THE GREAT HIMALAYAN NATIONAL PARK

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The Struggle to Save the Western Himalayas

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Dedicated to our wives:

Anita Sanjeeva Pandey
and
the late Anne-Marie Gaston

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FOREWORD

During the spring of 1969 I was working at Haritalyangar, in Bilaspur District of Himachal, searching for fossils in the Shiwalik sediments of the Himalayan front ranges. This was jungle fowl and peacock territory, the ridges of the hills clothed in chil pine. On clear days, though, from the summit of the ridges, the white line of the Himalayan snows was clearly visible. I dreamed of climbing in the clear glacial air and looking down on the teeming plains.

Later the same year, after my geological work was finished, I went to Manali with my partner, Anne-Marie, to escape the heat of Delhi. It was then a small, sleepy town with a large Tibetan bazaar and a scattering of guest houses. In those days, the Rohtang Pass, at the head of the valley, was as far as foreigners were allowed to go into the Indian Himalayas. I can vividly remember watching flocks of purple grandalas swirling against the sky while avalanches rumbled down the slopes of Beas Rishi and the high ridges stretching below the pass, before the motor-road had been completed. We stayed in a room heated by a one bar heater: It was very cold but the air was sharp and clear and the vistas dramatic. I fell in love with the Himalayas.

From 1970, Anne-Marie and I lived in Delhi and during the early 1970s we made several trips to the outer ranges in Himachal Pradesh, the area of 'hill stations' where the officials and soldiers of the British Raj fled in summers from the oppressive heat of the plains. Our commitment to the Himalayas was greatly influenced by a twist of fate in 1972. While we were travelling in South India, at Hampi, capital of the great 17th century Vijayanagara Empire, we met Penelope Chetwode, an Englishwoman whose father had been Commander-in-Chief of the Indian army near the end of the British Raj. In her married persona she was Mrs John Betjeman, wife of the British poet laureate of the time. Penelope had driven overland in a camper with a painter friend, John Nankivell, but was alone in Hampi. When she heard that we could not find any accommodation she invited us to spend the night in her van, while she slept in a nearby temple.

AJ Gaston and Anne Marie Gaston
(Photo: Peter Garson)

Penelope fired our imagination while relating her experiences of the tiny wooden hill temples, dedicated to local gods, that she had studied in Himachal Pradesh. She gave us a copy of her book, *Kulu: The End of the Habitable World* which opened our eyes to the unique culture of the Western Himalayas. After that, on many occasions, we travelled to remote Himachal villages to photograph temples and witness the worship of their goddesses and gods, carved in wood or cast in bronze, often in the form of rather enigmatic masks. Alongside the carvings on the temple walls we sometimes found the skulls and horns of goats, both domestic and wild. As a zoologist, I was interested in the species represented and I began to realise that the surrounding forests and mountains contained, or had contained, a greater diversity of wildlife than I had imagined.

Our favourite places were small villages tucked away in high valleys, where dense forest swept upwards to the tree-line and jagged snow-peaks rimmed the horizon. We walked many trails where we saw no one but groups of shepherds (*gaddis*), dressed in quaint-skirted woollen costumes, with their huge herds of sheep and goats, the men often carrying small lambs. Sometimes, too, we met large herds of milking buffaloes, the property of the Muslim gujjars, who took their animals and their families to pastures in the higher forests each spring.

Everything in those days was small and personal. In Chamba, the ancient Gaddi capital of the 8-9th century, we were invited to take tea with the Raja and his mother, photographed the reserve collection of miniature paintings in the local museum, met the local bronze maker, last master of the Himalayan lost-wax technique and got drunk with him on his homemade hooch. Travel was uncertain: buses broke down or fell in the ravines, bridges were washed away and replaced with rocks balanced on tree-trunks: On one occasion a suitcase was scraped off the

Gushaini Mandir at present *(Photo: Sanjeeva Pandey)*

roof of the bus by the overarching rocks above the road, but it was impossible to descend from the vehicle to retrieve it because the road was so narrow that the footboard overhung a precipice.

One trip, in 1972, stands out in my memory for focusing my attention on the need for conservation in the Western Himalayas. We left the Shimla-Rampur (Bushahr) bus at Duttnagar, on the banks of the Sutlej, and, as there was no bridge, crossed the river by *jhulla,* a metal cage hauled across on a wire by a local on the other side of the river who wanted to cross in the other direction. From there, we trekked to Nirmand, a large village with a very old and famous temple of Parasurama, to Arsu and onward to Sarahan (Kullu District), where the village is set beside a wonderful meadow with willow trees and a clear-running stream. After a day in Sarahan, we crossed the Bashleo Pass (3300 m) and came down to Bathad and then Gushaini, in the Tirthan watershed, now the start of many treks into the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP).

