

Mud on Boots Project
Impact Report 2024-25



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COURTESY SAHEBRAM, CHAMRU, AND RISHABH

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Where are our Project Leaders?

- 8 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 uplift and empower grassroots conservationists across India. These dedicated individuals – often from local and Indigenous communities – play a critical role in protecting biodiversity, but remain largely unrecognised on account of systemic barriers such as limited affiliations, a formal education, mainstream opportunities, and language barriers.

Over two years, Project Leaders receive not only a monetary grant but also strategic support tailored to their needs. This includes mentorship, media outreach, expert guidance, field visits, and networking opportunities – all aimed at amplifying their impact and strengthening conservation efforts on the ground!

Since its launch in 2017, the Mud on Boots Project has supported over 34 grassroots conservationists spanning 16 states and one Union Territory, championing causes from habitat protection to wildlife conservation.

In addition to working with individuals, the project has also provided support and resources to small grassroots organisations and citizen groups leading environmental campaigns and community-driven conservation initiatives. 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.

To explore and support the inspiring work of our current and alumni Project Leaders, visit our website! www.sanctuarynaturefoundation.org/donate

“The Mud on Boots Project has helped Jesu Das reclaim and redefine his traditional cast net skills – once overlooked on account of its association with hunting. Through the project, he has not only legitimised his expertise but also gained opportunities to work alongside fish biologists across the state, using his knowledge to support critical aquatic research and conservation initiatives.”

– Naren Sreenivasan, Conservation Biologist, WASI

“Mud on Boots is an excellent project that seeks to democratise conservation. Grassroots conservationists often get to learn new skills by assisting and collaborating with scientists like myself. However, the opportunities for them to put those skills into practice are always lacking. This is where MoB steps in. It has helped grassroots conservationists put the ideas that they are buzzing with into practice. Local communities are the custodians of their lands and it is imperative that they lead research and conservation initiatives in their areas. MoB allows them to do that. In doing so, they earn the respect of their own community members and the larger conservation community.”

– Rohit Chakravarty, Bat Researcher



COURTESY EKASTHA FOUNDATION

A file picture of migrating elephants in Koynardih from 2022. Chamru Bediya and Sahebram Bediya ensured their safe passage by leading locals in diverting them away from fields and people.



COURTESY EKASTHA FOUNDATION

An Indian Paradise-Flycatcher was photographed in Koynardih as part of ongoing biodiversity documentation for conservation efforts.

PROJECT LEADER:
CHAMRU BEDIYA AND SAHEBRAM BEDIYA
Location: Ranchi district, Jharkhand

Introduction

Deep in the forests of Jharkhand's Ranchi district, Chamru Bediya and Sahebram Bediya have spent their lives learning from the land. Growing up in Koynardih village, they developed a deep knowledge of the forests that surround their home – knowledge that they now use to protect and celebrate their natural heritage.

As graduates of the Green Hub Central India Fellowship, Chamru and Sahebram have been leading Ekastha Trails, with the support and mentorship of Rishab Lohia (Founder, Ekastha Foundation), a grassroots ecotourism initiative that introduces visitors to the rich biodiversity of their region through immersive treks and guided nature trails. But their work goes far beyond tourism. Through biodiversity games, storytelling, and interactive nature walks, they have connected hundreds of children from in and around their village to the wild spaces that sustain them.

As members of the marginalised *Bediya* community, Chamru and Sahebram are not just showcasing Jharkhand's wildlife – they are creating green jobs, fostering community-led conservation, and mobilising local support to combat deforestation, prevent forest fires, and reduce hunting pressures. Their work is a powerful reminder that conservation thrives when communities lead the way.

Leading the Way: Conservation, Community, and Culture

Between January and December 2024, Chamru and Sahebram didn't just guide people through the forests – they built a movement. Over the year, they led 37 nature trails and treks, introducing 433 visitors to the rich biodiversity of Jharkhand. But their work wasn't just about tourism; it was about creating opportunities for their community. The success of Ekastha Trails has sparked incredible local support, with more villagers now actively participating in the ecotourism initiative, turning conservation into a shared responsibility.

Their impact goes beyond the trails. In 2024, Chamru, Sahebram, and community members stopped six forest fires, protecting critical wildlife habitats. They also organised village clean-up drives, a free healthcare clinic, and workshops on *mahua* harvesting, strengthening both local livelihoods and traditional knowledge.

