

LIVING LANDSCAPES, THRIVING COMMUNITIES

Learning Exchange Documentation

Lessons from Taplejung: Linking Red Panda Conservation, Biodiversity and Livelihoods

Taplejung, Nepal

Restless Development & Samriddha Pahad

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1. Introduction and Background

Over the past year, Restless Development and Samriddha Pahad (SP) have been building a partnership in the Red Panda Habitat area of the Panchthar–Ilam–Taplejung (PIT) corridor. The partnership began with light-touch activities and learning exchanges to better understand the landscape and the communities living and working within it. As this partnership has grown, both organisations agreed to ground a future collaborative conservation-livelihoods programme in direct evidence gathered from the landscape itself, rather than in assumptions made from outside.

This document consolidates the evidence generated across three distinct but complementary data collection activities carried out between mid-2026 as part of the “Living Landscapes, Thriving Communities” learning series, undertaken to inform a joint intervention:

- A virtual learning exchange with five local entrepreneurs from across the Red Panda Habitat Area in Taplejung (31 July 2026), exploring the links between local livelihoods, biodiversity and ecosystem conservation.
- A second closed learning dialogue bringing together the conservation actors themselves – Red Panda Network (RPN), the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area Management Council (KCAMC), and Samriddha Pahad – focused on conservation threats, past interventions, and livelihood–conservation linkages (26 August 2026).
- A structured household survey of 25 community members across Taplejung, conducted jointly by Restless Development and Samriddha Pahad, covering livelihoods, environmental change, youth migration, conservation awareness, and appetite for a future programme.

Each activity was designed to surface a different vantage point on the same underlying question: how can livelihoods and conservation be genuinely integrated in this landscape, rather than treated as separate tracks? Read together, the three sources triangulate a consistent picture that is considerably more specific and more actionable than any one source alone.

1.1 Purpose of this Document

This report exists to document, in one place, everything learned across the series so that it can inform proposal design, be referenced by staff who were not present in the original sessions, and stand as an internal evidence record for the partnership. It is organised so that a reader can either read cover to cover for the full picture, or jump directly to any one session's findings or its detailed question-and-answer annex.

1.2 How to Use this Report

- Section 3 (Cross-Cutting Synthesis) is the fastest way to get the headline picture across all three sources.
- Sections 4, 5 and 6 present each session's findings in full, each followed by a detailed annex of the underlying question-and-answer record.
- Section 7 draws out direct implications for programme and proposal design.

2. Methodology

2.1 Overview of Data Sources

Activity	Date	Format	Participants / Sample
Entrepreneur Learning Exchange	31 July 2026	Closed virtual webinar, recorded internally with consent	5 local entrepreneurs across Taplejung livelihoods sectors
Conservation Stakeholder Learning Dialogue (Round 2)	2026 (second in the series)	Closed virtual dialogue, recorded internally	10 participants – RPN, KCAMC, Samriddha Pahad, Restless Development, and the Ward Chair of Olangchung Gola
Restless Development x Samriddha Pahad Household Survey	2026	Structured questionnaire (Google Form), administered in the field	25 respondents across Taplejung and settlements

Both learning dialogues followed a semi-structured discussion guide, with a facilitator posing planned questions while allowing organic follow-up; not every planned question was reached with every participant due to time. The survey used closed-ended scaled and multiple-choice questions alongside several open-ended questions, administered in person or via a shared digital form.

2.2 Guiding Approach

Across all three activities, the guiding principle was to listen first rather than to arrive with a predetermined problem statement or programme design. The entrepreneur session was framed around the belief, stated at its outset, that business and biodiversity go hand in hand: healthy forests, clean water, and protected wildlife can mean more livelihood and employment opportunity for local people, not less. The stakeholder dialogue and survey extended this same evidence-first approach to the institutional and household levels respectively.

2.3 Limitations

- Sample sizes for both learning dialogues are small (5 and 10 participants respectively) and were purposively selected rather than randomly sampled; findings should be read as rich qualitative evidence from informed voices, not as statistically representative of the whole landscape.
- The survey sample (n=25) is modest and drawn unevenly across wards, with some settlements represented by a single respondent; percentages should be read as directional rather than precise population estimates.
- Some planned discussion questions were not reached in the live sessions due to time constraints; these gaps are noted in the relevant annexes.
- All sessions were recorded internally with participant consent for evidence-gathering purposes only, not for public release.

3. Cross-Cutting Synthesis: What the Three Sources Say Together

The individual sessions and the survey were designed independently of one another, which makes it especially notable that they converge, repeatedly and specifically, on the same handful of underlying dynamics. This section draws out those points of convergence before the full session-level findings are presented.

3.1 Market linkage and storage, not production, is the binding constraint

This is the single most repeated finding across every source. In the entrepreneur session, Dil Kumar (agri-trader) stated it most directly: production is not the problem — what a farmer produces cannot sustain them if it cannot be sold. He cited the Maitighar Mandala farmers' protest, where growers dumped tomatoes to protest low farm-gate prices and inadequate storage and transport infrastructure. In the stakeholder dialogue, RPN independently described an almost identical dynamic at the institutional level: a past handicraft-training programme in allo and cardamom fibre failed because no market linkage was built in, which directly led RPN to create its Habre Enterprises guaranteed-purchase model. In the survey, “no buyers, customers, or market” and “limited business idea, no money or access to finance” were named among the top personal obstacles to starting or growing a livelihood.

Implication: A programme built around production-first training risks repeating a documented failure. Market linkage, storage, and guaranteed-purchase mechanisms (on the model of Habre Enterprises) should be treated as the core intervention, not an add-on.

3.2 Cardamom farming is a proven, organic example of livelihood and conservation reinforcing each other

Both learning dialogues converged independently on cardamom as the clearest existing case of a livelihood that is already conservation-positive. Because cardamom requires standing shade trees, its rise as the dominant cash crop has discouraged the slash-and-burn forest clearing once used for maize, and participants in the stakeholder dialogue pointed to increased sightings of deer and other wildlife near settlements as a tangible indicator of habitat recovery. In the survey, cardamom farming received the single highest mean rating of any livelihood as an opportunity for young people (8.4 out of 10), ahead of agriculture/livestock (8.0) and tourism (5.8), and was the most frequently selected “most promising” livelihood option.

Implication: Cardamom-linked livelihood support is both the most conservation-aligned and the most locally validated entry point available, and should anchor rather than accompany the programme's livelihood component.

3.3 Livelihood decline converts directly into conservation threats, and the reverse is also true

The stakeholder dialogue traced a specific causal chain: as yak and chauri herding declined over the past 20–25 years (driven by China's post-COVID closure of its yak market and the absence of a legal domestic yak-meat market in Nepal), herding dogs left behind have gone feral and now prey on red

panda – a livelihood decline converting directly into a new conservation threat. The entrepreneur session showed the same dynamic running in the opposite, positive direction: cardamom fibre handicrafts and shade-tree cultivation already function as informal conservation without being recognised or supported as such.

Implication: The programme's theory of change should explicitly model livelihood shifts as a conservation lever in both directions, rather than treating livelihoods and conservation as parallel tracks.

3.4 The threat picture is structural and indirect, not primarily poaching

KCAMC field staff confirmed no recent direct evidence of poaching, and historical poaching (mainly of musk deer) has already declined substantially. The dominant present-day threats – hydropower and road construction, forest fire, feral dogs, and climate-driven habitat shifts – are structural and largely outside individual household control.

Implication: A problem statement built around household-level behaviour change or anti-poaching enforcement would misdiagnose the landscape. The more accurate and fundable framing positions conservation threats as downstream of livelihood and infrastructure change.

