local wildlife-themed folktales and carry out maintenance of a trekking path to enable patrols and biodiversity documentations within the reserve area.



Members of ACRMC spearheaded income generation and livelihood diversification initiatives in Asukhomi village.



A rare sighting of a mother and baby pangolin in the Asukhomi Community Reserve, Zunheboto, Nagaland.

IN THE NEWS



- While celebrating World Wetlands Day with 48 local participants, on February 2, 2023, Project Leaders Kanhaiyalal Udapure and Shashank Ladekar led the [Asian Waterbird Census](#) and recorded 2,000 birds belonging to 55 species from four wetlands in Gondia district. The documented species consisted of migratory and resident birds such as Greylag Geese, Eurasian Pigeon, Painted Stork and Black-headed Ibis.

- In September 2023, journalist Amulya B. documented Project Leader Jesu Das's [experiences](#) of working to conserve and revive the Critically Endangered humpback mahseer in the Cauvery river basin for the [Village Square](#).

- Members of the Asukhomi Community Reserve Management Committee were delighted to win the [Nagaland SDG Action Awards](#) for Environment Sustainability-2023. On October 17, 2023, they were felicitated by the Planning Department, Government of Nagaland for their positive conservation-oriented impacts on the local community.

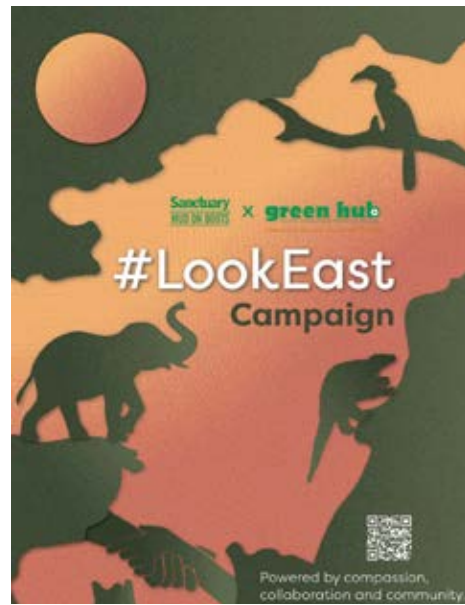
- In October 2023, Jesu Das was featured in an audio podcast titled '[Tigress on Tuk Tuk](#)', hosted by Sara Mohan. During this session recorded by the Cauvery river, Das shared his ongoing work in the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary. The podcast episode is slated for release in late 2024 or early 2025.



Mud on Boots Project Report



Annual Report 2023-2024



WE LOOKED EAST!

In December 2023, Sanctuary Nature Foundation's Mud on Boots Project and **Dusty Foot Foundation's** Green Hub were brought together by the #LookEast crowdfunding campaign to support four grassroots conservation initiatives in northeast India. This campaign was designed and led by Cara Tejpal (Founder, Mud on Boots Project and Member, Advisory Board of Sanctuary Nature Foundation). In September 2023, Cara mentored 20-odd applicants hailing from across northeast India, who were pitching their innovative community and conservation proposals for the **GreenHub Small Grants Programme**. Engaging with the participants inspired her to raise financial support for a few invaluable projects that could not make it to the final selection.

Amidst overwhelming support from wildlife enthusiasts and citizens, the #LookEast Campaign raised over 20 lakh rupees, surpassing the target amount in a mere 14 days!

ADI GIRL MEETS ADIVASI BOYS

In April 2023, Mud on Boots Project Coordinator Neyi Jamoh travelled to Koynardih village (Jharkhand) and spent four days conversing, roaming sal forests, and rock-hopping along Rahrur river with Project Leaders Chamru Bediya and Sahebram Bediya. She was humbled to learn from the duo that the grants received from the project have enabled them to focus wholeheartedly on their conservation-oriented efforts without having to worry about making ends meet, at least for the two-year Mud on Boots fellowship term.

IT TOOK A VILLAGE

In October 2021, with support from the Mud on Boots Project and in collaboration with the **Coexistence Project** and **Voices for Asian Elephant Society**, alumnus Project Leader Amir Kumar Chhetri spearheaded the installation of solar-powered fences around Panijhora. He involved his village community in the construction and maintenance of the three-kilometre-long solar fence, stopping the movement of wildlife into the village fields. The successful project has been laying the base for human-wildlife coexistence in the region as locals now experience a sense of security, and have earned economic profits between six to 10 lakh rupees so far.

The struggles and triumphs of Amir's journey have been documented by Green Hub's Sharat Hazarika and Keshar Jyoti Das in a short film titled 'It Takes a Village'. This movie was launched as part of the #LookEast Campaign. With humble beginnings as a safari guide, Amir's journey is a beacon for coexistence, community-led initiatives, and an inspiration for conservation practitioners!