And they didn't stop there. To make their tourism initiatives more immersive, they turned to the forests themselves – working with the community to harvest 12 different types of wild edible greens (*saag*). These greens became the heart of a culinary experience that introduced visitors to the flavours and heritage of their culture, served with stories of the land that has sustained them for generations.

Documenting the Wild: Koynardih's Biodiversity Chronicles

It all started with a single image. In October 2022, during an early morning birdwatching walk near Jonha Falls, Sahebram captured an image of a White-capped Redstart – a striking bird never before

2024 IN THE FIELD



Chamru Bediya

COURTESY EKASTHA FOUNDATION



Sahebram Bediya

COURTESY EKASTHA FOUNDATION



Children in Koynardih village identify birds using images during a nature education session.

documented in Jharkhand on eBird. This discovery wasn't just exciting; it was a turning point. It sparked a deep interest in biodiversity documentation, leading Sahebram to inspire others to look closer at the natural world around them.

This year, under his leadership, community members embraced biodiversity photography, collectively making hundreds of entries on eBird and cataloging the rich flora and fauna of their home. They documented native trees, plants with medicinal value, and a diverse range of insects. More importantly, they recorded nine different mammal species, including sloth bears, wild pigs, elephants, foxes, rabbits, and wild cats.

Taking their efforts deeper into the forest, they set up camera traps in Jarga Hills, capturing rare glimpses of the region's wildlife. The footage revealed foxes, sloth bears, wild boars, and even a pack of jackals feeding on a cow carcass – offering an unfiltered look into the predator-prey dynamics of the ecosystem. These findings not only enrich their understanding of local wildlife but also reinforce the importance of community-led conservation efforts.

For Chamru, Sahebram, and their community, these aren't just data points – they are stories of the land they call home. Every sighting is a reminder of what they are protecting, and every image is an invitation for others to see Jharkhand's wilderness through their eyes.

Growing Up with the Forest: Nurturing Young Conservationists

For the children of Koynardih, the forest is more than just a backdrop, it is part of their daily lives. They walk through it, gather fruits and firewood beneath its canopy, and inherit a deep, instinctive knowledge of its plants and wildlife from their families. Chamru and Sahebram see this connection as the foundation for a lifelong conservation ethic – one that must be nurtured.

In 2024, they led 27 nature walks and education sessions, engaging 173 local children in playful, hands-on explorations of the natural world. Through storytelling, nature-themed arts and crafts, birdwatching, and interactive games, they created new ways for children to connect with the landscapes they already know so well. These sessions weren't just about teaching; they were about celebrating the children's existing knowledge while sparking deeper curiosity and wonder.

By fostering a sense of pride and responsibility among young minds, Chamru and Sahebram are laying the groundwork for a future where the forests of Jharkhand are protected not just by policy, but by the people who call them home.

Building a Self-sustaining Future

Chamru and Sahebram's vision for conservation goes beyond protecting forests – they are working to ensure that their community thrives alongside them. In 2024, they, along with colleagues from Ekastha Foundation, organised a series of hands-on workshops focused on sustainability and self-sufficiency. They introduced bamboo glass-making as an alternative to single-use plastic cups, ensuring that visitors on treks are served refreshments in eco-friendly, locally crafted bamboo tumblers. The Responsible Tourism Committee of Koynardih took a bold step in promoting sustainable food traditions, gathering wild leafy greens (*saag*) from the forest and crafting unique recipes that celebrate the region's culinary heritage. Guests were treated to a traditional meal featuring rice and 12 varieties of *saag*, offering a true taste of Jharkhand's forests.

Meanwhile, a *Mahua* Workshop held in Dhipatoli, Guridih, brought village women together to explore new ways of using *mahua*, a culturally significant forest produce. Participants learned to prepare *mahua* laddu, salsa, and *puri*, blending tradition with innovation to create sustainable food-based livelihoods.

Chamru and Sahebram's commitment to their community's well-being also extended to healthcare and education. A free health camp at Guridih Panchayat, in partnership with Raj Hospital, Ranchi, provided 497 individuals with medical checkups and consultations, ensuring that marginalised families had access to essential healthcare services. Beyond this, they actively engaged with the community through 12 parent-teacher meetings, discussing critical environmental and social issues and even the welfare of the children of Koynardih.