3.5 There is real institutional capacity and at least one proven, transferable model already in the landscape

RPN's Habre Enterprises model, and its professionalised red panda ecotourism programme in Ilam (15–17 years old), are both proven models not yet extended into Taplejung itself, where the equivalent work (the Gyabla trail concept) is still at the planning stage. A UNESCO Biosphere Reserve nomination is also live and substantively close to meeting UNESCO's baseline standard, with documentation and continuity as the main outstanding gap.

Implication: The proposal's strongest positioning is extending and scaling proven models into a currently uncovered geography, and supporting a live, time-bound institutional opportunity (the Biosphere nomination) – not introducing conservation awareness from scratch.

3.6 Community appetite for a new programme is high and specific, not generic

In the survey, 96% of respondents (24 of 25) said they would join a free skills training or livelihood pilot programme if offered close to home, and 96% expressed interest (“very interested” or “yes”) in a paid or supported role monitoring wildlife or protecting forest. Confidence in starting or growing a business was high (mean 7.6/10), yet local organisations and institutions were rated as providing very little current support for youth livelihoods (mean 2.4 out of 5), and roughly half of respondents (12 of 25) reported no prior participation in any conservation, livelihoods, or skills-training programme.

Implication: Demand for a new programme is not a barrier; the gap is one of institutional support and delivery, not of will or confidence on the community side.

4. Session 1: Entrepreneur Learning Exchange

Date: 31 July 2026 · Organised by: Restless Development and Samriddha Pahad · Format: Closed virtual learning dialogue, recorded internally with participant consent

4.1 Purpose

The purpose of the session was to listen first, rather than deciding in advance what problems needed solving or what kind of programme should be designed. The two organisations wanted to hear directly from entrepreneurs already living and working in the Red Panda Habitat landscape about the relationship between their livelihoods and the natural environment they depend on. The guiding belief going in, stated at the start of the session, was that business and biodiversity go hand in hand.

4.2 Participants

Name	Business or Role	Location	Years Active
Nandu Baniya	Hotel Pathibhara (lodge and hotel)	Phungling, Taplejung	About 10 years
Maya Gurung	Chandan Fiber Udyog (cardamom fibre handicrafts)	Phungling market area	About 14 years
Manisha Bhattarai	Manabhara Industries and Suppliers (herbal essential oils, soap, compost)	Taplejung	About 4 years
Dil Kumar Menyangbo Limbu	Agri-entrepreneur and produce trader; District Vice Chair, national farmers federation	Taplejung Sadar Municipality	About 15–25 years
Basant Limbu	Founder, IT Academy Taplejung	Taplejung	Since 2023

4.3 Key Findings

4.3.1 Every livelihood in the room depends directly on biodiversity, even when it is not framed that way

All five participants confirmed that their business could not exist without the natural environment around them – something rarely articulated in these terms before. Dil Kumar put it plainly: “there is no other process by which agriculture happens.” Manisha said her business “would not run at all” without local herbs. Nandu offered the most developed version of the idea, framing his hotel as, in effect, a way of selling nature itself, referencing the Shinta Mani Mustang property as an example of what this can look like at scale, and noting candidly that his own hotel has not yet learned to package and sell nature that way.

4.3.2 Environmental change is visible, specific, and consistently reported — but not always framed as negative

- Nandu has not seen snowfall near his hotel in Phungling for more than a decade, despite one or two years of light snow when he arrived around 2013.
- Dil Kumar described a 30-year shift from reliable annual snowfall to unpredictable patterns, plants growing in new places, and medicinal herbs shifting altitude bands.
- Nandu and Dil Kumar both pointed to unplanned road construction and development, not climate change alone, as a major visible driver of forest loss near settlements.
- Basant flagged new health risks from a warming climate, including snakebite incidents and lowland diseases such as dengue appearing in hill districts.
- The picture is not uniformly negative: Dil Kumar noted warming has helped vegetable production at mid-altitude bands (1,200–1,500m) in the near term, even while flagging longer-term risk — a nuance relevant to how conservation messaging is framed with these communities.

4.3.3 Formal connection to KCAMC and conservation governance is minimal to nonexistent

Four of five participants' businesses or farms sit outside the formal KCA boundary, and none described a direct institutional relationship with KCAMC; any connection to conservation actors is emerging only recently, largely through Samriddha Pahad. Basant offered the clearest framing: “putting up a fence and telling people not to cut trees will not achieve conservation — conservation is only possible when we make the community itself understand and love nature.” This gap between deep ecological dependence and near-total disconnection from conservation governance is itself one of the most important findings of the session.

4.3.4 What sustains a business here is often not what one might assume — production is often not the bottleneck

- Nandu's constraint is customer volume and access: his hotel's annual capacity is roughly 14,500–15,000 guests, but it currently serves only about 3,500–3,600 — running at roughly a quarter of capacity — attributed to poor road access, unreliable flights, and weak promotion.
- Maya and Manisha both pointed to skilled workforce shortages and weak digital marketing capability, with Manisha tying this to weak local internet infrastructure specifically.
- Dil Kumar gave the most detailed response: “the problem is not production — whatever a farmer produces today, if it cannot be sold, that farmer's business cannot survive.” He cited the Maitighar Mandala farmers' protest as evidence that this is a district- or province-level infrastructure problem, not something an individual farmer or cooperative can solve alone.
- Basant's constraint is workforce willingness (young people want to see others already earning before committing to training) and the absence of a digital nomad visa policy in Nepal.

4.3.5 Conservation contributions already exist informally, but are neither recognised nor scaled

- Nandu has switched his hotel's cooking fuel from firewood to gas, while acknowledging his hotel was built where forest used to stand.

- Maya's entire handicraft business runs on cardamom fibre — a byproduct otherwise discarded — using no chemical inputs and no imported material.
- Manisha runs a near closed-loop model: essential oil extracted from leaves, with leftover material developed into compost.
- Cardamom growers informally leave shade trees to mature for roughly 10 years before harvesting them commercially — protecting forest cover while sustaining the cardamom economy, done individually with no cooperative structure organising or scaling it.

4.3.6 A concrete, community-originated conservation enterprise idea surfaced during the session

Basant proposed adapting Rwanda's gorilla-trekking tourism model to red pandas in PIT corridor — a paid, permitted, guided multi-day trek into a defined habitat zone, comparable in structure to gorilla treks running at roughly US\$1,500 per person for 3–4 days. Taplejung is already known within Nepal as a red panda area, yet this has never been packaged into an actual paid tourism experience; Nepalis currently travel to Darjeeling's zoo to see red pandas rather than seeing them in the wild at home. This was the single clearest, most fully formed enterprise idea to surface in the entire session.

4.3.7 Tourism potential is significant and underused, supported by hard numbers

- Pilgrimage numbers to Pathibhara Temple, the area's largest single draw, fell from roughly 400,000–450,000 visitors in prior years to about 350,000 last year.
- The Great Himalaya Trail (90+ days) begins in Taplejung, yet remains barely promoted.
- Barriers repeatedly cited: unreliable road access, unclear permit information for trekkers, weak digital marketing, no digital nomad visa policy, and inaccurate online location information (mapping services have been known to misroute visitors, e.g. toward Phungphunge waterfall).

4.3.8 Willingness to engage in conservation-linked livelihoods exists, but is still tentative

Responses to whether participants would learn wildlife or biodiversity monitoring skills in exchange for income were positive but noticeably less specific and confident than answers to other questions, consistent with the idea being genuinely new. Manisha gave the clearest individual response, expressing personal interest in learning forest and wildlife monitoring so she could both earn from it and teach others.

