



# Munsiari Visit: Narrative Report (1-4 December,2025) \*

## ABSTRACT

This report covers a four-day collective session in Munsiari (1-4 December,2025) with Himal Prakriti, Kalpavriksh, local Van Panchayat leaders, youth, and Maati Sangathan women. The first three days focused on youth-driven learning- Forest laws, FRA, and global frameworks. The final day brought Sarpanches and community members together, highlighting challenges of governance, funding, and tourism, and concluding with a shared call to strengthen Van Panchayats, and pursue FRA rights for lasting community control.

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Munsiari visit by Kalpavriksh team members:  
Neha Negi, Mahesh Kale and Neema Pathak  
Broome

## Introduction

As part of the Self-Strengthening Program, the Kalpavriksh team engaged with the local organisation Himal Prakriti in Mungsiari. Himal Prakriti has been working on the self-actualisation of the Territories of Life, building community capacity to conserve forests, document biodiversity, and strengthen Van Panchayat governance.

The Mungsiari Collective Session (1-4 December) was convened to reflect on the evolving realities of community forest governance and conservation. The first day was devoted primarily to a collective review and reflection on the activities undertaken by the team during this phase. From this foundation, the session was then shaped by the team's interest in learning, specifically their interest in legal terminologies, the politics behind governance structures, and the significance of conventions, Acts, and laws. The purpose was to equip the team with the awareness necessary to interpret what is happening at the national and international levels, so that after learning, it becomes easier to understand and engage with these processes.

The following three days unfolded as flexible co-learning sessions, moulded to the priorities of Himal Prakriti's youth. Although an agenda was prepared, discussions naturally shifted to their interests, covering the history of Van Panchayat, the Forest Rights Act (FRA), and global conservation frameworks. These exchanges were not only about information transfer but about knowledge exchange and collective learning, strengthening practical skills and building confidence in navigating both legal and ecological contexts.

The final day transitioned into a broader community forum at Mati Café, where Sarpanches and Van Panchayat members, along with Maati Sangathan women, joined the dialogue. Here, lived realities were shared openly: the absence of honorarium and compensation for Sarpanches, the Forest Department's capture of funds, loss of royalties, tourism pressures, and the impacts of climate change. The session concluded with a collective consensus to prioritise institutional strengthening of Van Panchayats, secure direct funding channels, and pursue FRA rights as a pathway to lasting community authority.

## Objectives of the Collective Session

1. Meet the new team members and review and reflect on this year's activity together.
2. Explore legal frameworks, Van Panchayat history and amendments, FRA provisions, and related terminologies.
3. Discuss the politics of forest governance and how laws shape community rights.
4. Engage with community members to hear perspectives on Van Panchayat amendments and FRA.

# Day 1: Introductions, Roles, and Forest Laws

**Date:** 1<sup>st</sup> Dec 2025

**Location:** Himal Prakriti Office, Sarmoli, Munsiri

**Participants:** Deepak, Bhawana, Pawan, Priyanka, Ishant, Isha, Malika, Mahesh, Neema, Neha, Trilok

## Introduction and organisational histories

The session began with personal introductions in which each team member described their professional responsibilities and the individual experiences that motivated their engagement in conservation and community work. The Himal Prakriti team presented the organisation's origins and core initiatives, including Himalayan Arc (a homestay in Sarmoli), Maati Sangathan, and the genesis of Himal Prakriti as an idea that evolved into sustained practice. These narratives established context for the group's ongoing programmes and community relationships.

## Roles and responsibilities

The team provided an overview of individual responsibilities within the organisation. While members frequently undertake multiple tasks, certain functions are primarily assigned to specific individuals to ensure clarity and accountability.