For Chamru and Sahebram, conservation isn't just about protecting nature – it's about strengthening the people who depend on it, ensuring that both forests and communities flourish together.



COURTESY WASI

Project Leader Jesu Das holds an adult humpback mahseer from the Moyar river during a joint survey with WASI and the Karnataka Forest Department in Bandipur.



COURTESY WASI

Project Leader Jesu Das, his mentor Naren Sreenivasan, researchers, and Forest Department personnel in the field.

PROJECT LEADER:
JESU DAS
Location: Mandya district, Karnataka

Introduction

For Jesu Das, the river is more than just a source of livelihood – it is a living, breathing world that he understands with an intimacy few can match. A gifted fisherman with deep knowledge of fish behaviour and traditional fishing techniques, Jesu has spent years navigating the waters of the Cauvery river basin, witnessing firsthand the changes in its fragile ecosystem. His expertise in species identification and river ecology has led to remarkable discoveries, including the rediscovery of fish once thought to be locally extinct.

Today, Jesu plays a crucial role in protecting the endangered humpback mahseer. As a field operative with the Wildlife Association of South India (WASI), he has become an integral part of the Humpback Mahseer Repository Facility at Bheemeshwari, set up by the Karnataka Forest Department. In 2024, he took on an even bigger responsibility – overseeing juvenile mahseer at the newly constructed Sangam repository facility.

Jesu's dedication to mahseer conservation, research, and captive breeding has been nothing short of extraordinary. Recognising the impact of his work, the Mud on Boots Project has committed to supporting him for an additional two years – ensuring that his fight to save the humpback mahseer and restore the health of the Cauvery river basin continues.

Nurturing the Future of the Mahseer

In July 2024, Jesu took on a new challenge: preparing a second mahseer repository at an abandoned plant nursery pond. This newly constructed Sangam repository facility will continue to house juvenile mahseer from the Moyar river, conditioning them for captive rearing and ensuring their survival.

By November, Jesu established water testing and feeding protocols at the Sangam repository. He also installed water management equipment, and optimised aeration and water cycling processes. These improvements, drawing from his experience at the Bheemeshwari repository, have created a stable environment for 30 juvenile and sub-adult mahseer. This facility is being developed as a key holding tank for wild-caught juveniles and hatchlings bred through artificial propagation, offering a critical lifeline for the species.

But Jesu's commitment to the humpback mahseer doesn't stop at rearing juveniles – he is also gaining vital insights into their breeding biology! In July, he led a team to transport five mahseer from the Bheemeshwari repository to a temporary holding facility while maintenance work was underway. At this time, Jesu observed that all the humpback mahseers were in breeding condition. This affirms that Jesu's management practices are well-suited for conservation breeding. Today, Jesu continues to collaborate with experts from the

2024 IN THE FIELD



Jesu Das

COURTESY WASI



Project Leader Jesu Das, along with Forest Department team members, stocks wild-caught mahseer at the Bheemeswari Humpback Mahseer Repository in Karnataka for conservation rearing.



Project Leader Jesu Das briefs local children and Forest Department personnel on ongoing mahseer conservation efforts at the Bheemeswari Humpback Mahseer Repository, Karnataka.

National Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources (NBFGR), allowing him to deepen his understanding of the species' breeding behaviour.

River Run: Chasing Mahseer in the Cauvery

In early 2024, Jesu Das and his team embarked on a mission to track the elusive mahseer, fitting five adult fish – ranging from 10 to 23 kg. – with radio transmitters. As part of an ecology study sanctioned by the Karnataka Forest Department, Jesu trained a second tracker from Sangama village, ensuring that local expertise played a role in the project. Together with volunteers and WASI frontline staff, he monitored how these fish responded to shifting environmental conditions, meticulously documenting 14 key habitat parameters.

By March, the team had tagged seven mahseer, but the river presented new challenges – three transmitters were lost, likely owing to fish rubbing against rocks. Despite this, the study pressed on, with two additional mahseer successfully tagged and tracked. By June, Jesu had supervised 25 volunteers and logged an astonishing 457 tracking days, yielding the first in-depth insights into mahseer ecology in the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary.

November brought another test of perseverance. Jesu and his team successfully tagged two mahseer, Prani and Yodha, but just weeks later, Cyclone Fengal caused a sudden surge in water levels, and both fish vanished. Determined not to lose valuable data, Jesu, along with two interns from Kuvempu University, launched an intense 45-km. search. After nearly a month, both fish were relocated and are now under close monitoring.