4.3.9 Cooperative and group membership is common but currently underused as a channel for solutions

Dil Kumar is District Vice Chair of a national farmers federation; Maya belongs to a cardamom-related cooperative that was more active before COVID. Neither cooperative currently addresses the market-linkage or storage gaps identified above, suggesting existing structures are a useful entry point rather than something to build from scratch.

4.4 Summary and Implications

Every business represented depends materially on the surrounding ecosystem, yet almost none has any real institutional connection to the bodies responsible for managing that ecosystem. Several participants are already engaging in practices that function as informal conservation, without recognition or support to scale them. At least one clear, concrete, income-generating idea – red panda trekking – surfaced spontaneously from within the community itself. The clearest and most repeated message, reinforced most strongly by Dil Kumar, is that market access and storage infrastructure, not further production training, is the binding constraint for agricultural livelihoods in this landscape.

4.5 Annex: Detailed Question and Answer Record

The following records what was asked and how each participant responded, organised by the three planned discussion segments. Some questions were asked of all participants, others only of specific individuals whose business made them most relevant, and a few planned questions were not reached due to time.

Segment 1: Business and Lived Environmental Change

Q1. Tell us about your business, what you offer, and how long you have been doing it.

Nandu has run Hotel Pathibhara in Phungling for about 10 years. Maya has run Chandan Fiber Udyog since 2068 BS, making 50–60 different items from cardamom fibre, after an initial 2–4 years introducing the product to people. Manisha registered Manabhara Industries and Suppliers about 4 years ago, extracting essential oils from local herbs (especially titepati) and expanding into soap, handwash, and compost. Dil Kumar has been in business roughly 25 years, shifting from large-scale personal farming to primarily trading other farmers' produce over the last 4–5 years. Basant founded IT Academy Taplejung in 2023, training youth in graphic design and web development, and also runs a “digital nomad” initiative bringing remote workers to Taplejung.

Q2. What changes have you noticed in the local environment over the years (water, land, soil, forest, mountain topography)?

Nandu has not seen snow near his hotel for many years, compared to occasional light snow when he arrived around 2070 BS; forests along the Pathibhara trail have thinned gradually as roads were built. Dil Kumar described a 30-year shift toward unpredictable snowfall, cardamom growing in new places, and medicinal herbs shifting altitude bands. Basant noted rising snakebite incidents and lowland diseases appearing in hill districts, arguing unplanned development, not only climate change, drives much of the visible change. Manisha and Maya did not give detailed personal observations, focusing instead on their supply chains.

Q3. Does anything from nature go directly into your business? What would happen without it?

Nandu said his hotel would become “just a place to sleep” without its natural surroundings. Maya confirmed her entire product line depends on hand-processed cardamom fibre with no outside

material. Manisha said her business “would not run at all” without local herbs. Dil Kumar said plainly there is no version of agriculture that does not depend on nature. Basant tied this to tourism potential rather than direct material inputs, since IT itself needs little direct natural resource input.

Q4. (Handicraft producer) Where do you source your cardamom fibre, and has this gotten easier or harder over time?

Maya sources fibre from surrounding villages and households. It has become harder to source over time since usable fibre only comes from newer cardamom plants, so her supply fluctuates with availability of fresh plant stock.

Q5. (Lodge owner) What do most guests come here to see or do, and has this shifted over the years?

Nandu said domestic and Indian pilgrims come mainly for Pathibhara Temple, though numbers have declined from ~400,000–450,000 in prior years to ~350,000 last year. Foreign trekkers come mainly for Kanchenjunga/Kumbhakarna Himal views and the Kanchenjunga Base Camp trek. He flagged the Great Himalaya Trail (starting in Taplejung) as underused, and confirmed some guests ask about red pandas, though the hotel can only tell them red pandas are found in the region generally.

Q6. Considering you are in a conservation area, have you had interaction with KCAMC? Does your business positively impact conservation?

Nandu's hotel is in Phungling municipality, outside the formal KCA boundary, so there is no real institutional connection; he pointed to switching from firewood to gas as a concrete positive step. Maya and Manisha both said they have no formal relationship with KCAMC. Manisha added that forest decline would definitely hurt her business, and biodiversity increase would help it, though she was doubtful forest area is likely to grow. Dil Kumar's farmland is also outside the formal boundary, with no formal KCAMC relationship, though he informally advises other farmers on land use. Basant offered the broader philosophical framing that fencing off nature does not achieve conservation – community education and livelihood incentive does.

Q7. What is the critical thing your business needs in order to sustain itself?

Nandu named customer volume above all, sharing the capacity/occupancy figures above and attributing the gap mainly to poor road access, unreliable flights, and weak promotion. Maya named skilled workforce shortages, better organised fibre collection, and a marketing gap. Manisha named skilled workforce and digital marketing capability, tied to weak local internet infrastructure. Dil Kumar gave the longest, most detailed answer, stressing that production is not the constraint – market linkage and storage are – citing the Maitighar farmers' protest and his own reduction in farm scale (from 120 ropani to 20–25 ropani) as a direct response to being unable to sell surplus, not declining land quality. Basant named a trainable local workforce and the absence of a digital nomad visa policy as his two biggest constraints.

Segment 2: Conservation-Linked Opportunity

Q8. Do tourists or customers ask you about wildlife, red panda, or the forest here?

Nandu confirmed some guests specifically ask about seeing red pandas, though the hotel cannot currently point them to a specific viewing location or experience.

Q9. Is there anything from the forest, wildlife, or local culture that people would pay for, that is not currently offered?

Manisha named medicinal herbs that do not yet have commercial names or recognition, and undiscovered lakes and waterfalls that are not mapped, promoted, or made easily accessible. When the facilitator raised the plant yangben as a possible example, she confirmed it exists with some harvesting restriction, though products exist at too small a scale for larger markets given difficult terrain and limited cultivation knowledge.

Q10. If the forest or wildlife disappeared or got worse, what would happen to your business?

Manisha said this would definitely hurt her business, since her herb supply depends directly on forest health.

Q11. If local biodiversity and wildlife became richer, would this positively impact your business?

Manisha said yes, though she considered an actual increase unlikely. Maya connected this specifically to cardamom-forest linkage rather than forest in general, since cardamom availability (not forest area broadly) affects her fibre supply.

Q12. Fewer tourists come to KCA compared to Everest or Annapurna — does this hurt your business, or does it not matter much?

Nandu answered this in detail under Q7, with the capacity/occupancy figures as his direct response. He does not see the destination itself as the problem, but rather accessibility and promotion.

Segment 3: Support and Stewardship

Q13. What kind of training or support would help your business the most?

Nandu wants digital marketing and promotion training. Maya wants product development support and branding/digital marketing training, having no branding knowledge currently. Manisha wants skilled workforce and digital marketing training. Dil Kumar was explicit he does not need more production training — he needs storage management support, estimating up to ~20% of produce is lost to spoilage in the monsoon season. Basant said his challenge is convincing young people to commit to training before seeing others already earning, and cited a concrete success: his students completed branding work for a new local coffee roastery, Singzey Coffee Beans, which has since adopted that branding.

Q14. Have you seen, heard of, or thought of an innovative enterprise idea that helps conserve or regenerate local biodiversity?

Manisha described the informal practice among cardamom growers of leaving shade trees to mature for ~10 years before harvesting. Basant gave the most developed answer, proposing a red panda trekking model adapted from Rwanda's gorilla trekking industry (see 4.3.6).

