



## Study of Ecological Distress faced by the Gaddi pastoralists of the Himalayas

A FOREST WALK IN THE HIMALAYAS

### Ecological Stress

We looked at 'Ecological stress' as the unease or anxiety that can be linked causally to changes in ecology. The Anthropocene has seen rapid changes in ecology that affect us all, but these changes are more relevant and their effects more immediately felt by people who are directly dependent on nature or exposed to its vagaries.

A roadside laborer in the city, for instance, would experience global warming more intimately than an office worker. Similarly, rain-dependent agriculture would be more vulnerable to climate change than that dependent of ground water.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT:

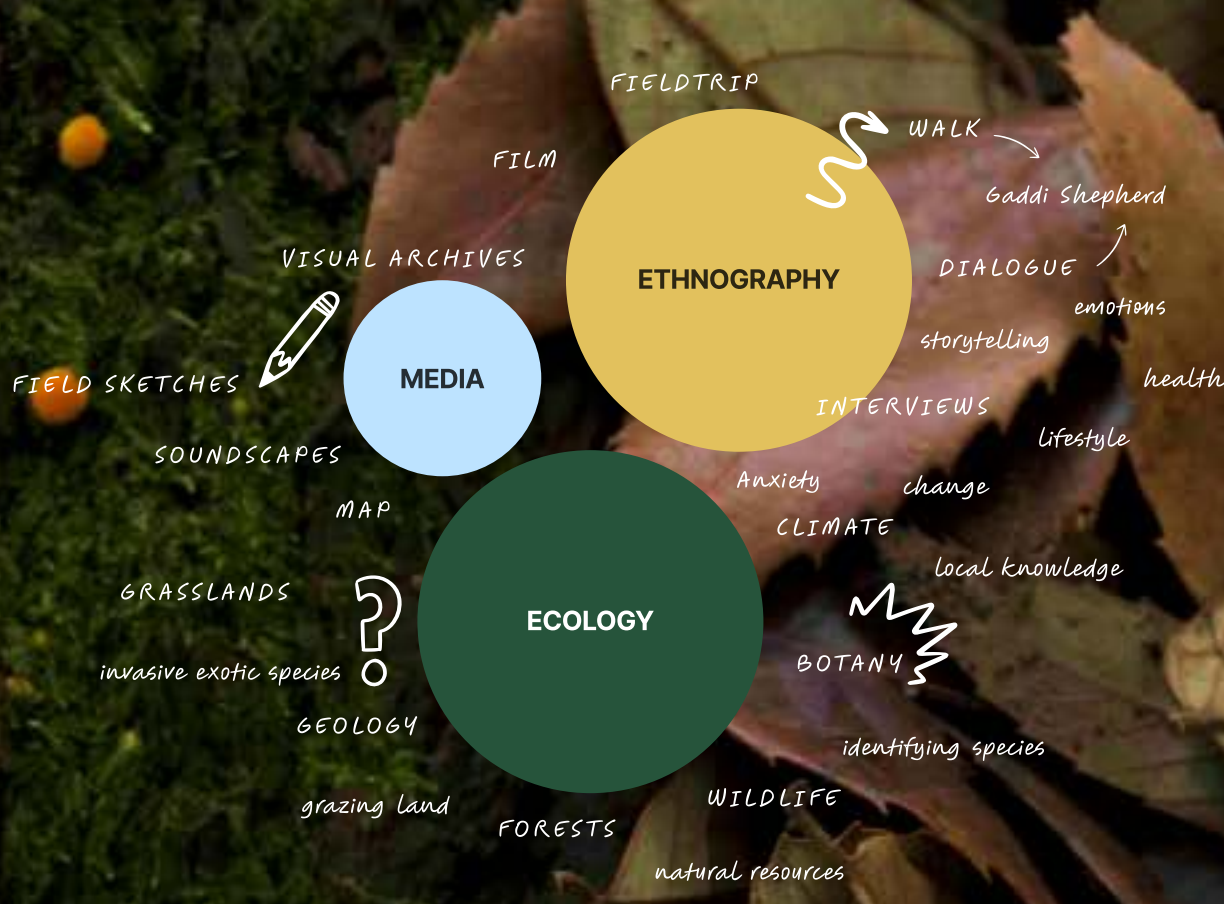
1. How would you characterize Ecological Stress in your field site?
2. Whom would you talk to, and where would you have these conversations?
3. What tools do you think might aid the discussion?
4. Can you think of relevant questions or ways in which the people you are talking to can speak about their environment objectively, through the lens of another?



**WRITING ACTIVITY:** Write an essay about how ecological changes affect you. Are there activities/ behaviours in your daily life that are affected by changes in ecology or climate? It could be something you eat, how you travel, or where you wait for the bus. Are there others who share your environment and are affected differently by the same changes?



### Ideating tools for fieldwork



### Why embark on a walk?

The collaboration between Dr.Nikita Simpson(anthropolgist) , Sartaj Ghuman (wildlife scientist), Shyam (mounatineer and a Gaddi shepherd) and Soujanya (new media artist) led to the exploration of the idea of curated nature walks as a research methodology to understand Ecological Distress.

The objectives were to:

- A) to engage with the semi-nomadic Gaddi shepherd community and understand what their nature of relation is with their ecology, by walking the trails that they take to navigate their herd of sheep and goat across the grazing lands,
- B) to understand the relation between ecological distress and mental distress in local context,
- C) to document the conversation, processes and learnings from this walk.

### Case study / Pilot Walk

By talking to herders, we were able to identify two ways in which changing ecology leads to stress for them:

Gaddi herders live a large proportion of their lives exposed to the elements, and with their livelihood intricately linked to delicately-balanced ecological cycles in relatively fragile ecosystems, they are at the forefront when it comes to facing the brunt of ecological stress.

#### 1. Increasing unpredictability in the weather.

Weather dictates the rhythms to which vegetation grows and wilts, and thus, in turn dictates the herders' annual migrations up into the mountains and back down. Changes in the onset of winter and altered patterns of rain and snow leads to grasses sprouting late or early and throws the herders' movements off-beat.

In the short term, sudden, heavy rains, snow, or fluctuations in temperature can cause the herd to go hungry, fall ill, or in the worst case, lead to the death of the animals.

#### 2. Degrading pastures

In the mountains, repeated trampling around the deras, where a herd rests everyday, and an overdose of nutrient-rich droppings and urine has led to a few, hardy species taking over these places. Given a choice, the sheep and goats don't eat these plants and they would rather go farther afield to graze.

These non-preferred species of plants are also making their way into what used to be good pastures. The animals, therefore, have to travel further and work harder to eat their fill. Sometimes they're still hungry when it's time to head back.