TRAINING OUR NATURE TRAINERS

In the second half of 2023, the Mud on Boots Project collaborated with **NCF-India's** Vena Kapur (Head, Nature Classrooms Project, NCF-India) and Priyanka Prakash on strengthening the nature education sessions led by Project Leaders in their respective landscapes. As part of this, Project Leaders Chamru Bediya, Sahebram Bediya, Saddam

Husain and Manoj Gogoi delivered presentations on the nature education work they've been leading during an online interaction on August 28, 2023. Following this, all Project Leaders and Neyi attended a five-day Nature Education Workshop at Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh from October 27 to 31, 2023. This immersive practice-based workshop conducted by Pranav Trivedi, Sangeeta Trivedi, Saniya Chaplod and Tajik Tachang of **NCF-India** imbued our educators with fresh perspectives on nature education, continuing to inspire their methods and approaches to date.

SPOTLIGHTING OUR LEADERS

During the Sanctuary Wildlife Awards 2023 in Mumbai, Bittu Sahgal (founder of Sanctuary Nature Foundation) applauded the tireless work of our Project Leaders while highlighting the Mud on Boots Project to an enthralled audience of over 2,000.

A DEI WORKSHOP FOR GRASSROOTS CONSERVATIONISTS

On November 1 and 2, 2023, the Mud on Boots Project and **Canopy Collective** (Tezpur, Assam) conducted a workshop titled 'Embracing the Values of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Nature Conservation' for Mud on Boots Project Leaders, and other grassroots conservationists from northeast India. This workshop was co-designed by Neyi Jamoh, Krishnapriya Tamma (Faculty, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru), Manisha Kumari (Independent Researcher), Yamini Srikanth (M.Sc. student at NCBS, Bengaluru), and Nandini Velho (Project Lead, Canopy Collective), to encourage participants to become emotionally intelligent conservationists, who can embrace the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion when doing conservation-related work.

RECOUNTING VISHAL'S REWILDING JOURNEY

Mud on Boots Project Coordinator Neyi Jamoh got together with alumni Project Leader Vishal Ahuja and penned a piece recounting **Vishal's rewilding journey** for the August 2023 issue of *Sanctuary Asia* magazine.

PEMBA MAKES THE MOVES

In July 2023, as part of the Mud on Boots exposure trip, the alumni Project Leader visited Changlangshu in Mon district, Nagaland to learn about the conservation initiative led by local youth leader Wanmai Konyak. On this week-long visit, Pemba learnt the specifics of successfully leading a youth conservation initiative from his peers.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At Sanctuary, we firmly believe that conservation depends on collaboration and cooperation – a philosophy that is embodied by the Mud on Boots Project. We are thus privileged to partner with many stellar professionals and organisations that propel us forward.

Thank you, Naren Sreenivasan of WASI; Rishabh Lohia and Kailash Bhakat of Ekastha Foundation; Rohit Chakraborty; Dr. Hutoka Jakha; Dr. Nandini Velho of Canopy Collective, Tezpur, Dr. Sanjay Molur of Wildlife Information Liaison Development Society, Coimbatore; The Himalayan Grey Langur Project; Mallika Chandra; Rita Banerji, Bonti Saikia, Ishita Chigilli Palli, Jahnabi Gogoi, Keshar Jyoti Das, Nikita Buragohain, Sumit Sisodiya and Sharat Hazarika of Green Hub (Tezpur); Krishnapriya Tamma of Azim Premji University; Manisha Kumari; Yamini Srikanth; Salil Subedi; Rituparna Neog and Shamim Megnahi Modi.

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We are also indebted to the many members of the Indian Forest Service who have supported the Mud on Boots Project. A heartfelt thanks to the Forest Departments of Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Nagaland and Uttarakhand.

Thank you, Cara Tejpal, for guiding and nurturing the project. Undoubtedly, this project would not be possible without our wonderful team at the Sanctuary Nature Foundation, which provides backend support in uncountable and invaluable ways each month.

We would once again like to acknowledge the work of our Project Leaders and all grassroots conservationists across India. It is your drive and conviction that gives purpose and merit to the Mud on Boots Project. Thank you for all that you do.



COURTESY SAHEBRAM BEDIYA

OUR SUPPORTERS

The Mud on Boots Project is a publicly funded initiative. In the seven years since its inception, we have found stability through steady contributions from Dia Mirza and Anushka Singh. Their generosity continues to propel the incredible work carried out by our Project Leaders in various corners of our beautiful country.

We are deeply moved and encouraged by all contributions toward the Look East Crowdfunding Campaign, which was held between December 2023 and January 2024. Thanks to the enthusiasm and support of each one of our donors, the campaign was a huge success! Our special thanks goes out to Raj Mohan, Amitabh Bachchan, Nikhil Advani, Jim Sarbh and Kalki Koechlin for donating generously to the various conservation causes supported via the campaign.

Our team was also delighted to receive support from Padmini VNA Mechatronics, whose generous donation has enabled the work of Mud on Boots Project Leaders in 2023-2024.



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