Q15. Would you be interested in learning more about local biodiversity and monitoring, if it could also add to your income and let you share this knowledge with others?

Responses across the group were positive but fairly general. Manisha gave the clearest individual answer, expressing personal interest in learning wildlife and forest monitoring specifically so she could earn from it and teach others.

Q16. Do you think richer or better protected biodiversity would lead to better economic output for your business?

Manisha said yes. Maya again tied this to cardamom-forest linkage specifically. Dil Kumar separated the two issues, saying his declining output is a market failure, not environmental degradation — he had voluntarily reduced farmed land because he could not sell his produce, and suggested forest cover in farming areas may have grown somewhat as land goes fallow, though as a side effect of the market problem rather than something deliberate. Basant pushed back gently on the idea that forest is simply declining, arguing hill-region forest may be increasing in places due to outmigration, while cautioning this is not automatically beneficial if unmanaged (young trees sometimes pulled up before maturity); he argued priority should go to protecting ecologically important species and habitat trees such as rhododendron and the bamboo species used as red panda habitat.

Q17. Are you part of any savings group or cooperative?

Dil Kumar is District Vice Chair of a national farmers federation and active in agricultural cooperative work. Maya is part of a cardamom-related cooperative that was more active before COVID, but has since scaled back to mainly coordination work.

5. Session 2: Conservation Stakeholder Learning Dialogue

Format: Closed virtual learning dialogue, recorded internally. Second in the learning dialogue series, following the entrepreneur session.

Where the first session focused on livelihoods and lightly touched on conservation, this session flipped the emphasis: it brought together the conservation actors themselves – Red Panda Network (RPN), Samriddha Pahad, and the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area Management Council (KCAMC) – to discuss how conservation and livelihoods can genuinely be integrated in the PIT corridor.

5.1 Participants

Name	Organisation / Role
Ashish Ghimire	Restless Development – Communications and Partnerships
Shailendra Dangol	Restless Development – CSO and Youth Engagement
Ruby Shrestha	Samriddha Pahad – Senior Officer, Fundraising, Partnership and Communication
Mukesh Kumar	Samriddha Pahad – Project Management, Eco Project
Raju Magar	Samriddha Pahad – Senior Technical Officer, Taplejung
Adarsha Chhetri	KCAMC – Ranger (4 years)
Sujan Rai	KCAMC – Accounts Officer (~10–12 years with the council)
Nishan Limbu	Red Panda Network Nepal – Outdoor Coordinator, Himalayan Habre Center, Taplejung
Sonam	Red Panda Network representative (joined and left partway through)
Nishal Karki	Samriddha Pahad – Senior Project Officer
Ward Chair of Olangchung Gola (Ward 7, Phaktanglung Rural Municipality)	Former KCAMC council member secretary; personal background as a herder – gave the most extensive and detailed testimony in the session

5.2 Key Findings

5.2.1 The threat picture is indirect and structural, not primarily poaching

KCAMC field staff confirmed no recent direct evidence of poaching, and historical poaching pressure (mainly on musk deer, driven by cross-border demand from Tibet) has already declined substantially, credited to community-based anti-poaching monitoring and reduced cross-border economic incentive. The real threats identified are indirect and largely driven by development and demographic change:

- Hydropower and road construction, licensed federally, are the most concrete drivers of habitat disturbance and fragmentation – a policy and infrastructure-level threat, not a household behaviour problem.
- Forest fire is treated by RPN as a serious, high-consequence hazard, already the subject of dedicated mitigation training.
- Feral guard dogs, left behind as traditional yak and chauri herding collapses, have emerged as an unexpected predation pressure on red panda – a livelihood decline converting directly into a new conservation threat.
- Climate change is altering habitat use patterns in a documented, specific way (see 5.2.2).

Implication for the proposal: The problem statement should resist a default “poaching and overharvesting” framing. The more accurate and more fundable framing is that conservation threats here are downstream of livelihood and infrastructure change – the rationale for an integrated livelihood-conservation programme rather than a pure protection programme.

5.2.2 Climate change has specific, evidenced mechanisms worth citing directly

- RPN's own 2019 radio-collar study (published 2024, Ilam and Panchthar) found red pandas move to higher elevation during heavy or unpredictable snowfall, likely to avoid increased human movement at lower elevations – a citable, published, geographically adjacent data point.
- Two named glacial lakes (Ghanglung Tal near Olangchung Gola, and Naga Tal in Yangma) have already burst historically and remain at risk, with no completed volume assessment or downstream risk mapping.
- The Tiptala pass, which used to close every winter due to snowfall, now stays open essentially year-round – a structural seasonal change directly observed by the Ward Chair over decades.
- A wolf-versus-red-panda dynamic described by the Ward Chair: as yak herding declined, reduced human/livestock movement into high pastures lowered disturbance for red panda but changed grazing pressure patterns that now favour wolf predation on remaining livestock – a single demographic shift cutting in opposite directions for two species.

5.2.3 There is already a credible intervention landscape – including one clearly documented failure worth learning from

RPN openly described a past failure that directly explains why its current flagship model exists. RPN and other agencies previously trained community members, particularly women's groups, in allo (nettle) fibre and cardamom fibre handicraft production, but did not build in a market linkage; products had nowhere to sell, and the training investment was effectively wasted. The fix was Habre Enterprises, a profit-not-distributing company that guarantees to purchase qualifying products and move them to market (Kathmandu, online, and export to the UK, Europe, and US) – directly closing the loop the earlier failure exposed.

- Other interventions with a track record: improved cookstoves (measurably reduced firewood use and indoor smoke in an RPN sensor-based study, though not a complete fix since fire is also used for warmth), community-based anti-poaching units (credited with declining

poaching over ~25 years), and red panda ecotourism (fully professionalised and successful in Ilam over 15–17 years, not yet replicated in Taplejung).

- Unresolved or failed asks: a solar feasibility study for Yangma, formally requested with government backing years ago, never delivered. A wolf-specific radio-collar study proposed internally has not attracted funding, reportedly because wolves lack the donor appeal of snow leopard or red panda.

Implication for the proposal: RPN already has a working model for fixing the “training without market access” failure. A new programme should build on Habre Enterprises rather than propose a parallel handicraft training scheme – framing itself as extending a proven model into a currently uncovered geography rather than inventing something new.

5.2.4 Cardamom farming is the clearest example of livelihood and conservation reinforcing each other

Multiple participants independently converged on this: cardamom's need for standing shade trees has organically discouraged the slash-and-burn forest clearing once common for maize cultivation. Participants pointed to visibly increasing wildlife tolerance of human proximity (deer and other animals now seen close to homes and courtyards) as a tangible indicator of habitat recovery credited specifically to this shift. This happened as a side effect of a market-driven crop shift, not a deliberately designed conservation programme – suggesting the opportunity is to identify and deliberately replicate this same dynamic elsewhere (for example, through NTFP market development).

5.2.5 NTFP livelihoods are a validated but currently underdeveloped opportunity

Medicinal herbs and non-timber forest products came up repeatedly as already valuable but poorly monetised. Kutki reportedly sells for around NPR 80,000 per quintal in Kathmandu, but the missing pieces are harvesting technique, processing, and market access rather than demand; jatamasi was mentioned in similar terms. This closely parallels the entrepreneur session's finding on cardamom fibre and titepati oil, strengthening the case that market linkage is the priority intervention area across the whole landscape, not just one sector.