From training local trackers to recovering lost fish against the odds, Jesu's work is shaping a deeper understanding of one of India's most iconic freshwater species – one radio signal at a time.

Educating for Mahseer Conservation

Jesu is at the forefront of mahseer conservation through research and by sharing his expertise with scientists, students, and policymakers. This year, he collaborated with 20 conservationists from the International Institute of Hotel Management and Foundation for Ecological Research, Advocacy and Learning on managing the Bheemeshwari repository. His role as a field expert was highlighted when Sanjai Mohan from the Karnataka Forest Department visited the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary to review the outcomes of the mahseer radiotelemetry and repository projects. Das ensured that field insights shaped conservation strategies.

In October, four students eager to understand water quality changes in natural waterbodies visited the sanctuary. Jesu took the initiative to conduct a hands-on workshop, introducing them to pocket titration kits and advanced water testing techniques. His dedication to outreach extends far beyond individual sessions – he and his team have oriented over 2,000 people on mahseer conservation, including 14 educational groups. By engaging with diverse audiences, from researchers to young students, Jesu is not just studying the mahseer – he's inspiring a new generation to protect it.



COURTESY KANHAIYALAL UDAPURE

A file image of the critically endangered Sarus Cranes in Gondia district, Maharashtra.



COURTESY KANHAIYALAL UDAPURE AND SHASHANK LADEKAR

Kanhaiyalal Udupure and Shashank Ladekar at an indoor nature education and painting competition for school children in Gondia, Maharashtra.

PROJECT LEADER:
KANHAIYALAL UDAPURE AND SHASHANK LADEKAR
Location: Gondia district, Maharashtra

Introduction

In Maharashtra's Gondia district, Project Leaders Shashank Ladekar and Kanhaiyalal Udupure are working to protect vital wetlands that serve as a refuge for the Vulnerable Sarus Crane. Beginning as volunteers with Sustaining Environment and Wildlife Assemblages (SEWA), they have since taken on larger roles as field assistants to a Ph.D. researcher studying waterbird conservation in Central India. Their work extends beyond research – they are actively engaging with Gram Panchayats to develop wetland management strategies that benefit both wildlife and local livelihoods.

Restoring Wetlands, Reviving Communities

In 2023, Kanhaiyalal Udupure and Shashank Ladekar uncovered a major roadblock to wetland conservation in Maharashtra's Gondia district – many villages either lacked biodiversity committees or had inactive ones. Without these local governance structures, wetland protection efforts struggled to take root. Determined to change this, the duo set out to revive existing committees and establish new ones in collaboration with Gram Panchayats.

By mid 2024, they had made headway, working with four biodiversity committees to help draft five-year management plans and identifying six more villages where committees could be formed. The conversations that followed were eye-opening. Community members proposed key conservation strategies – deepening lakes without disturbing aquatic vegetation, legally reclaiming encroached wetlands, reintroducing native fish species, and even exploring wetland-based tourism. To strengthen community-led conservation, Kanhaiyalal and Shashank used video documentation and informational booklets in the local language to showcase the Sarus Crane's life cycle, helping Biodiversity Committees understand their role in wetland management. Now, five committees independently overlook wetland conservation, regularly engaging with the team to develop five-year management plans, while efforts continue to activate five more.

In May 2024, their work took them to Zilmili and Shivni where they helped committees take tangible steps toward wetland restoration. In Zilmili, a pressing issue emerged – 30 per cent of the village population was using the wetland as an open toilet, endangering both human health and biodiversity. The committee immediately proposed constructing public toilets as a long-term solution. Meanwhile, in Shivni, local leaders pushed forward with finalising documentation and reopening their committee's bank account.

With every meeting and discussion, Kanhaiyalal and Shashank are not only protecting wetlands but also empowering local communities to take ownership of their natural resources. Their work is proving that conservation isn't just about saving ecosystems – it's about strengthening the people who depend on them.

2024 IN THE FIELD



COURTESY SHIVONA BHOJWANI

Kanhaiyalal Udupure and Shashank Ladekar



Project Leader Shashank Ladekar interacts with residents of a wetland village in Gondia, Maharashtra.



A file image from a wetland bird count organised by Project Leaders Kanhaiyalal Udupure and Shashank Ladekar, with support from local bird enthusiasts, NGOs, and the Forest Department.