Looking north from the pass, I was confronted, for the first time, by a valley which was largely forested. As we descended on the north side, we passed through dense forests of mixed conifers, oaks and horse chestnuts. Along the way, I saw pheasants and the tracks of wild ungulates. The woods were carpeted with flowers, while warblers, tits, minivets and flycatchers flitted everywhere in the canopy. I suddenly realised how different this forest was from the hollowed-out, silent plantations around Manali. This was a forest throbbing with diversity and most of it was characteristic of that particular altitude zone. I had already trekked extensively in the lower hills and I was aware that such richness was hard to find. I began to wonder just what was left of West Himalayan wildlife.

Later, in 1976, when we were in Oxford and I was finishing my D.Phil. on the behaviour of babblers, I conceived the idea of going back to the Himalayas for a prolonged trip. I put out a call for volunteers and two of my fellow graduate students – Mac Hunter and Peter Garson – responded enthusiastically. Between the three of

River crossing by jhulla, a metal cage hauled across on a wire *(Photo: Sanjeeva Pandey)*

us, we set about planning and raising funds. Initially, I had thought in terms of an intensive study covering a limited geographical area and concentrating on ecological studies of the most critically endangered species. However, discussing my ideas with Mac and Peter, it became clear that intensive studies in the Western Himalayas were premature. Instead, the priority seemed to demand a broad survey of wildlife and undisturbed forest to discover what remained of the fauna and how seriously it was endangered: something which, up to that point, had not been attempted.

We chose to carry out our study in Himachal Pradesh because (excluding the trans-Himalayan areas) it is one of India's most heavily forested states, with approximately 40 per cent of its land area supporting forest, and this percentage is much greater if we exclude the extensive areas that are above the natural limit of tree growth. Himachal Pradesh also contains large areas which are or were covered in moist temperate forest, a habitat type rich in the types of wildlife that we were most concerned about, and substantial areas of which remained only mildly disturbed by human activities, according to the information we could obtain. We christened our venture, Himachal Wildlife Project (HWP).

There was already general agreement that wildlife indigenous to the moist temperate forests was on the decline;

hunting and habitat destruction were both being blamed. The human population and, hence, pressure on natural resources, was rising quickly. An official commitment to expansion of the road network in rural areas was likely to have an intrusive effect on the natural ecosystems of the region. This expansion of roads would undoubtedly facilitate commercial timber-extraction and mining in formerly remote areas. However, there was no published information on the rate or extent of forest habitat damage in Himachal Pradesh, and nor was there any documented information on the extent to which different species of wildlife had been affected.

Despite human encroachment, we were aware that large and relatively

Bashleo-Pass *(Photo: Sanjeeva Pandey)*

undisturbed areas of forest persisted in the upper Beas and Ravi valleys. Two specific localities within the upper Beas Valley had already been proposed as sites for National Parks. One was in the Beas catchment north of Manali, where Solang Nalla had been proposed as a potential Biosphere Reserve under the UNESCO Programme, Man and the Biosphere (UNESCO 1977). The other proposal related to the possible creation of a National Park in the Tirthan and Upper Sainj valleys, which converge on each other and meet the Beas from the east some 60 kms south of Manali.

Because of these previous suggestions, one of the aims of the Himachal Wildlife Project was to make recommendations concerning the creation of National Parks

in Himachal Pradesh. In the absence of any detailed information on local wildlife, either within or outside the two proposed areas, we considered our time was best spent in conducting extensive surveys in many different localities within the upper Beas and Ravi catchments, to provide a prioritisation, based on concrete biodiversity assessments.

In UK, Keith Howman, then President of the World Pheasant Association, was an early and enthusiastic backer and the Association supported me to make some reconnaissance surveys in 1978, for which Anne-Marie and I returned to India, basing ourselves in a one-room flat on the roof of a house near the centre of New Delhi. To get official sanction for the project, I made the round of relevant ministries of both State and Central governments. The great Salim Ali, a towering figure in Indian conservation (though a small man, in person), and WWF-India, in the person of their Delhi representative, Duleep Matthai, both lent their support.