5.2.6 The energy and forest-pressure link is concrete and partly quantified

- Olangchung Gola already has a working 10kW micro-hydro plant (lighting only), with a completed feasibility study showing it could scale to ~70kW – enough to power electric heating and cooking for the settlement's ~90–100 households. This upgrade is fully scoped and simply unfunded.
- Yangma (8–9 households) cannot support micro-hydro economically and needs solar instead, but a previously requested, government-backed feasibility study was never completed.
- RPN's own Habre Center demonstrates low-cost, replicable passive solar heating (a sand-filled “micro trombe wall”) and other passive design techniques suited to high-mountain conditions.

- RPN's own sensor-based research already quantifies the firewood and indoor-smoke reduction achieved by improved cookstoves – a directly citable, already-collected evidence base.

5.2.7 Institutional landscape: real capacity exists, with a specific jurisdictional friction point

RPN, KCAMC, WWF Nepal (historically), Himalayan Conservation Forum, a snow leopard curriculum initiative in area schools, and Snow Leopard Trust, are all already present in some form – the proposal should be explicit about coordinating with, not duplicating, this landscape. One specific friction point: KCAMC's conservation area authority and the two rural municipalities that now cover the landscape (Phaktanglung and Sirijunga, which replaced four former VDCs) have an acknowledged and sometimes contested overlap in natural resource decision-making authority, including disagreement over which body deserves credit for a given initiative.

5.2.8 The UNESCO Biosphere Reserve nomination is a live, time-sensitive opportunity

KCA's own leadership believes it has already substantively met UNESCO's baseline standard for biosphere reserve status, largely because its integrated conservation and livelihood approach already resembles what UNESCO is looking for. The Ward Chair's own assessment is that the outstanding gap is documentation and continuity, not underlying substance. If successful, KCA would become Nepal's first UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. RPN and Samriddha Pahad are already conducting a baseline wildlife study in the lower-elevation, hydropower-affected zones specifically to support this case. A caution raised: biosphere designation could introduce new resource-use restrictions on communities already dependent on forest resources, and this needs to be proactively framed as opportunity rather than restriction.

5.2.9 Gender and equity: formally compliant but unevenly realised in practice

Nepal's 33% women's representation requirement is being met on paper in most community forest and user committees, and Aama Samuha (mother's groups) are fully women-led. However, the KCAMC accounts officer candidly noted at least one ward-level committee currently has zero women members despite the formal requirement. Leadership across institutions is also notably interlinked – several current local government leaders are former KCAMC staff – meaning conservation leadership draws from a fairly tight, overlapping pool rather than a broadly diversified base.

5.2.10 Clear, named funding gaps the proposal could credibly target

- Wolf research and monitoring (radio-collar study) – requested internally, unfunded, lacking the donor appeal of red panda or snow leopard.
- The Olangchung Gola micro-hydro upgrade (10–70kW) – fully feasibility-studied and ready, simply uncatalysed.
- The Yangma solar feasibility study and installation – previously promised by another organisation, never delivered.

- Market linkage infrastructure for NTFPs (kutki, jatamasi, and similar) – demand and price exist, but processing and market access do not.
- Policy-level advocacy to legalise domestic yak meat trade in Nepal – a specific, solvable structural barrier with a direct conservation payoff via the feral-dog predation pathway.
- Documentation and continuity support for the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve nomination.
- Extension of the red panda ecotourism and Habre Enterprises model from Ilam into the entire PIT corridor, currently only at the trail-concept planning stage (Gyabla).

5.2.11 Cross-referencing with the entrepreneur session strengthens the evidence base

Two consistent threads run across both dialogues: (1) market linkage and storage/processing infrastructure, not production capacity, is the binding constraint across handicrafts, herbs, and agriculture alike – Dil Kumar's testimony and RPN's documented handicraft training failure independently tell the same story; and (2) livelihood decline can directly convert into a conservation threat, and the reverse is also true, as detailed in Section 3.3 of this report.

5.3 Summary Implication for Proposal Design

This session suggests the proposal's strongest and most defensible positioning is not “introduce conservation to a community that lacks awareness of it,” since community awareness and institutional capacity are already substantial, but rather “close specific, already identified gaps in a landscape with proven models, some simply unfunded, and address the specific livelihood-driven pathways (declining herding, unmonetised NTFPs, incomplete energy access) that are currently the actual mechanism connecting livelihood change to conservation outcomes here.” This framing is both more accurate to what was said in the room and more fundable.

5.4 Annex: Detailed Question and Answer Record

1. What are the top threats to red panda survival in Taplejung right now? How severe are they?

Participants did not describe an escalating direct hunting threat right now; KCAMC field staff (Raju) confirmed recent field visits have not turned up direct evidence of poaching or trafficking targeting red panda, though seasonal tourist movement on trekking routes was noted as a minor disturbance. The clearest threats were indirect and structural: infrastructure development (hydropower and associated roads) as the most concrete negative driver of habitat disturbance and forest loss; forest fire, named by RPN as a serious, high-severity risk with dedicated mitigation training already running; an indirect predation pressure from feral guard dogs left behind as yak/chaury herding declined sharply over 20–25 years; and climate-driven habitat and food-plant disruption (see Q4).

2. For each of those threats, what is actually driving it at the household level?

Infrastructure/hydropower pressure is driven by national energy policy and federal licensing, not household poverty. The wild-dog issue is a second-order effect of a market and policy failure: herding families stopped keeping yak and chaury largely because China closed its market to Nepali yak exports after COVID, and Nepal has no legal domestic yak-meat market, making large-scale

herding economically unviable; abandoned guard dogs then went feral in red panda habitat. Firewood dependence, where it persists, is an access and infrastructure gap rather than pure poverty (alternatives like solar or micro-hydro either do not exist yet, as in Yangma, or are not built out to capacity, as in Olangchung Gola). Historical poaching (mainly musk deer) was driven by cross-border economic incentive from Tibet-side buyers, and has substantially declined due to rising prosperity on the Tibet side and community-based anti-poaching monitoring on the Nepal side.

3. Apart from red panda, are there other species in the PIT corridor that are critical from a conservation perspective?

Snow leopard (explicit conservation priority; Yangma singled out as one of the best snow leopard and blue sheep habitats in the conservation area); blue sheep (naur), the primary prey base for snow leopard; wolf (Tibetan wolf), identified by multiple speakers, especially the Ward Chair, as currently the single biggest cause of livestock loss at high altitude – worse at present than snow leopard – and significantly understudied, with no dedicated radio-collar or monitoring study, unlike snow leopard; and musk deer, historically the species most targeted by poachers.

4. How does climate change concretely alter these threats?

Rising temperature and heavier, less predictable rainfall at the upper elevation belt over roughly the last 2–3 years (RPN's own field observation). Glacial melt is increasing glacial lake size and GLOF risk – two historical lake-burst events were named (Olangchung Gola's Ghanglung Tal, around 2020 BS, and Yangma's Naga Tal, around 2037 BS), both still risky and lacking a completed volume assessment or downstream risk mapping. Landslides and flash floods linked to this change have damaged trekking routes and habitat, and in at least one case appear to have caused snow leopard to relocate away from a previously used area. Snowfall decline is changing the traditional grazing calendar and cross-border trail patterns – the Tiptala pass now stays open essentially year-round. RPN's own 2019 radio-collar telemetry study (published 2024, Ilam and Panchthar) found red pandas move to higher elevation during heavy or unpredictable snowfall, affecting their access to preferred food plants and now informing RPN's habitat restoration and food-plant planting programmes.

5. What conservation interventions have already been tried in your area, by whom, and what worked, partially worked, or failed?