Crane-worthy Steps for Conservation

Kanhaiyalal Udupure and Shashank Ladekar have monitored Sarus Crane nests in paddy fields since 2016, working with a local organisation, SEWA, and the Maharashtra Forest Department. As Mud on Boots Project Leaders, they continued strengthening collaborations in 2024 by participating in Sarus Crane censuses across Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.

On June 23, 2024, in collaboration with the Gondia Forest Department, SEWA, and local volunteers, they organised a census in Gondia, where 38 teams counted 25 Sarus Cranes at identified roosting sites. A second census on June 25 in Balaghat, Madhya Pradesh, brought together 25 teams and 50 volunteers, contributing to regional conservation data. Additionally, a large-scale bird count on February 2, 2024, at Paraswada and Zilmili Lakes identified 30 migratory bird species and 25 local species, with 110 participants, including forest officials, birders, and students.

Regular wetland monitoring was strengthened through a WhatsApp network, ensuring real-time communication with local villagers and biodiversity committees. This approach improved participation in the Asian Waterbird Census and seasonal bird counts while creating a platform to share resources. Nest monitoring efforts also expanded – two Sarus Crane nests were found in Gondia and 11 in Balaghat during field surveys. A heronry survey launched in August at Chipiya and Chargaon N2 Wetlands recorded 124 nests, furthering the understanding of local bird populations.

Capturing Wildlife: Mammals of the Wetlands

In March 2024, Kanhaiyalal and Shashank launched a mammal survey across 10 selected wetlands, using 10 camera traps, local interviews, and direct sightings. With support from SEWA, they deployed camera traps in five safe locations – Lohara, Nilaj, Chargaon, Paraswada, and Gonditola.

Their efforts paid off, revealing a fascinating glimpse into the wetland ecosystem. The cameras captured images of blackbuck, Indian jackal, northern plains grey langur, Indian grey mongoose, and Indian wild pig – highlighting the diverse mammal species that rely on these waterbodies. This data is helping strengthen wetland conservation by showing the crucial role these habitats play, not just for birds but for a wide range of wildlife.

Birds, Books, and Wetlands: Learning Takes Flight!

In 2024, Kanhaiyalal and Shashank expanded their school outreach, conducting 10 awareness programmes that introduced 1,879 students to the Sarus Crane and the importance of wetlands. Through interactive sessions, they encouraged students to become active stewards of their local ecosystems.

To mark World Wetlands Day on February 2, they organised a quiz and drawing competition at Orchid International School, Gondia, with 150 students participating. These activities not only sparked curiosity about waterbirds but also emphasised the role of young conservationists in monitoring wetlands. By fostering awareness early, they aim to empower students to recognise and report threats such as habitat encroachment, electrocution, and poisoning, ensuring a safer future for Gondia's wetlands and its wildlife.



COURTESY MAEE

A herd of barasingha in the Jhilmil Jheel Conservation Reserve, where they remain vulnerable to hunting threats.



COURTESY MAEE

An Indian Peacock in Uttarakhand's Haridwar district, documented by Project Leader Saddam Husain and his team as part of their biodiversity documentation efforts.

PROJECT LEADER:
SADDAM HUSAIN

Location: Haridwar district, Uttarakhand

Introduction

Saddam Husain's path to conservation wasn't paved with research papers and field guides – it started in apple orchards, poultry farms, and chemist shops, where he worked daily wage jobs before finding his true calling in wildlife research. A quick learner with a sharp eye for the field, today, Saddam is a key figure in community conservation. Now, as a Mud on Boots Project Leader, he's channeling his skills into conservation, leading local youth in monitoring swamp deer and bird populations in Jhilmil Jheel Conservation Reserve – where hunting remains a threat. Through Mae, he educates *Van Gujjar* children and youth in Gaindikhata and Gujjar Basti, showing that conservation isn't just about expertise – it's about dedication, hands-on learning, and a deep bond with the land.

Rewilding Young Minds through Nature

Deep in the forests and riverbanks near Jhilmil Jheel, a quiet transformation is unfolding. Children are now identifying birds by their calls, colours, and flight patterns. Through 29 nature trails and birdwatching sessions, the Mae team has consistently engaged over 100 children in observing more than 150 bird species across diverse habitats. During Harela, a festival dedicated to tree planting, 105 trees of 12 different species were planted at the learning centres, while butterfly walks recorded 46 species, offering hands-on lessons in pollination and biodiversity. Interactive activities such as tree observation exercises, the Early Bird card game, and butterfly rearing projects deepened their understanding of bird habitats, migration patterns, and insect life cycles. These experiences not only sparked curiosity but also opened up space for thoughtful discussions on conservation issues such as deforestation, plastic pollution, and climate change.