- **Deepak** is responsible for accounts and communications, and he oversees water quality testing and the documentation of Community Conserved Areas (CCA). Also learning about the Carbon market and Carbon credit.
- **Bhawana** leads awareness programmes focused on Van Panchayats and related community issues, including the implications of the increasing number of child guides in the village. She conducts biodiversity and Van Panchayat awareness activities in schools using interactive methods and films, and she engages with sarpanches to emphasise the importance of CCA documentation. The team noted that amendments to the Van Panchayat Niyamavali are not widely known among patwaris, Sub Divisional Magistrate (SDMs), and residents; accordingly, the team conducts targeted awareness for these stakeholders.
- **Isha** curates, edits, and compiles local biodiversity narratives. To date, the team has published 24 biodiversity stories from across the Himalayas, 12 of which originate from Munsiri. Their recent book, *Baarish Ki Pehli Boond*, contains 25 stories; both digital and hard copies are maintained to ensure accessibility for schoolchildren and villagers. Isha also leads drafting and publishing efforts and provides translation support for the newsletter, media hub, film festival activities, and the Films in Schools programme.

The team has revised its birdwatching pedagogy to move beyond checklist exercises, placing greater emphasis on species, habitat, and behavioural ecology to foster deeper ecological understanding among children and strengthen their connection to Van Panchayat forests.

- **The team** is trying to create a foundation for a film club to build interest in the community and among children. They also participated in Gramya Manthan, which is a youth alliance. The youth alliance they attended is called Earth Shastra.
- **Pawan**, a recent addition to the team, is assisting with GIS-based mapping of water resources and water quality; he is supported by Aparna from Kalpavriksh.

Given that the main Munsiri market draws water from Van Panchayat sources, the team emphasised the need to combine catchment microshed mapping with water quality analysis to assess long-term sustainability, particularly in light of the Van Panchayat's transition to a Nagar Panchayat.

- **Priya**, also recently joined, is preparing a feature on Burans (Rhododendron). **Ishan** supports the team's CCA documentation efforts

## Legal, constitutional, and historical context

The session examined legal, constitutional, and historical factors affecting Van Panchayat governance, with particular attention to recent administrative changes and their local consequences.

### Governance Concerns

- Transition of some Van Panchayats into a Nagar Panchayat has left the area without a sitting *sarpanch*, creating governance uncertainty.
- The resulting vacuum has led to inter-panchayat resource extraction (e.g., grass and materials harvested from neighbouring panchayats).

To address these immediate governance concerns, the group resolved to convene a Van Panchayat meeting that will include community members, panchayat committees, and relevant non-governmental organisations.

### Constitutional and Legal Frameworks

The team requested a legal session to review constitutional provisions and statutory frameworks relevant to forest governance.

- There was discussion on constitutional provisions and statutory frameworks relevant to forest governance.
- The team reviewed Article 371A, the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, and their relevance to local self-governance.
- These provisions were linked to the Forest Rights Act (FRA), PESA, and the Panchayati Raj framework, providing foundational context.

- Distinctions among agricultural land, Van Panchayat land, and Protected areas were examined, with emphasis on how unclear demarcation of boundaries remains a central source of confusion and conflict.
- Historical background was provided by Malika of Sarmoli Van Panchayat, who traced the evolution of forest governance:
  - 1823: First demarcation separating village and forest lands, asserting state ownership of “benap” land.
  - 1921: Kumaon Grievances Committee recommendations.
  - 1931: Kumaon Van Panchayat rules, establishing statutory village forest management.
  - Class I forests: Local communities retained primary management rights for non-timber, community uses.
  - Class II forests: Remained under stricter departmental control.



*Neema Pathak Broome facilitating a session on constitutional and legal frameworks*

These co-learning sessions were conducted with technical and legal guidance from Neema Pathak Broome from Kalpavriksh, who participated as the knowledge partner and led the discussions.

### [Acts, Rules, and Regulations](#)

- Forest classifications were examined: Reserved Forests, Protected Forests, and Unclassed Forests.
- Historically, most forested areas were designated as Reserved Forests, where communities had limited usufruct rights (riyayat).
- In response to resistance, the government introduced Protected Forests and Unclassed Forests.
- In Uttarakhand, categories such as Protected Forest, Revenue Land, and Pasture Land were brought under Van Panchayats.
- The Indian Forest Act 1927 and Wildlife Protection Act 1972 were discussed, along with Joint Forest Management (JFM) introduced in 1992.
- Under the Indian Forest Act, Van Panchayats are treated as Village Forests.
- The definition of “forest” was discussed both according to the dictionary meaning and the Supreme Court’s Godavarman judgment, which clarified that any area fitting the dictionary definition is legally considered a forest.