Worked or partially worked: community-based anti-poaching and youth mobilisation units (funded/directed through KCAMC), credited with the long-term decline in poaching over ~25 years; KCAMC's improved cookstove distribution, measurably reducing firewood use per RPN's sensor-based field study, though not eliminating firewood dependence given its use for warmth; RPN's Habre Enterprises model, designed to fix a documented earlier failure (see 5.2.3); red panda tourism, professionalised in Ilam over 15–17 years, now being extended eastward via the Gyabla trail concept; and KCAMC's livestock-loss compensation scheme. Partially worked / flagged as a problem: the compensation scheme's maximum payable amount (NPR 60,000) can exceed a live animal's market value (NPR 25,000–30,000), risking a perverse incentive, though actual disbursed

amounts are usually lower (~NPR 30,000) due to lack of a scientific assessment basis. Failed or not delivered: a solar feasibility study for Yangma, requested from an organisation referred to as Kadoorie with formal government backing, never delivered despite repeated follow-up; and a wolf-specific radio-collar study proposed to RPN's snow leopard researcher, unfunded, reportedly for lack of donor appeal.

6. What are the livelihood opportunities genuinely tied to conservation outcomes in the PIT corridor?

Red panda ecotourism (proven in Ilam, in planning for Taplejung via Gyabla); handicrafts from allo and cardamom fibre sold through Habre Enterprises; traditional carpet/rug weaving, an ancestral skill in Olangchung Gola tied historically to Tibet border trade, with potential for revival via modern market linkage; NTFP-based livelihoods around kutki and jatamasi, where market value already exists but harvesting technique, processing, and market access are missing; a legalised, better-marketed yak economy if the domestic policy barrier were resolved; and homestay/community-based tourism in Olangchung Gola and Yangma.

7. Are there livelihoods in the PIT corridor that depend directly on red panda conservation or its habitat?

Not yet in a fully monetised way. Red panda tourism as an income source is established in Ilam, not yet in Taplejung, where it remains at the planning stage. NTFP and herb-collection livelihoods depend on the same habitat type (bamboo/nigalo undergrowth) that red pandas use, an indirect ecological overlap not yet developed into a dedicated conservation-linked livelihood product.

8. Are any current livelihood practices harming red panda habitat, and are there interventions helping households shift away from them?

Historically, khoriya phanne (slash-and-burn clearing for maize) was common and harmful; this has substantially declined in the lower belt, organically, as a side effect of the shift to cardamom farming (see Q9), rather than through a deliberately designed behaviour-change intervention. Firewood collection remains an ongoing, reduced pressure, particularly at high altitude; improved cookstoves are the main intervention and a partial rather than complete solution. Traditional wood shingle roofing is being replaced by tin roofing.

9. Are current harvesting practices (cardamom farming and other agriculture) helping, harming, or neutral for red panda habitat?

Cardamom farming was explicitly and repeatedly described as a net positive for conservation in the lower belt of KCA, since it requires standing shade trees and has directly discouraged forest clearing and burning previously used for maize. Participants pointed to increased sightings of deer and other wildlife close to human settlements as a tangible indicator of habitat recovery credited specifically to the cardamom economy. No other agricultural practice was flagged as currently harmful in this session.

10. What tourism opportunities could be more directly linked to red panda conservation? Existing examples and expansion potential?

Existing: red panda tourism, fully professionalised and successful in Ilam for 15–17 years. In planning: RPN and Samriddha Pahad have an active joint plan to develop red panda trekking trails in the Gyabla area of Taplejung. RPN cautioned against spreading limited grant funding too thinly across many small tourism activities, recommending focused investment. Homestay tourism in Olangchung Gola has already received a training round and basic supplies from KCAMC. Yangma was singled out by the Ward Chair as an especially strong future tourism prospect given its shrinking herding population, potentially centred on snow leopard viewing (a live sighting has already occurred once during a research collaring operation). Potential biosphere reserve status was also raised as something that could indirectly boost tourism income.

11. Are there cooperative or microfinance models offering loans or savings benefits for conservation-friendly practices? Has this been tried in the PIT corridor?

KCAMC operates a seed fund (Biu Kosh) allocated as grants, not loans, to community forest user committees, mother's groups (Aama Samuha), anti-poaching units, and similar bodies, who decide their own spending priorities within that allocation. The closest comparable mechanism to conservation-linked microfinance is RPN's Habre Enterprises market-guarantee model, which is a market-linkage tool rather than a financial lending product.

12. Which government bodies are actively engaged with KCAMC's work?

KCAMC functions as a field office under Nepal's federal Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC). Locally, KCA's boundary now falls under two rural municipalities, Phaktanglung and Sirijunga, which replaced four former VDCs (Tapethok, Lelep, Olangchung Gola, and Yamphudin). There is an acknowledged and sometimes contested jurisdictional overlap between KCAMC's conservation-area authority and these local governments' own authority over natural resource decisions. No specific provincial government (Province 1) engagement or additional named federal ministry beyond DNPWC was raised.

13. Are there existing government plans or targets in the PIT corridor (biodiversity strategy, national red panda action plan, protected area guidance)?

No specific named provincial biodiversity strategy or national red panda conservation action plan document was directly cited. KCAMC's own internally approved annual council budget and community-facing programme structure (covering irrigation support for cardamom, women's group capacity building, human-wildlife conflict compensation, and anti-poaching unit funding) functions as its practical management framework. The clearest active formal process discussed was the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve nomination (see Q15).

14. Where has government involvement in past initiatives been genuinely useful?

The livestock loss compensation/relief scheme, while imperfectly calibrated, was cited as a concretely useful government-backed mechanism for managing human-wildlife conflict. The community forest legal user-rights model, a nationally recognised government framework,

underpins KCAMC's entire community-based conservation approach and is described as foundational to its success – KCAMC is often cited as a pioneering, first-of-its-kind community-managed conservation model in Nepal, even compared regionally in Asia. Nepal's mandated 33% women's representation requirement in community forest and user committees was cited as an enforced policy ensuring a baseline of gender representation in local conservation governance.

15. What is the actual current status of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve nomination, and what would it mean?

KCAMC leadership, by the Ward Chair's own account, did not initially understand the biosphere reserve concept well, and undertook study visits, including to the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve already established on the Sikkim, India side of the same Kanchenjunga landscape (in Yoksum), and to another site in southern India. Part of the process involves producing a short (5–6 minute) documentary meeting UNESCO's minimum standard. The Ward Chair's own assessment is that KCA has likely already substantively met, or come close to meeting, UNESCO's baseline standard through its existing integrated conservation and livelihood work, and the real outstanding question is documentation and continuity, not underlying substance. If declared, KCA would become Nepal's first UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. RPN and Samriddha Pahad are jointly conducting a baseline wildlife study in the lower-elevation, hydropower-affected zones of KCA, where monitoring data has historically been weakest, partly to support the biosphere case and enable future before-and-after comparison. A concern was raised that formal biosphere designation could introduce new resource-use restrictions on communities already dependent on forest resources, needing to be actively managed and framed as opportunity rather than restriction.

16. Given everything already happening in the PIT corridor, what is the clearest, most defensible funding gap?

Several specific, concrete gaps emerged directly from the discussion: a dedicated wolf research and monitoring programme (radio-collaring), explicitly requested internally but unfunded; a solar feasibility study and installation for Yangma, previously requested from an external organisation but never delivered despite years of follow-up; structured market-linkage support for already-valuable but under-monetised NTFPs like kutki and jatamasi, where the missing piece is harvesting technique, processing, and market access rather than product demand; policy-level advocacy to legalise domestic yak meat trade in Nepal, a specific, named, potentially solvable structural barrier with knock-on effects on human-wildlife conflict via the wild-dog pathway; documentation and continuity support for the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve nomination, substantively close to completion by KCAMC's own internal assessment but lacking a dedicated resourcing push; and extension of the red panda ecotourism and Habre Enterprises livelihood model from Ilam into Taplejung, currently only at the trail-concept planning stage (Gyabla).

