

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Himal Rakshaks of Sikkim: The Burden of Being the Flag-bearers of Community-based Conservation

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1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2017, one of my respondents, Karma, an ex-herder in West Sikkim, made a statement: “People who keep animals are much more concerned for the *himal* (mountains) here than the Himal Rakshaks (the honorary guardians of mountains); just because we do not go and pick up plastic from the mountains (i.e., support the conservation agency driven mountain cleaning campaign) or wear T-shirts with conservation slogans does not make us the destroyers and them the protectors.” Karma’s father used to live in the temperate and alpine regions of Khangchendzonga National Park (KNP) and Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve (KBR) for a large part of the year as part of the seasonal movement necessary for yak herding. His son and other family members would accompany him to the forest during the summer; the entire family would stay in the pastures and help with the day-to-day tasks associated with livestock management. But in 1998, a grazing ban policy was formulated by the Government of Sikkim, and pastoral communities were removed from KNP and KBR between 2002 and 2004.

My research project in Sikkim focussed on a wide range of questions about historical and recent changes in traditional pasture management. However, during the field study, the Himal Rakshaks (HRs) repeatedly surfaced in my

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interactions with local communities. But who are these people? And what made them subject to the anger of the ex-herders of West Sikkim?

This article examines the contentions that surround the HRs in West Sikkim, as epitomized by Karma's statement. Based on my ethnographic research, I show how the honour associated with being an HR is locally contested and influences the everyday lives of the HRs. While conservation initiatives may benefit biodiversity conservation, they may also have far-reaching societal consequences for local actors, particularly those who become the "face" of conservation initiatives. It is paramount to pay attention to these consequences, as they may perpetuate or reproduce social inequalities or systematic exclusion and, in some cases, further ecological harm.

2. RANGELAND CONSERVATION AND THE HIMAL RAKSHAKS

While the resource management practices of pastoral societies can be considered as adaptations to regional and climatic conditions (Behnke and Scoones 1992; Niamir-Fuller 1999; Scoones 1994), conservation plans in high-altitude rangelands are still based on the principles of the equilibrium model of rangeland management. The equilibrium paradigm assumes that rangeland ecosystems are potentially stable systems that are destabilized by improper use by pastoral communities, which causes degradation (Brown 1971; Stebbings 1935). Almost as if tracing the steps of fortress conservation, which has *assumed* rather than *demonstrated* gains of human removal (Kabra 2018), the state of Sikkim implemented a grazing ban with the aim of conserving the biodiversity in and around KNP and KBR. However, following the ban, the Forest Department found it difficult to manage the natural resources in the remote and rugged mountain terrain.

This led to the recognition of the crucial role of traditional knowledge and the experience of local herders in the management of high alpine. Based on this realization, a participatory conservation of *himal* (mountains) was proposed (Shrestha *et al.*, 2013). In 2006, the Forest Department initiated the HR programme, under which 21 individuals were recognized as "the honorary guardians of mountains" and were given stewardship of the alpine areas. This initiative was indeed unique, due to its aspiration of capacity-building among local community members to help conserve the high reaches of KNP. The HRs were trained by organizations like The Mountain Institute (TMI), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC) in basic biodiversity monitoring techniques and in documenting and reporting wildlife crimes and instances

of illegal grazing in and around KNP and KBR. As many HRs were also the Eco-Development Committee (EDC) members who had helped to remove the herders from KNP and were expected to report grazing and other wildlife-related crimes, conflicts with other community members were bound to happen.

3. BEING HIMAL RAKSHAKS: SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND SYSTEMATIC EXCLUSION

While there seemed to be an evident sense of pride in being honorary guardians of their own mountains, the HRs mentioned that they often have to deal with hostility and social exclusion in the villages within the studied area. This was apparent in some of my interviews; ex-herders showed signs of agitation towards the HRs. In November 2019, one HR mentioned that while explaining the impact of grazing to his fellow villagers, he had gotten into a fight with them. Moreover, after that incident, his brother did not speak to him for 10 years. In another incident, in November 2019, two HRs mentioned that during a discussion on the need to conserve the forest, a locally influential herder stated that the HRs had betrayed the community. They mentioned that even after more than 15 years since the implementation of the grazing ban, some households that had previously been involved in livestock herding harboured feelings of hatred and betrayal towards the HRs because the latter had supported the forest department in the removal of their own community members from the forests.

During the field surveys, five of the HRs mentioned that they bore the cost of conservation in their daily lives, as they were excluded from local social events and the associated livelihood opportunities. Social capital is extremely crucial in this region to attain the benefits of seasonal livelihood opportunities associated with trekking tours (as porters and tour guides), seasonal labour in agricultural fields, and daily wage labour under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA). Currently, some ex-herders hold influential positions and, therefore, play a critical role in providing livelihood opportunities in the region. HRs, therefore, lose out on many livelihood opportunities that are controlled by ex-herders because of systematic exclusion.

HRs, as the face of conservation in West Sikkim, have borne the brunt of social exclusion, loss of livelihood opportunities, and antagonism from their own community. These social exclusions are seldom, if ever, considered when evaluating the impacts of conservation policies and decisions.

4. CONCLUSION

Natural resource management, which includes community participation in the name of the Himal Rakshak programme in Sikkim, shares some similarities with earlier stories of community-based conservation in India, where the devolution of policies and community participation emerged as an extension of state control (Lele 2004; Sarin, Singh, Sundar, and Bhogal 2003). However, while the Himal Rakshak initiative started with the aim of conserving KNP and KBR by involving knowledgeable local individuals in the monitoring of protected areas, it has a unique angle in that it valorizes local knowledge *only* in forms and actions that dovetail state policy. All the while, HRs have mixed feelings of contentment and pride on one hand and disappointment arising from having to bear the cost of conservation and social exclusion on a daily basis on the other. There has been a rapid increase in the discourse around community participation and local knowledge in conservation policy and practices. However, the unique case of the HRs in the Sikkim Himalayas points to the risks and vulnerabilities that emerge from the implementation of community-based conservation initiatives that do not pay adequate attention to long-term social outcomes for the members of the local community who become the flag-bearers of conservation programmes.

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