### Comparative and Historical Perspectives

- A comparative discussion contrasted customary conservation practices in India with the British colonial approach.
- Colonial policies emphasised state control and recreational hunting, alien to traditional Indian stewardship.
- Traditional conservation norms were grounded in community needs, cultural practices, and customary management.

### Wildlife Protection Act and Conservation Developments

- The Wildlife Protection Act (WLPA) 1972 was examined as a response to illegal hunting and exploitation.
- The Act’s schedules categorise species by protection levels, and statutory mechanisms establish National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries.
- Historical developments included:
  - 1973: Creation of Tiger Reserves under Project Tiger.
  - 2002 amendment: Introduction of Conservation Reserves and Community Reserves.
  - Earlier categories, such as Game Reserves, are no longer formal classifications.
- Local examples of Eco-Development Committees and Joint Forest Management were shared.
- A cautionary case from Nagaland was discussed, where large areas notified as Community Reserves shifted management control to the Forest Department due to a lack of community awareness of legal implications.

### Way Forward:

1. Explore possibilities of a youth alliance for the Munsiri region
2. Explore linkages with the TDS youth alliance in the state and other national youth alliances

## Day 2: Ownership Rights, Van Panchayat Governance, and Legal Frameworks

**Date:** 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec 2025

**Location:** Himal Prakriti Office, Sarmoli, Munisari

**Participants:** Deepak, Bhawana, Pawan, Priyanka, Ishant, Isha, Malika, Mahesh, Neema, Neha, Trilok

The day began with a review of Day One and then transitioned into a comprehensive exploration of ownership, management, and benefit claiming in Van Panchayats. The exchanges highlighted how community roles have evolved, how colonial legacies continue to influence governance, and how the Forest Rights Act (FRA) emerged to rectify historical injustices. The discussions also covered constitutional frameworks, ministries and nodal agencies, land allotments, new Van Panchayat rules, overlapping institutions, and international conservation commitments. The day concluded with reflections on FRA processes, rights categories, and precedents, linking local governance challenges to global biodiversity frameworks.

As the team wanted to learn about this, the discussion for the day went as follows:

### Shifts in Community Roles

- Earlier, communities were regarded as owners of the forest, exercising customary rights.
- With the introduction of management plans and committees, they became primarily managers.
- Today, in many cases, they function mainly as benefit claimers, with limited authority.
- This shift was discussed in relation to the role of Van Panchayats.

### Colonial Mindset and Recognition of Knowledge

- Forest governance continues to reflect a colonial mindset, where community rights and traditional knowledge are not fully recognised.
- Traditional knowledge is often used but rarely acknowledged or credited.
- When communities raise their voices, it is framed as “protest”, increasingly criminalised.

## Acts Emerging from Community Struggles

The discussion highlighted how forest-dwelling and semi-nomadic communities, such as the Van Gujjar, have faced long struggles during forest settlement processes, with their histories illustrating the broader injustices experienced by forest-dependent groups.

Examples were shared to show that movements of this nature have, in earlier contexts, led to policy initiatives such as Joint Forest Management (JFM) and Eco-Development Committees, and eventually contributed to the broader environment in which the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was introduced. The FRA was enacted specifically to correct historical injustices and to recognise the customary rights of forest-dwelling communities formally.

It was clarified to the team that the core purpose of the FRA lies in rectifying historical records and settlements, ensuring that communities' rights are acknowledged. Importantly, in cases of conflict between the Wildlife Protection Act, the Indian Forest Act, and the FRA, the FRA prevails, as it is a rights-based legislation.

## Constitutional and Legal Frameworks

- Differences between the Constitution, policies, Acts, laws, and rules were explained.
- The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were highlighted as strengthening local self-governance.

## Governance Challenges in Van Panchayat and Public Consultation

- There was discussion on the Van Panchayat Niyamavali and how it remains controlled through the Forest Department.
- It was explained that amendments or rules related to Van Panchayats move first through the Forest Department, are then placed before the Vidhan Sabha, and only after legislative passage are they formally accepted.
- There was discussion on the recent Biodiversity Act amendment, which was circulated for public comments with only two days allowed for submission. The draft was released on a Friday, leaving only Saturday and Sunday for responses, making submissions, especially by post, practically impossible.
- This highlighted how public consultations are often conducted formally "on paper," while in reality, meaningful participation from communities and NGOs is restricted.
- There was discussion on how many government officials and even lawyers lack a proper understanding of the Forest Rights Act and Van Panchayat rules.
- Because of these gaps, NGOs and community organisations continue to conduct awareness programmes whenever required, which in practice is often.