17. Who else is currently active in Taplejung?

WWF Nepal was named as having historically played a significant role in PIT corridor's conservation work. UNESCO is actively engaged through the ongoing biosphere reserve nomination process.

Himalayan Conservation Forum is an active local NGO in the area. A group referred to as Teka Samuha Nepal (name partly unclear) reportedly works with schools on a snow leopard curriculum in 3–4 local schools, in partnership with Himalayan Conservation Forum. A Clouded Leopard Working Group, possibly linked to an organisation called Third Pole Conservancy, was mentioned as potentially active, though participants were not fully certain of its current activity level. Snow Leopard Trust/Conservancy has a distinct, newly starting programme just outside KCA's boundary in the Lumbasamba/Thudam/Bhotekhola area. Hydropower developers are licensed and active or planned within the conservation area under federal DNPWC-issued licenses, functioning both as a source of community investment/CSR obligation and as a habitat pressure. No other bilateral donors or private-sector conservation finance actors were named.

18. What is the current status of alternative energy use around the Red Panda habitat in Taplejung district, and could increasing it reduce forest dependence?

Improved cookstoves have already been distributed across conservation-area households by KCAMC (users cover transport cost, stoves themselves free), and RPN's own year-long, sensor-based research in a Panchthar village measured a real reduction in both firewood use and indoor smoke pollution, though not a full elimination, since fire is also used for warmth in winter. Olangchung Gola already has a working micro-hydro plant (~10kW, lighting only); a completed feasibility study found potential to scale to ~70kW, enough to power electric heaters and cooking stoves for the settlement's ~90–100 households, substantially reducing firewood dependence — not yet funded or built. Yangma (8–9 households) cannot support micro-hydro at a viable cost, making solar the only realistic renewable option; a previously requested solar feasibility study was never completed despite formal government backing. Yangma households currently rely heavily on dung (gobar) as fuel, reused afterward as compost for potato farming, supplemented by firewood for winter warmth. RPN's own Habre Center demonstrates low-cost passive solar heating (a “micro trombe wall”) and other passive design elements such as dung-based insulation and recycled plastic bottles in foundations for moisture resistance, which RPN suggested could be taught and replicated more widely. Participants directly and repeatedly linked increased alternative energy access, particularly for heating and cooking at high altitude, to reduced forest pressure and better red panda and snow leopard habitat protection.

19. What are the biggest barriers to taking up conservation-focused livelihoods in Taplejung?

Market access was the single most repeated barrier across every livelihood type discussed — RPN's own experience shows training alone, without a guaranteed market linkage, results in wasted investment, precisely why Habre Enterprises was created. Transport and access cost, especially in remote high-altitude settlements like Yangma and Olangchung Gola, was repeatedly cited as a structural cost barrier affecting both agricultural marketing and infrastructure delivery (solar, hydro equipment). Policy and legal barriers, most concretely the lack of a legal domestic market for yak meat. Jurisdictional ambiguity between KCAMC's conservation-area authority and local government authority over natural resource decisions was flagged as an ongoing friction point. Capital or funding gaps were implied mainly at the institutional/donor level rather than as a direct

household-level capital access problem. Gender norms were not explicitly named as a barrier in this session, though the unevenness of women's actual representation in leadership (see Q20) suggests it remains a live issue even if not directly raised as such.

20. Who is leading conservation or livelihood initiatives around forests in Taplejung today? Are women, Indigenous, or marginalised individuals involved?

Indigenous and ethnic participation is effectively the default in this landscape – Taplejung's population is overwhelmingly Indigenous/Janajati, primarily Sherpa, Rai, and Limbu, with a small Gurung presence; Olangchung Gola specifically is a single-ethnicity Sherpa settlement. Formally, women's representation follows Nepal's mandated 33% quota in community forest and similar user committees, and KCAMC's Aama Samuha (mother's groups) are fully women-led by definition. In practice, the KCAMC accounts officer candidly acknowledged that actual representation is uneven – at least one of the seven ward-level committees he is aware of currently has zero women members despite the formal requirement. Leadership in this landscape is also notably interlinked across institutions: several current local government leaders, including at least two ward chairs, are described as former KCAMC council staff themselves, meaning conservation and local government leadership draws from a fairly tight, overlapping pool rather than a broad or newly diversified base.

6. Household Youth Livelihoods and Conservation Survey

A structured survey of 25 respondents was administered jointly by Restless Development and Samriddha Pahad across KCA wards, covering demographics, livelihoods, environmental change, conservation awareness, and appetite for a future programme. Findings are presented here as a companion evidence base to the two learning dialogues, and read consistently with them.

6.1 Respondent Profile

Characteristic	Profile
Sample size	25 respondents
Gender	14 male, 11 female
Age	Predominantly 35+ (14 of 25); remainder spread across 19–21, 22–25, 26–30, and 31–35
Main activity	Farming or herding (12), employed in a paid job (4), running own business (4), teacher (1), school chairperson (1), unemployed (1), student (1)
Education	Higher secondary (+2): 8; secondary (9–10): 7; lower secondary (6–8): 4; primary (1–5): 3; bachelor or higher: 2; no formal schooling: 1
Villages/settlements represented	Households across Phaktalung/Tapethok, Sirijangha/Yamphudin, Limbu community areas (Hellok), and Phungling municipality wards, plus Lelep

6.2 Livelihoods, Income, and Environmental Change

- 92% of respondents (23 of 25) currently earn income for themselves; of those, income is described as “somewhat stable” by 20 and “very stable” by only 3.
- 56% (14 of 25) said their livelihood depends on forests, wildlife, or the natural environment in some way; 36% said no, and 8% were unsure.
- Only 16% (4 of 25) reported a household member working in tourism in the past year (guiding, porter work, hotel/lodge/homestay, or selling to trekkers) – consistent with the entrepreneur session's finding of underused tourism potential.
- 76% (19 of 25) said environmental changes (floods, landslides, irregular seasons) have affected their family's income or livelihoods in the past few years, most describing the effect as “a little” rather than severe.
- 68% (17 of 25) are not thinking about leaving the area for work or study in the next two years; 20% are unsure, and 12% said yes.

6.3 Perceived Livelihood Opportunity for Young People (0–10 scale)

Livelihood area	Mean rating (0–10)
Cardamom farming	8.4
Agriculture / livestock farming	8.0

Livelihood area	Mean rating (0–10)
Tourism	5.8
Forest and wildlife protection as an income source	5.4

Cardamom farming was also the most frequently selected option (alone or in combination) when respondents were asked to choose the two most promising livelihood activities for young people, appearing in the majority of responses – directly corroborating the qualitative finding from both learning dialogues that cardamom is the landscape's clearest existing livelihood-conservation win.

6.4 Barriers and Obstacles

Biggest reason young people leave the area (single choice)

- No jobs or income opportunities here – 9 respondents
- Low income from farming or herding – 5 respondents
- Better education is available elsewhere – 5 respondents
- Lack of business skills or training – 3 respondents
- Conservation area rules limit what they can do – 3 respondents

Biggest personal obstacle to starting or growing a livelihood (single choice)

- Limited business idea / no money or access to finance – 13 respondents
- No training or skills – 6 respondents
- No buyers, customers, or market – 5 respondents
- Poor roads or difficult terrain – 1 respondent

Together, these responses echo the entrepreneur and stakeholder dialogues almost exactly: market access, financing, and skills – not a shortage of raw production potential – are the dominant constraints named by the community itself.

