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Title: Human-bear conflict in the Lahaul valley, Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract: The Himalayan region has a history of people and wildlife sharing space. Less than 10 percent of the region is designated as protected areas, but wildlife populations occur across the region and are not restricted to protected areas alone. The region is witnessing an unprecedented socio-economic change due to, improved connectivity and integration with domestic and international markets, rapid growth in tourism, development of linear infrastructure and a growing human population with new aspirations. The region is facing increasing pressures to support a multitude of human enterprise and as human footprint and interface increases, so does the conflicts with the wildlife in the region. Loss of livestock due to predation by carnivores such as snow leopard, wolves and bears often causes severe economic losses to the local communities, imposes hidden costs, and increases vulnerability. Similarly, loss of crops to bears and wild ungulates also imposes cost on people sharing space with wildlife. The Lahaul valley of Himachal Pradesh is a transition zone between the Trans-Himalayas and the Greater Himalayas and that endows it with rich floral and faunal diversity from both the regions. The resident agro-pastoral community primarily practice agriculture while the transhumant Gaddi community rears livestock, primarily sheep and goats. Earlier studies indicate a growing human-wildlife conflict with bear being reported as the species most often in conflict with people. This conflict ranged from losses to crops including recently introduced and valuable exotic vegetables such as broccoli and iceberg lettuce, apple as well as livestock depredation. I focused on understanding the nuances of human-bear relationships, the nature and extent of conflict and mitigation strategies the local communities use. I administered a structured questionnaire to 197 respondents from 26 villages in Lahaul. Other than the village people, the Gaddi formed a major part of our study. My results show that the resident community lost 83 heads of livestock while the Gaddi community lost 165 heads of livestock amounting to a total economic loss of 46,50,000 INR between 2019 and 2020 (twenty months). The economic loss due to crop loss in 2019-2020 due to bears alone was INR 6,41,170 for 71 households. While people overall exhibited a positive attitude towards bears despite losing crops and livestock to bears, their tolerance towards bears was low. An ordinal logistic regression analysis showed that crop damage by bears was the viiprimary determinant of reduced tolerance of people to bears. The people reported deploying a range of interventions to deal with bears but most of these interventions lacked effectiveness. I present a nuanced understanding of the relationship between people and bears and suggest potential steps to mitigate human bear conflict in the region.

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