## Ministries, Nodal Agencies, and Forest-Dependent Communities

- There was discussion on the difference between ministries and departments, clarifying their respective roles in governance.

- The roles of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) were explained.
- It was highlighted that MoTA is the nodal agency for the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) at the central level.
- In Uttarakhand, the Social Welfare Department acts as the state-level nodal agency, while in other states this responsibility lies with the Tribal Welfare Department.
- It was noted that even nodal agencies often struggle to effectively implement the FRA on the ground, leading to continuous challenges and contestations.
- There was also discussion on forest-dependent communities such as the Vanraji tribe, Taungya communities, and Van Gujjars, all of whom are in the process of claiming rights under the FRA in Uttarakhand.
- It was mentioned that only some Van Panchayats in the state have actually received recognition or settlements so far, leaving many communities still waiting for formal acknowledgement of their rights.

### Land Allotments, New Rules, and Overlapping Institutions

- After lunch, there was a discussion on how some Van Panchayats in Uttarakhand have been allotted only two nali of land, which is extremely small and often leads to allegations of pressure and encroachment due to insufficient land availability.
- This raised the question of whether the number of Van Panchayats reported by the Uttarakhand Forest Department is genuinely active on the ground or exists mostly on paper.
- Given that some Van Panchayats control only very small land parcels, there is uncertainty about how many of these institutions are truly functional despite being listed on official records and websites.
- Cautionary example: Very small allotments and paper-only Van Panchayats can create pressure and encroachment; verification of active governance on the ground should be undertaken.
- There was discussion on the new Van Panchayat rules, including how the role of the Gram Pradhan has expanded, with significant administrative responsibilities now being placed on this position.
- It was also discussed that under the new rules, the Gram Sabha is expected to take on more responsibilities, giving it a stronger role in decision-making.
- There was confusion about how this will work in practice, what exactly the Gram Sabha will do, what duties the Gram Pradhan will have, and how this will affect the role of the Sarpanch Van Panchayat leadership.
- Malika, an earlier Sarpanch from a Van Panchayat, shared that communities that had earlier been benefit claimers now feel their rights are being taken away as the rules continue to change.

- With multiple institutions in a single village, Gram Panchayat, Van Panchayat, and Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs), it remains unclear who will be responsible for what, and how conflicts between these bodies will be resolved.
- Issue: Communities feel rights are being eroded as rules change; overlapping bodies create role confusion.

### Forest Rights Act, Documentation, and International Conservation Frameworks

- There was discussion on historical injustice, records of rights, community responses, and settlement processes under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).
- An introduction to the FRA was given, with clarification on how it differs from the Van Panchayat system.
- The requirement of submitting 75 years of documentary evidence was explained.
- This rule emerged because newer settlers in forest areas were also being granted rights.
- Older communities felt this was unjust, leading to the introduction of the requirement to establish long-term customary occupation and rights.

The types of rights under the FRA were then discussed, including:

- **CFR-** Community Forest Resource Rights
- **IFR-** Individual Forest Rights
- **CFRR-** Community Forest Resource Rights to manage, protect, and conserve
- **HR-** Habitat Rights
- **Conservation Rights**
- **Relief and Development Rights**

The process of CFR/IFR was also discussed.

- It was discussed that if a Van Panchayat area becomes recognised as a CFR, it can secure rights under the FRA.
- This is especially important now, as many Van Panchayats are transitioning into Nagar Panchayats, creating uncertainty.
- Communities were reminded that they hold rights under the FRA independent of the Van Panchayat framework.
- A question was raised: If two revenue forest areas have a single Van Panchayat, can they receive CFR rights?
- The response was yes, under CFR, communities can claim multiple rights: the right to use, manage, and conserve, with conservation rights under Section 3(1) often emphasised.