Festivals of Conservation: Learning through Celebration

In Jhilmil Jheel, festivals are opportunities to reconnect with the land. During National Moth Week, over 100 participants – including children, elders, and youth – gathered under night skies in three distinct habitats, observing and recording dozens of moth species. Wildlife Week saw 87 children from three learning centres create art using fallen leaves, twigs, and flowers, turning nature into a canvas. The Global Tiger Day engaged 64 children in mask-making and discussions on tiger conservation, while World Elephant Day sessions taught 53 children about the ecological role of elephants. The Great Backyard Bird Count recorded an impressive 154 bird species over four days, with 55 children participating in hands-on data collection. By weaving conservation into cultural celebrations, the Mae team ensures that protecting nature becomes a shared responsibility, passed down from one generation to the next.

2024 IN THE FIELD



COURTESY ROHIT CHAKRABORTY

Saddam Husain

“Mud on Boots was more than just a learning journey – it was about dedication, hands-on learning, and building a deep bond with the land. It helped me tackle real challenges, develop practical skills, and most importantly, understand the value of preparing for the future.”

– Saddam Husain



COURTESY MAEE

Van Gujjar children observe birds during a nature trail led by Project Leader Saddam Husain and his team at Mae.

Tracking Birds and Changing Landscapes in Jhilmil Jheel

Jhilmil Jheel has long been a sanctuary for both migratory birds and the elusive barasingha (swamp deer), but its landscape is constantly evolving. To track these changes, the Mae team has conducted 12 intensive bird surveys, engaging 210 children and youth in bird identification, habitat monitoring, and data collection. In the last six months alone, 37 birdwatching sessions have helped record over 180 bird species, providing valuable insights into migration patterns and population dynamics. During September and October, no barasingha were sighted in the area, raising important questions about habitat shifts. Meanwhile, climate change discussions at the learning centres have involved 80 children, covering topics such as water scarcity, deforestation, and soil erosion. As wetlands shrink and forest landscapes transform, young birdwatchers are learning to think critically – why do some species thrive while others decline? How do changes in their environment shape the bird populations they observe every day? By training the next generation to document, analyse, and protect their surroundings, the Mae team is ensuring that conservation remains a community-driven effort for years to come.



COURTESY MAEE

Saddam led World Elephant Day celebrations with children at one of Mae's Learning Centres, helping raise awareness about the importance of wildlife conservation.



COURTESY MAEE

A group of Black-rumped Flamebacks photographed by Saddam and his team in and around the Jhilmil Jheel Conservation Reserve, Haridwar, Uttarakhand.

PROJECT LEADER:
ASUKHOMI COMMUNITY RESERVE
MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Location: Zunheboto district, Nagaland

Introduction

Spanning 280 ha. of forest, the Asukhomi Community Reserve's journey began in 2019 when villagers rescued a rare primate – the slender loris – and released it back into its natural habitat. This powerful act of compassion sparked a deeper conversation around the need to formally protect the forest and its wildlife. With growing community support, the reserve was officially notified in 2020, marking a collective commitment to conservation.

In 2022, the residents of Asukhomi village took another bold step – they voluntarily laid down their hunting guns and pledged to safeguard the forest for future generations. Nestled between 600 to 2,200 m. above sea level, the reserve today is a thriving habitat for a wide array of flora and fauna.

Since its inception, the Asukhomi Community Reserve Management Committee (ACRMC) has led conservation efforts grounded in sustainable practices, wildlife monitoring, and inclusive community participation. In 2024, internal challenges led to a temporary pause in fieldwork mid-year. However, despite the setbacks, the ACRMC remained committed to their mission – carrying out key conservation activities and reaffirming their dedication to protecting the forest they proudly steward.

Wildlife Patrols and Biodiversity Monitoring

In the first quarter of the year, the Asukhomi Community Reserve Management Committee (ACRMC) conducted two extended field visits focused on wildlife tracking and monitoring poaching activity. From January 8 to 19, committee members embarked on a rigorous forest patrol, venturing deep into the reserve and even camping overnight in the jungle. Their goal was to identify any signs of hunting or illegal trespassing – thankfully, no such activity was discovered. The team also explored neighbouring forest patches along village borders and returned with plans to continue species documentation.