6.5 Conservation Awareness and KCA Rules

- 60% of respondents (15 of 25) said they know “a little” about KCA's management, rules, and regulations; 20% said no, and 16% said they don't know the rules at all – indicating generally low awareness of formal conservation governance among households, consistent with the entrepreneur session's finding of minimal institutional connection to KCAMC.
- Ease of selling local products or services to tourists or outside buyers was rated a mean of 3.3 out of 5, with most respondents clustering at “moderate” (3).
- Confidence in starting or growing a business or income-generating activity was high, at a mean of 7.6 out of 10.

6.6 Support Needs and Programme Appetite

- The most frequently requested forms of support (respondents could select up to two) were business or entrepreneurship training and connecting with organisations or programmes, followed by access to finance/loans, help finding buyers or customers, and digital skills/online marketing.
- 96% of respondents (24 of 25) have their own smartphone with internet access, indicating strong potential for digitally-enabled outreach, training, or market linkage tools.
- 96% (24 of 25) said they would join a free skills training or livelihood pilot programme if offered close to home; the remaining respondent said “maybe.”
- 96% expressed interest in a paid or supported role monitoring local wildlife or protecting forest (18 “very interested,” 6 “yes”), with only 1 respondent unsure — a strong signal of appetite for Forest Guardian or youth fellowship-style roles.
- 48% (12 of 25) reported prior participation in a conservation, livelihoods, or skills-training programme that they found useful; another 48% reported no prior participation at all, and one found a prior programme not very useful.
- Awareness of active local organisations was fairly broad: KCAMC, Samriddha Pahad, government programmes, and local cooperatives or savings groups were the most commonly recognised, with Red Panda Network and other NGOs/INGOs recognised by a smaller but still substantial share of respondents. Two respondents were aware of no organisations active in their area.
- Despite this awareness, local organisations and institutions were rated as currently offering very little support to young people seeking new livelihoods — a mean of only 2.4 out of 5, with the large majority of respondents rating it 1 or 3.

6.7 What Respondents Said in Their Own Words

Open-ended responses were strikingly consistent with the closed-ended data and with both learning dialogues. Recurring themes are summarised below rather than reproduced verbatim in full.

Livelihoods seen as having the greatest potential, and why

- Cardamom cultivation and trading was named more often than any other single livelihood, repeatedly described as “geographically suitable” and having “good market value.”
- General agriculture, chiraito cultivation, livestock rearing, and hotel/tourism businesses were named as complementary opportunities, several respondents citing “abundant fallow land” as an underused asset.
- Several respondents linked opportunity directly to the need for training, market promotion, and grant support alongside the crop or activity itself, rather than treating any livelihood as self-sufficient without support.

Main challenges preventing young people from earning a decent, sustainable income

- Lack of market access and market management for agricultural products was the most frequently cited structural barrier.

- Lack of relevant knowledge, skills, and vocational/technical training was cited nearly as often, often paired with a lack of financial resources or access to capital for investment.
- A smaller number of responses referenced crop damage from wildlife and livestock, poor road and market access, and – more critically – a perceived lack of youth-targeted government programmes and, in a few cases, low youth motivation.

What respondents want a new programme to include

- Skill-oriented and technical training tied specifically to cardamom cultivation (from seedling to drying), agriculture, tourism/guiding, and photography or digital documentation.
- Financial support and access to inputs – seedlings, irrigation, and small grants – alongside training, not training alone.
- Several respondents explicitly requested conservation and environmental protection programming alongside livelihood support, and infrastructure improvements (irrigation, cooperative strengthening) to support cardamom cultivation specifically.

What would encourage young people to stay rather than migrate

- Creation of genuine local employment opportunities was the most repeated response, closely followed by calls for quality education, healthcare, and transport infrastructure.
- Multiple respondents specifically requested self-employment support paired with investment capital and skills/knowledge training, echoing the “training plus market linkage plus finance” package that recurs throughout this report.

6.8 Summary Implication

The survey independently corroborates the two learning dialogues on every major point: cardamom is the most locally validated livelihood opportunity; market access, finance, and skills – not production capacity – are the binding constraints; institutional support for youth livelihoods is currently perceived as weak despite fairly broad awareness of active organisations; and community appetite for a new, paid conservation-livelihoods programme (including wildlife monitoring roles) is very high. This is a rare case of three independently designed evidence sources reinforcing the same conclusions from three different vantage points – entrepreneurs, institutions, and households.

7. Implications for a Joint Intervention

Drawing together Sections 3 through 6, the following design implications are the most directly evidenced and most repeated across all three sources:

- Anchor the livelihoods component in cardamom-linked value chains (cultivation, fibre handicrafts, market linkage) as the most conservation-aligned and most locally validated entry point, rather than spreading effort evenly across sectors.
- Build market linkage and storage/processing infrastructure into the programme design from the outset, using RPN's Habre Enterprises model as a proof-of-concept and potential delivery partner, rather than proposing standalone production or handicraft training.
- Frame the problem statement around structural, livelihood-driven conservation threats (infrastructure development, herding decline and feral dogs, climate-driven habitat shift) rather than a poaching-and-awareness narrative that the evidence does not support.
- Design explicitly for livelihood shifts as a conservation lever in both directions – supporting shifts that reduce pressure (cardamom, NTFPs, ecotourism) while addressing the conservation consequences of livelihood decline (feral dogs, unmanaged fallow forest regrowth).
- Treat the currently unfunded, fully scoped opportunities – the Olangchung Gola micro-hydro upgrade, the Yangma solar feasibility study, wolf research and monitoring, and NTFP market linkage – as ready-made, high-credibility budget lines rather than starting programme design from a blank page.
- Time or position the proposal to support the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve nomination's documentation and continuity needs, given its live, time-sensitive status and clear institutional buy-in.
- Design for high existing community appetite: near-universal willingness to join training and interest in paid conservation roles means outreach and mobilisation are unlikely to be the binding constraint – programme design effort is better spent on the market-linkage and financing mechanisms communities say they actually need.
- Treat the 33% women's representation figure as a formal floor, not evidence that representation gaps are solved, and design leadership and skills-building components to reach beyond the existing, fairly tight and interlinked leadership pool.
- Design explicitly around the KCAMC–local government jurisdictional overlap rather than assuming smooth institutional coordination, particularly for any activity that touches natural resource decision-making.

8. Annex: Survey Instrument Overview

For reference, the survey instrument covered the following question areas (Q1–Q31):

- Demographics: community/village, age, gender (Q1–Q3)
- Livelihood and income: main activity, education, income status and stability, dependence on natural environment, household tourism involvement, migration intention (Q4–Q10)
- Perceived opportunity: rated opportunity in tourism, cardamom, agriculture/livestock, and forest protection as income sources; perceived untapped opportunities; impact of environmental change (Q11–Q14)
- Preferred livelihoods and barriers: most promising livelihood activities, biggest reasons youth leave, biggest personal obstacles (Q15–Q17)
- Conservation awareness and market access: KCA rules awareness, ease of selling to outside buyers, business confidence, desired support (Q18–Q21)
- Digital access and programme appetite: smartphone/internet access, willingness to join training, interest in wildlife monitoring roles, prior programme participation, awareness of active organisations, perceived institutional support (Q22–Q27)
- Open-ended: greatest-potential livelihoods and why, main challenges to decent income, desired programme content, and what would encourage youth to stay (Q28–Q31)

End of document.