

Submitted Abstract

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First Author First Name Last Name	Madison Paige (1) Stevens
Submitting Author First Name Last Name	Madison Paige Stevens
Correspondence	madison.stevens.ubc@gmail.com
Co-Authors >> E-Mails will be not listed	Rawat, Shalini (2); Ramesh, Krishnamurthy (3)
Organisations	1: University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada 2: ERA University, Lucknow, India 3: Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, India
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Abstract

Human-wildlife conflict presents a persistent challenge for global biodiversity conservation. Yet in many communities who live closely with wildlife, local norms and ethics of care towards wild animals continue to enable coexistence and sustain local conservation efforts. In the Uttarakhand Himalaya, a biodiversity hotspot, van panchayat community forests support agro-pastoralist livelihoods and forest conservation through a co-management arrangement between local communities and the state. While the governance dimensions of the van panchayat are well documented, their impacts on wildlife are sparsely investigated, leaving uncertainty about whether and how community forest management contributes to conservation-compatible landscapes in the region. Among these forest-dependent mountain communities, are wildlife perceived as a threat to livelihoods, as kin who belong in these forests, or both, and what are the implications of these perceptions for biodiversity across the landscape? Informed by open-ended interviews gathered during a scoping study in 2019-2020 and household surveys conducted in 202 in fifteen community forests in Pithoragarh District, Uttarakhand, we explore the nature of human-wildlife relations in van panchayats. While results indicate high prevalence of human-wildlife conflict and associated hardships (mentioned by 71% of survey participants), many participants (60%) expressed persistent ethics of care, concern, tolerance, appreciation, or responsibility for wild animals. Moreover, residents frequently discussed the role of wildlife in maintaining healthy forests; many view continued forest conservation as imperative for mitigating conflict and ensuring peaceful coexistence in the landscape (34%). Individual affective perceptions of wildlife varied considerably, mediated by tradition and spiritual connections, management regimes, livelihood demands, and everyday encounters. These experiences inform mountain communities' decisions and coping strategies for coexisting with their wild neighbours and are key to understanding their role as conservation actors.