- It was explained that while land and forest processes are typically initiated by the Patwari, under the FRA Act and Rules, the Gram Sabha initiates and leads the process.

Use precedents: An example from Chhattisgarh was shared, where a Nagar Panchayat successfully received CFR rights. It was suggested that this example could be presented before the District Level Committee as a precedent for similar claims. However, it was also noted that outcomes often depend on the approach taken by the District Magistrate, making implementation variable across districts.

The Van Panchayat Niyamavali 2024 was also discussed. It was discussed that the Van Panchayat management plan still needs to be submitted to and approved by the DFO. Funds, such as those from CAMPA and other schemes, can be routed to Van Panchayats if activities appear in the micro-plan, though in practice the Forest Department often remains the primary implementing authority.

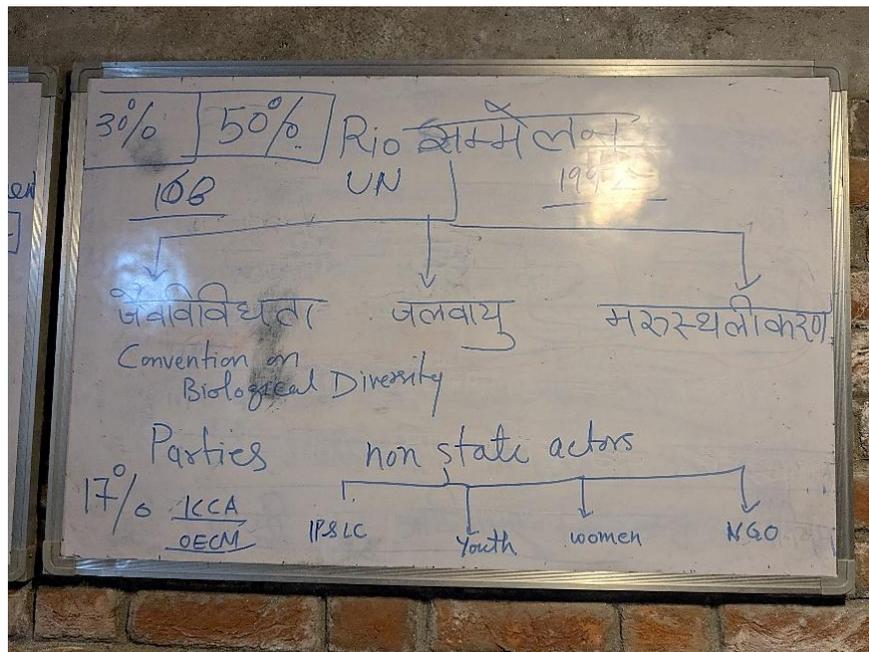
## International Conservation Laws and Frameworks

- The team requested an overview of international conservation laws and terminology.
- The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) was discussed, including its first global report in 2019 and identification of five nexus areas: biodiversity, water, food, health, and climate change.
- It was highlighted that although about 17% of land globally is under protected or reserved status, biodiversity and species decline continue, showing that protection on paper alone is insufficient.

The Rio Earth Summit of 1992 was also discussed. This summit led to three major international conventions:

- Convention on Biological Diversity CBD
- UN Framework Convention on Climate Change UNFCCC

- UN Convention to Combat Desertification UNCCD



Under the CBD, two categories of stakeholders were explained:

- Parties: Government representatives of signatory nations.
- Non-state actors: Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), youth, women, NGOs, and others.

From the CBD discussions, the concept of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA) emerged, and this was briefly explained to the team.

The global target of protecting 30% of land and sea areas was also discussed. A newer concept, Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECM), was explained. It was also discussed that during COP, concerns were raised by the communities and representatives that OECMs could include areas controlled by industries or the military, which are very different from community-led conservation areas. After this, IPLCs are again emphasising the importance of formally recognising ICCAs, so that community-managed conservation areas are not sidelined.

Since India is a signatory to the CBD, it was explained that communities can refer to international commitments if domestic recognition of CCAs is challenged. The argument put forward by ICCAs and IPLCs is that proper recognition of community conservation efforts, along with access to resources, livelihoods, and employment opportunities, could itself help achieve the global 20%- 30% conservation targets without displacing or marginalising communities.