It would be silly to pretend that organising an undertaking of the scale of the Himachal Wildlife Project is an easy matter, or that everything in the early stages went as we had hoped. There was a distressing period of nearly seven months from the date at which we intended to start, to the point at which we finally had all the necessary clearances to proceed. Fortunately, Keith Howman found funds to support other research projects which I carried out in a private capacity, but which yielded results eventually contributing to those of Himachal Wildlife Project.

Eventually, after nearly two years of slow progress, but with the determined assistance of Nalni Jayal, then the Secretary for Forests in Government of India, we had all the permissions required. The Zoological Survey of India, initially unenthusiastic, sent personnel in the form of the energetic and enthusiastic Dr Srikumar Chattopadhyaya, as well as two graduate students, Girish Kumar and Prakash Tak; Prof CR Babu at Delhi University sent students to study the effects of grazing on vegetation (R. Khandwa and B. Vashisht), the State Government allowed us to use rest houses and told their forest staff to assist us; Bombay Natural History Society sent a volunteer, Vivek Matthai, a very energetic young man, and the Mountaineering Institute in Manali lent a hand. Volunteers came from as far afield as Kerala, UK and USA.

The main surveys were carried out during October 1979-October 1980, with work carrying on through the winter,

Himachal Wildlife Project personnel at Manali base, 1980: Rear, Tony Gaston, Vivek Matthai; Front L to R, CR Babu, Malcolm Hunter, Girish Kumar, PC Tak, Peter Garson *(Photo: Peter Garson)*

The Himachal Wildlife Project team in 1983, from the left (on the jeep) Philip McGowan, Peter Garson, Surinder Vats, (front) Sunjoy Monga (BNHS), unknown, two Forest Guards, Rajiv Bharti, the late M.P. Sharma (RO Sainj)". *(Photo: Peter Garson)*

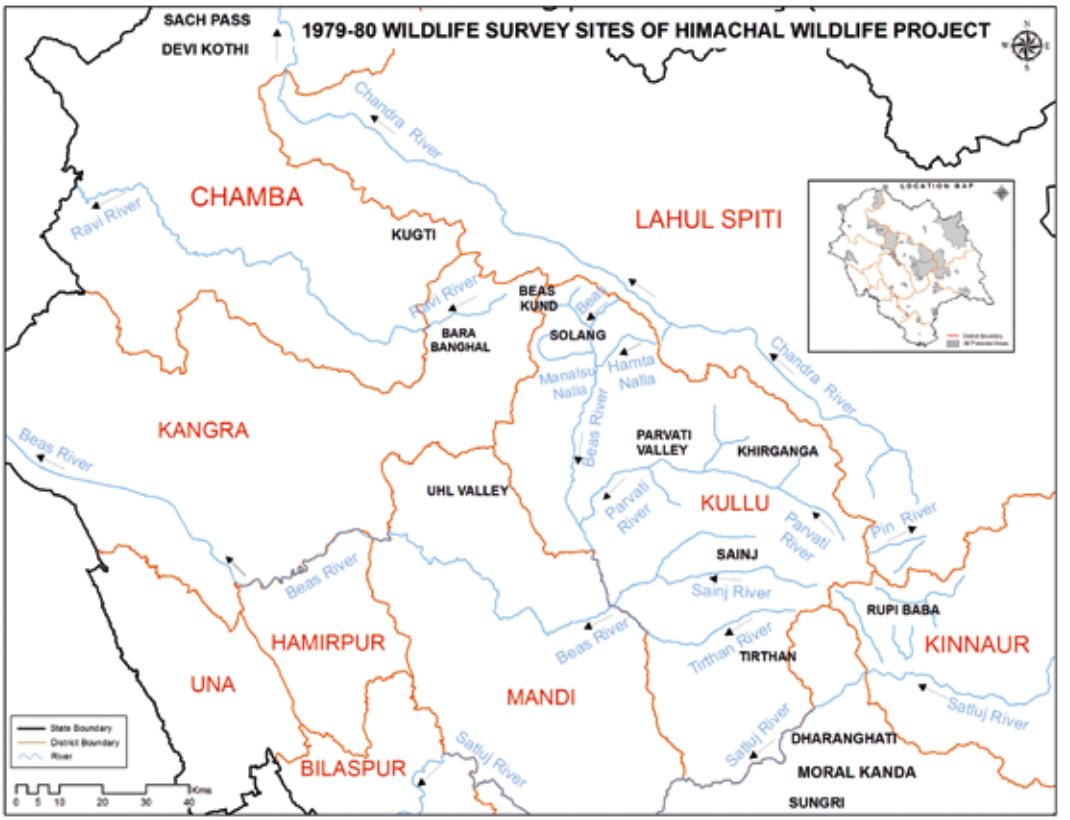
using snow shoes to access high altitudes. Our surveys covered the Kullu Valley and surroundings, including Solang Nalla to Beas Kund, Manalsu and Hamta Nallas, the Parvati valley as far as Khirganga, the Sainj and Tirthan valleys, the Uhl Valley, Bara Bangahal, Kugti and adjacent parts of the Ravi Valley, and Dharangati and Sungri on the Mural Kanda Ridge. We were incredibly naïve at first, but gradually learned to tap into the experience of local *shikari* (hunters). Their expertise was vital in teaching us how to find especially the large ungulates which, owing to heavy pressure from hunting, were extremely shy at that time.