A second field visit took place from February 12 to 19, 2025. During this time, camera traps borrowed from the Forest Department were strategically deployed across animal and bird hotspots. In addition to reviewing footage from the traps, members documented sightings of various wild animals, birds, edible plants, and fruits found in the reserve. This round of biodiversity documentation was conducted between March and April.

Strengthening Community Ties and Eco-Tourism Efforts

Despite internal challenges that paused activities mid-year, ACRMC resumed patrol efforts in November. Six members surveyed the reserve again to ensure it remained protected from illegal hunting. Alongside forest protection, community-led



Asukhomi Community Reserve Management Committee members during a wildlife patrol within the reserve.



Children of Asuloto Government School during a nature awareness and plantation drive led by ACRMC members.



Members of ACRMC, in collaboration with the local women's self-help group, organised a one-day cleanliness drive to raise awareness about nature conservation.

beautification projects were launched in collaboration with the Village Development Board – painting the church steps and refurbishing the village's public toilet facilities.

To promote environmental awareness and boost eco-tourism, two large biodiversity billboards were installed, highlighting the region's native species. Additional sign boards were placed in local shops to guide and inform visitors. Furthermore, 12 ACRMC members cleared and maintained the trekking trail from the village to the forest resting shed, improving access for both locals and tourists. Though 2024 brought its share of setbacks, these efforts reflect the committee's enduring dedication to community-based conservation and set the stage for renewed momentum in 2025.



Members of ACRMC during their annual patrol and trekking path maintenance.



A mother and baby pangolin in the Asukhomi Community Reserve, Zunheboto, Nagaland.

IN THE NEWS

TALES FROM THE MOYAR VALLEY

Armed with a pen and a pair of binoculars, alumni Project Leader S. Chandrasekaran turned his field notes and long days of surveying the Moyar Valley into a compelling Tamil book, *Kazhukukalin Kaadu*. The book captures moments from his early recce work and experiences as a Mud on Boots Project Leader, offering readers a glimpse into the ecology and everyday realities of this unique landscape. In recognition of his efforts, he was awarded the Tamil Nadu State Government's Best Environment Author Award for 2022 – proof that patient observation and a deep love for vultures can go a long way!

HIGHLIGHTS 2024

A WILD HONOUR FOR A WILD HEART

On August 11, 2024, Alumni Project Leader Manoj Gogoi was recognised as a 'Professor of Practice' by the Manipur International University (Imphal) during a special event held in Guwahati, Assam. The honorary title was awarded in appreciation of Manoj's decades-long dedication to wildlife conservation in and around the Kaziranga landscape. From rescuing animals to raising awareness, Manoj's field expertise has earned him this well-deserved acknowledgment – proof that real-world conservation can sometimes earn you classroom respect too (minus the chalk dust and lecture halls)!

MAKING SPACE FOR EVERYONE IN CONSERVATION

From October 27 to 29, 2024, the Mud on Boots Project teamed up with Canopy Collective (Tezpur) to host the second edition of the workshop 'Embracing the Values of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Nature Conservation.' Co-created by a multidisciplinary team, the workshop brought together 20 on-ground conservationists – including Mud on Boots Project Leaders, alumni, and other grassroots champions from across Northeast India. Over three days, participants explored the roots of implicit bias, its influence on conservation work, and picked up practical tools to recognise, reflect on, and respond to these biases. The goal? To create safer, fairer, and more inclusive spaces within the conservation movement – starting from the ground up.



COURTESY- MANOJ GOGOI

TRACKING IMPACT, TOGETHER

Hot on the heels of the DEI workshop, the Mud on Boots Project and Canopy Collective hosted a two-day course on 'Project Monitoring and Evaluation' from October 31 to November 1, 2024. Co-facilitated in collaboration with NCF-India, the course was designed and led by Deepshikha Sharma and Taznin Thinley. A mix of lectures, case studies, and lively group discussions helped 25 grassroots conservationists build practical skills to better plan, implement, and assess their projects. Whether it was refining goals or figuring out what 'impact' really looks like, participants walked away with sharper tools – and a stronger network to lean on.