## Way Forward:

Plan more co-learning sessions (Online and Offline)

## Day 3: Global Biodiversity Framework, Carbon Credit and its politics

**Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec 2025**

**Location: Himal Prakriti Office, Sarmoli, Munisari**

**Participants: Deepak, Bhawana, Pawan, Priyanka, Ishant, Isha, Malika, Mahesh, Neema, Neha, Trilok**

As the team wanted to learn about the Community Conserved Areas (CCA) Portal and its wider significance, the day began with a recap and then moved into discussions on global biodiversity frameworks. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and its 23 targets were explored, alongside cautionary and positive examples of recognition and reporting. Practical tools for documentation and monitoring were introduced, linked to upcoming reporting cycles. The day concluded with sessions on climate change, carbon politics, and debates around carbon credits and justice.

The discussion for the day was as follows:

### CCA Portal and Global Biodiversity Framework

- The Community Conserved Areas (CCA) Portal was introduced as a platform documenting CCAs across India, showcasing community-led conservation nationally and internationally.
- The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), adopted in 2022, was explained as a response to earlier biodiversity targets not being met effectively.
- The 23 global targets under KMGBF were discussed, including recognition of ICCAs, Conservation Reserves, Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs), and Indigenous and Traditional Territories (ITT).

### Cautionary Example: Nagaland

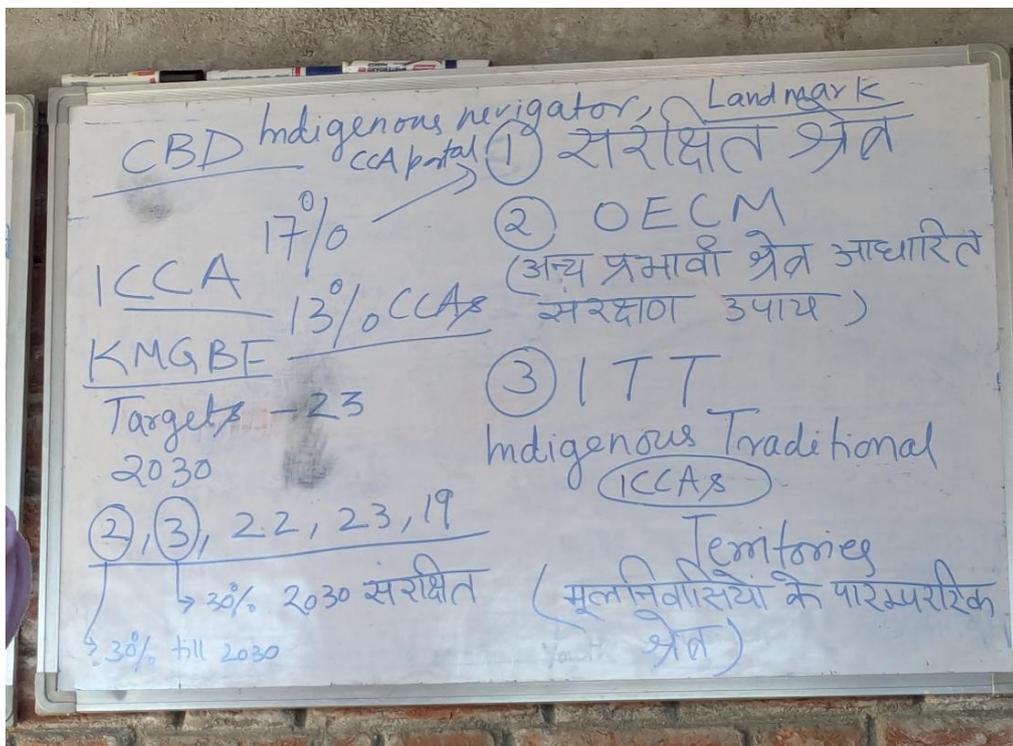
- Roughly 14% of Nagaland's land is officially classified as forest, but nearly half of that has been designated as Conservation Reserves.
- Conservation funding typically flows to the Forest Department, even when local communities carry out most of the work.
- This disconnect was highlighted to argue for a clear CCA policy and formal recognition of community-managed reserves, ensuring communities receive direct acknowledgement and access to resources.