Methods were primitive because in many areas we could only move on existing trails, so systematic surveys were impossible, but the broad patterns of wildlife distributions became clear and seemed to relate strongly to the activities of migrant graziers. Where their flocks passed through in large numbers, wildlife densities were generally low. Where they did not visit, or where their visits were brief, wildlife was generally more abundant. The huge grazing pressure from migrant flocks was a major reason why we excluded the Solang and Hamta Nallas from consideration as National Parks: both valleys are very heavily used by migrant graziers. Conversely, the absence of practicable passes leading north and east from the Tirthan and Sainj valleys was considered likely to be a major factor

in maintaining natural ecosystems in their forests and alpine pastures.

At the end of our surveys, we produced a comprehensive report giving details of the ecology of our study region and the status of wildlife within it (Gaston, Garson & Hunter 1982). Our surveys covered many of the most promising sites and our data on the status of mammals and birds was more current and more comprehensive than anything available previously. Our findings were condensed into a paper for Biological Conservation (Gaston et al. 1983) and several other scientific papers on specific topics. (See Bibliography).

We had been asked by the State Government to choose one area as the most promising for the protection of biodiversity and the creation of a National Park. After



1979-80 Wildlife Survey Sites of Himachal Wildlife Project

reviewing all the areas we had visited, we had no hesitation in recommending the Sainj, JiwaNal and Tirthan catchments, being a group of steep-sided valleys from which no passes led across the mountains to summer pastures in the trans-Himalaya. We were able to demonstrate that the abundance of wildlife in these valleys was the highest of any of the areas we surveyed and also that the vegetation showed much less evidence of browsing by domestic stock than comparable valleys elsewhere in the upper Beas and Ravi catchments. Within four years the State had announced a National Park based on our recommendations and the creation of the Great Himalayan National Park had begun. Peter Garson and I continued to consult for the State Government for a decade after the establishment of the Park and later assisted the Wildlife Institute of India on the design of monitoring surveys for the Park.