VOICES FROM INDIA AT OXFORD

On August 18, 2024, Mud on Boots Project Coordinator Neyi Jamoh joined a multidisciplinary team to deliver the opening plenary on Day 2 of the Conservation Optimism Summit, held at Keble College, Oxford University. Their presentation 'Collaborations for Conservation' spotlighted stories of resilience and hope from across India. The session featured moving reflections and grounded insights from alumni Rajeev Chauhan, Phuntsog Dolma, Malhar Indulkar, and Neyi – offering a rare window into the power of community-driven conservation efforts from the ground up.



COURTESY- PHUNTSOG DOLMA



COURTESY- KANHAYALAL UDAPURE



COURTESY- CANOPY COLLECTIVE

NEW FACES, SAME FIERCE COMMITMENT

After a rigorous five-month selection process, the Mud on Boots Project welcomed its 2025–2026 cohort in November 2024. The new Project Leaders include Bhumika Yadav and Deepak Yadav from Chhattisgarh, Dawa Sangpo Bhutia from Sikkim, and Kashif Farooq Bhat from Kashmir – each bringing unique perspectives and deep-rooted commitment to grassroots conservation. Meanwhile, Jesu Das from Mandya, Karnataka (2023–2024 cohort), was awarded an extended two-year fellowship in recognition of his impactful work conserving the Critically Endangered humpback mahseer. The new cohort officially kicked off their work in January 2025, ready to roll up their sleeves and dig into the field.

ROOTS OF COEXISTENCE

In Himachal Pradesh's Chamba Valley, Alumni Project Leader Vishal Ahuja continues to nurture coexistence – one sapling at a time. At the heart of his rewilding efforts is a native plant nursery in Dugli, established in 2023 with support from the Mud on Boots Project. This monsoon season, Vishal found fresh allies in students from Senior Secondary School, Randoh. Together, they planted over 50 native



COURTESY - PEMBA TSERING ROMO

saplings on abandoned terrace farms, turning forgotten land into future forest. Not stopping there, Vishal also worked with local farmers to plant an additional 250 saplings – quietly expanding food sources for wildlife and deepening the region's roots of conservation.

BUZZING AHEAD WITH WETLAND CONSERVATION

After a rigorous selection process, Mud on Boots Project Leader Shashank Ladekar from Maharashtra's Gondia district was awarded the prestigious WCT BEES Grant for 2024–2025. Building on the momentum of their work under the Mud on Boots Project, Shashank – alongside fellow Project Leader Kanhaiyalal Udupure and mentor Shivona Bhojwani – will continue championing wetland conservation in the region. With this new support, the trio is all set to deepen their impact across Gondia's rich aquatic ecosystems.

STORIES FROM THE MOUNTAINS

In July 2024, Alumni Project Leader Phuntsog Dolma penned a heartfelt piece for *Sanctuary Asia Cub* titled '*Ladakhi by Nature*', where she reflected on her childhood in the dramatic landscapes of Ladakh and her path into the world of conservation. The piece also sheds light on the growing environmental challenges in the region and her experiences as a Mud on Boots Project Leader.

A few months earlier, in March, Pemba Tsering Romo from the 2021–2022 cohort was featured on *Sanctuary Asia Cub's Green Peeps*. In his feature, he shared insights into his ongoing efforts to protect the wintering grounds of the majestic Black-necked Crane in Arunachal Pradesh's Jemethang Valley – a place he calls home.

LOOKING BACK TO LEAP AHEAD

As the team prepared to welcome the 2025–2026 Mud on Boots Project cohort, Project Coordinator Neyi Jamoh took a moment to reflect on the journey so far. She penned an article for the October 2024 issue of *Sanctuary Asia*, spotlighting the many collaborations and incredible collaborators who have shaped the Mud on Boots Project since its inception in 2017. A celebration of shared purpose and people-powered conservation, the piece set an inspiring tone for what's to come!



COURTESY - SVABHU KOHLI

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sanctuary Nature Foundation's Mud on Boots Project is a testament to the collaborative nature of conservation efforts. We are privileged to partner with many stellar like-minded professionals and organisations that propel us forward.

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Thank you, Cara Tejpal, for selflessly continuing to guide and nurture the project. Undoubtedly, this project would not be possible without our wonderful editorial and design 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 KANHAYALAL UDAPURE

OUR SUPPORTERS

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COURTESY MAEE

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