## Data and Reporting

- About 13% of ICCAs are being proposed for international recognition. Under the global 30% conservation target, roughly 70% is expected to be met by existing protected areas, leaving a substantial share dependent on community-conserved areas.
- It was emphasised that biodiversity data from CCAs should feed into national and international reporting, with the CCA Portal identified as a primary reference.
- Alongside the portal, mapping and documentation platforms such as Indigenous Navigator and LandMark were introduced. It was shared that tools like iNaturalist (iNat), the People's Biodiversity Register (PBR), and community-based monitoring systems can be utilised as platforms to document and generate data about CCAs, thereby contributing to the reporting inputs due by October 2026.

## CARE Principles and Reporting Cycle

- The CARE Principles, Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics were explained, noting their operation under UNEP frameworks.
- The reporting cycle from 2022 to 2026 was discussed, with a major international review planned for October 2026 in Armenia, where countries will present progress on biodiversity targets.
- Related frameworks were also covered, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Biological Diversity Act 2002, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), and the National Report 2026.



## Climate Change and the Politics of Carbon

After the discussions and a question-and-answer session, the next module focused on climate change and the politics of carbon. The co-learning session began with an overview of the history of the Earth, the Industrial Revolution, and the distinction between climate and weather. The concept of climate change was explained in detail, including how it differs from weather, and the greenhouse effect was introduced as a key driver of global warming.

The discussion then moved to the idea of common global goals and how they should be achieved. The principle of equity fairness was highlighted, acknowledging that countries have different capacities and responsibilities. This was linked to climate justice, which emphasises how climate policies affect livelihoods and stressed that vulnerable groups, including tribal communities, farmers, coastal populations, and the poor, should receive priority protection and benefits.



*Mahesh Kale leading a co-learning session on the carbon market*

## Carbon Markets and Related Concepts

The session then explained the functioning of carbon markets and related terms:

- The carbon market is a system where carbon emissions are bought, sold, and regulated to encourage pollution reduction.
- A carbon credit represents the reduction or avoidance of one ton of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and can be traded in the market.
- A carbon footprint refers to the total amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted by an individual, organisation, project, or country.

## Risks for Communities in Carbon Projects

The team examined risks linked to carbon projects for communities, including:

- Land dispossession: Carbon becomes a valuable resource, and governments or private companies may claim control over land, restricting community access to traditional territories and forests.
- Restrictions on livelihoods: Activities such as grazing, farming, and forest use may be curtailed in the name of carbon conservation projects.
- Elite capture: Benefits from carbon projects may be appropriated by local elites or intermediaries such as NGOs, project developers, or carbon aggregators, rather than reaching communities.
- Bureaucratic takeover: Forest Departments may recentralize control over forests, weakening rights recognised under the FRA and Van Panchayat systems.
- Volatile carbon markets: Carbon prices are unstable, creating uncertainty in community incomes dependent on carbon credit revenues.

Finally, climate data visualisation tools and reference platforms were briefly mentioned as useful resources to track emissions trends and global warming patterns.

## Way Forward:

- It was noted that a follow-up discussion with Ruchinilo from Kenono Foundation, Nagaland, is needed regarding their research and experiences related to carbon credits, particularly the work in Sandhyani village with CJM Siddhartha. This was highlighted as an important future area of work.
- Plan an exchange visit to Nagaland in the next phase

## Day 4: Meeting with Van Panchayat Sarpanches and local community

**Date: 4<sup>th</sup> Dec 2025**

**Location: Mati Café, Sarmoli, Mungsiari**

**Participants: A total of 23 participants from Sarmoli, Harkot, Malla Ghorpatta, Shankhdhura, Nayabasti, Darkot, Pune**

The fourth day's meeting was convened at Mati Café in Sarmoli village and commenced with introductions of all participants. Beena from Maati Sangathan opened the session by outlining the agenda. Following this, each participant introduced themselves, after which Neema Pathak Broome from the Kalpavriksh team provided an overview of the international Territories of Life context and the significance of ICCAs. She elaborated on national-level self-strengthening initiatives and traced the history of Van Panchayats in Uttarakhand since 1931,

noting the increasing dissolution or transformation of Van Panchayats into Nagar Panchayats, and highlighted the implications of this transition.