Entrance to GHNP in Tirthan Valley, *(Photo: Abhimanyu Pandey)*

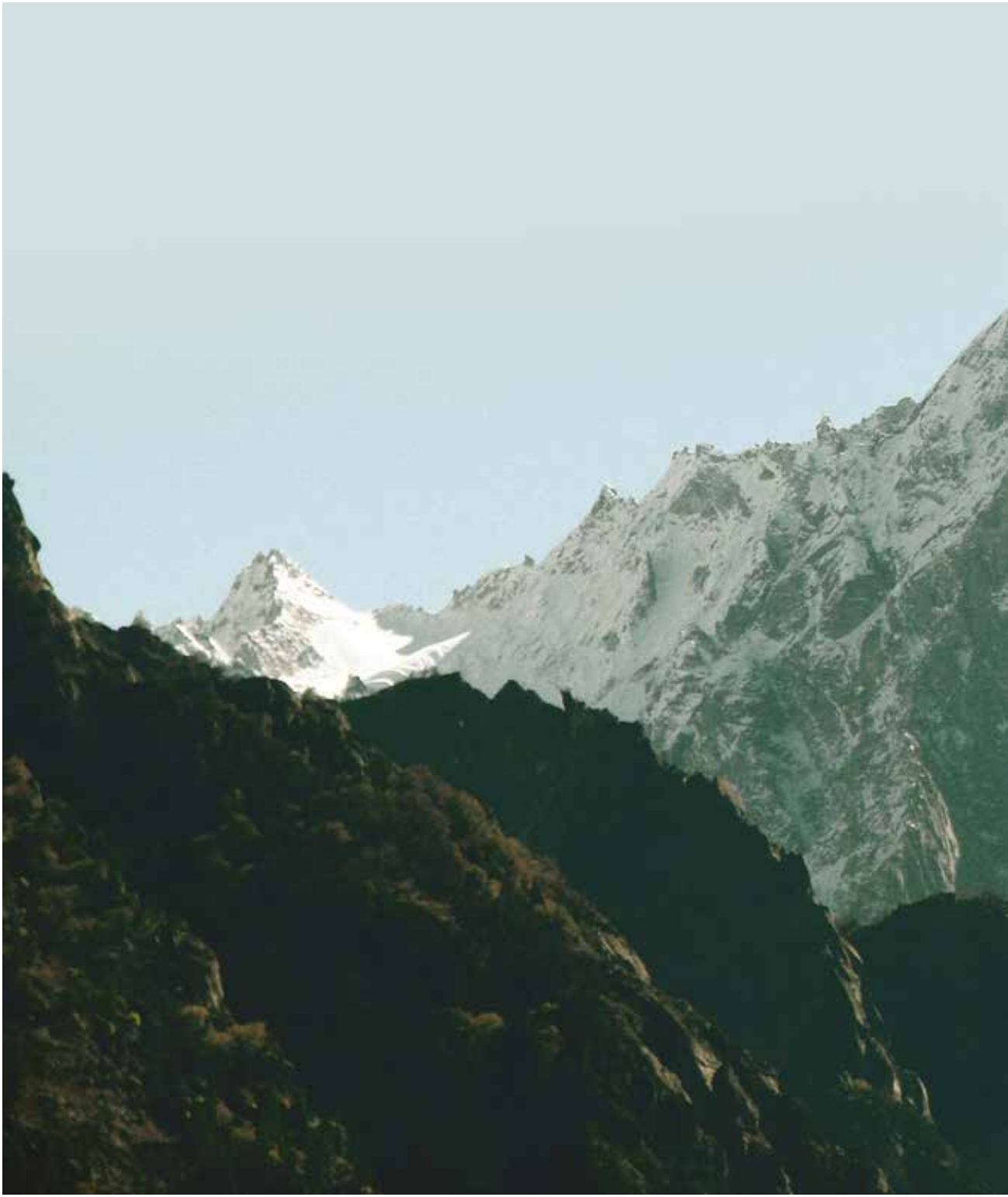
Balak Ram, loaded; a porter with sharp eyes for wildlife sightings

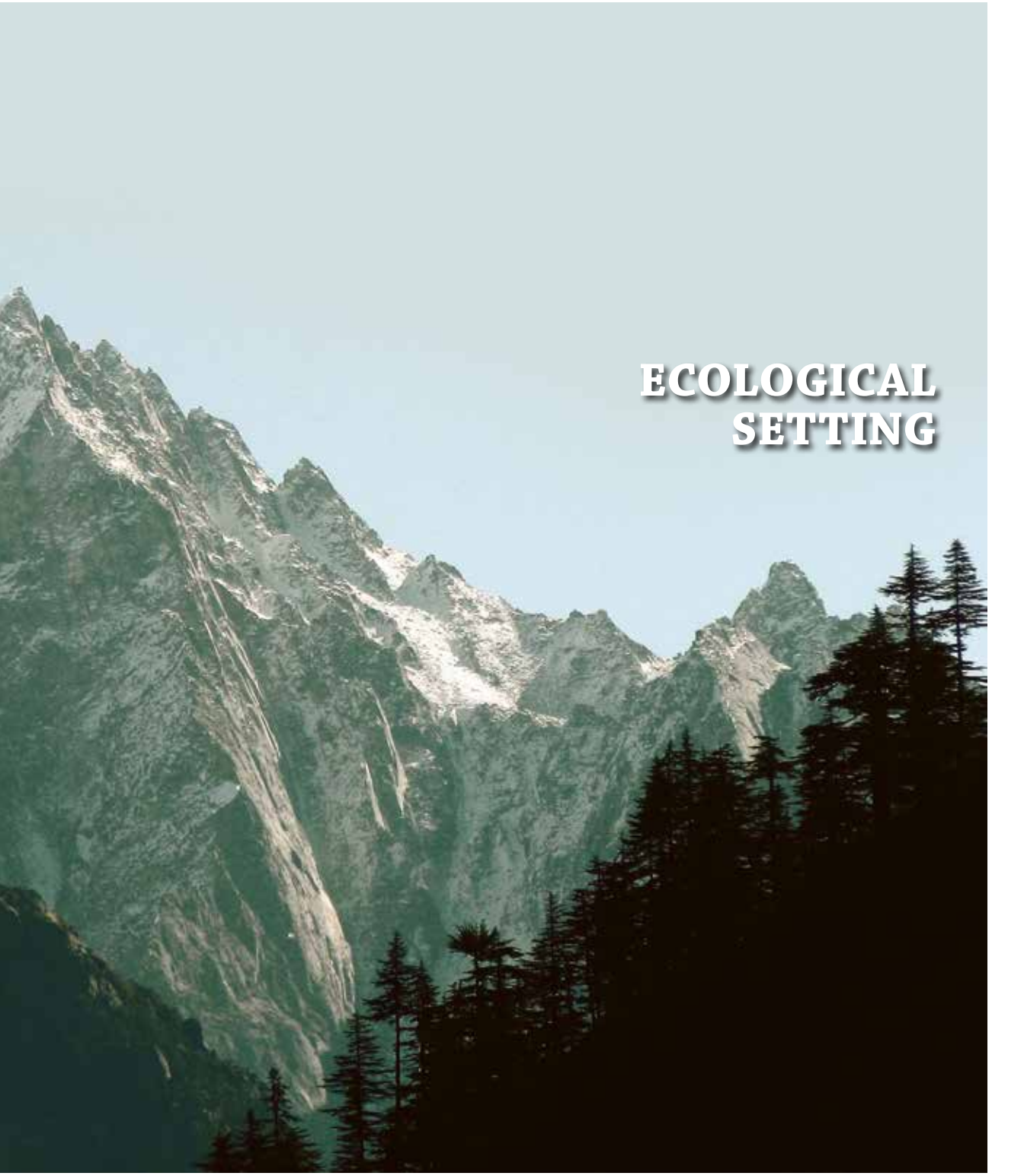
The Himachal Wildlife Project was a product of its time. It would be unthinkable now for a group of raw young foreigners, fresh from graduate school, to come in and swarm all over the countryside doing general wildlife surveys. Nor would it be as necessary, but back then wildlife studies were in their infancy in India – the

Himachal Wildlife Project III, Tirthan: The survey team for Tirthan in 1991, Anne-Marie and Tony Gaston in front, BR Negi (Range Officer) second from the right. *(Photo: Anne-Marie Gaston)*

Wildlife Institute of India was created only in 1982, the Delhi Bird Club could all fit in one car. We had a lot of freedom and access that might not be possible today: high officials in the Indian government would meet and talk with us: In Himachal we met the Chief Minister and other influential people. Also, the estrangement between the Forest Department and local people, which blossomed after the foundation of the Park, had not yet begun and we had no difficulty in getting information from villagers. In hindsight, many things could have been better done, but the main achievement of the Project, in providing a compelling rationale for the creation of Great Himalayan National Park, is unassailable and the culmination, in the designation of the area as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, may be the single biggest reward I have received for my own modest efforts of forty years to abet the conservation of global biodiversity.

—Anthony Gaston





ECOLOGICAL SETTING

When most people think of the Himalayas they think of great peaks, towering above the clouds, ice-fields and glaciers and the screaming jet-stream winds that roar over the crests. The eye is drawn to the distant horizon, with its gleaming snows, as mine was when I was working in Bilaspur District; the foreground hardly registers. Books and movies glamorise the 'assaults' of climbers on the mountain giants of the Himalayas. Heroism is magnified by the sheer scale of the mighty mountain walls. Queues form on the approaches to Everest. Friends I know who have hiked in the mountains are quick to mention the altitude they attained, their shortness of breath, the steepness of the ascents and the frigid cold of 'base camp'. The books, the movies and the trekkers hardly ever mention the wildlife because most people do not encounter large animals, which is what wildlife consists of in the popular imagination. If wildlife is mentioned at all in the accounts of climbers it is to refer to some peculiar tracks in the snow that could only have been made by the mythical Yeti.

The writer and mountaineer John Keay wrote a very well-received book about the Western Himalayas, When Men and Mountains Meet *(1975), but the men he referred to (and they were all male) were all Europeans 'discoverers'. Almost no one has dealt with the actual inhabitants of the mountain who for centuries have eked out a precarious livelihood in the shadow of the peaks. The hill people, if they appear in books at all, tend to be mere accessories to the foreground story of European or city-based Indian travellers. Yet, the setting, of deep valleys separated from one another by toilsome climbs, has created many unique cultural phenomena, in the form of religions, superstitions, arts, crafts and lifestyles. Certainly, the people are as much part of the charm and the story of Great Himalayan National Park as the bees, the birds and the bears.*