After this introduction, the participants began sharing their experiences. Sarpanches from different Van Panchayats spoke about their realities and concerns.

## Shared Experiences and Concerns

Those gathered, especially Sarpanches from different Van Panchayats, spoke about their realities and challenges:



*Meeting with Van Panchayat sarpanches and local community members on governance and rights.*

- **Changing dependence on Van Panchayats:** The Sarpanch of Harkot noted that earlier, communities relied heavily on Van Panchayats for fuelwood, grass, and grazing. With the adoption of gas and a reduction in cattle, this dependence has declined.
- **Lack of honorarium and compensation:** Sarpanches expressed concern that, despite carrying significant responsibilities, they receive no honorarium or compensation, even when assisting in hazardous tasks such as forest fire control.
- **Forest Department's capture of funds:** It was shared that whenever projects receive funding for Van Panchayat work, 50% of the funds are diverted to the Forest Department, which often undertakes construction without involving the Sarpanch or community.
- **Loss of royalties and rights:** Earlier royalties from forest produce have ceased, leaving communities with fewer means of financial sustainability.
- **Weak institutional recognition:** Several Sarpanches highlighted that election certificates from the SDM remain pending, leaving their roles formally unacknowledged.

## Local Initiatives and Eco-Tourism

Examples of community-led initiatives were discussed:

- The Harkot Van Panchayat has introduced an entry fee for the Bethlidhar-Thamri Kund route to cover waste-cleaning costs caused by tourism.
- Plans are being considered to register an organisation to promote eco-tourism in Thamrikund.
- Local youth were recognised for their knowledge of flora, fauna, botany, and honey collection, which is vital for conservation.

## Climate Observations and Community Knowledge

Those present observed decreasing snowfall and shifting weather patterns, emphasising that communities hold deep ecological knowledge of forests, grazing routes, biodiversity, and seasonal changes. They reiterated that funds should be channelled directly to Van Panchayats rather than contractors (thekedars).

## Reflections on Honorarium and Authority

A broader discussion unfolded on the demand for honoraria. Sarpanches explained that while earlier they had fewer responsibilities and received royalties, today their responsibilities have increased, while financial support has diminished. They stressed the need for funds to support even basic staff such as watchmen.

Concerns were raised that reliance on Forest Department funds weakens community authority. This led to reflections on the Forest Rights Act (FRA) as a framework for strengthening community control. The example of Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, was cited as a model of collective action.

## Institutional Transitions and Case Examples

- Munsiri lichen garden (NoC): A lichen garden was constructed by the Forest Department without prior No Objection Certificate; consent was sought only after completion. Those present insisted that consent must precede construction and asked the Department to take responsibility for waste management and dustbins due to heavy tourist traffic.
- Patal Dhara encroachment: Agricultural land used for potato cultivation was accessed by tourists without permission; fencing was installed to indicate private land, yet camping continued.
- Malla Ghor Patta transition to Nagar Panchayat: In response to the transition, a local committee collects ₹500 per household annually, manages fuelwood collection and sales, undertakes plantations every two years, and secures funds via networking with the Forest Department, the Nigam, and CM Kosh. The committee recently received ₹5 lakh primarily through active networking and established Devi Ka Jungle (Sacred

Grove), restricting forest produce to the benefit claimers (the community that relies on that V.P).

- Leadership uncertainty: The Nagar Panchayat has not nominated a Sarpanch; Van Panchayat leadership continues through its own Sarpanch for now, though future conflicts may arise if Nagar Panchayat authority is asserted.
- Plantation responsibilities: Concerns were raised about new rules transferring plantation work to the Gram Sabha, with questions about the Sarpanch's role if this shift continues; those present expressed that moving plantations entirely to Gram Sabha weakens the Van Panchayat system.



*The Van Panchayat leaders sharing experiences on the governance*

## Collective understanding and priorities

- Honorarium vs. direct funding: While honorariums and compensation coverage (e.g., for forest fire accidents) are important, the shared priority is establishing direct funding channels to Van Panchayats, bypassing the Forest Department, to strengthen institutions and maintain community authority.
- Community control: Reliance on Forest Department funds often transfers power away from local governance; authority should remain with communities.
- Reaffirmation of authority: Although the Forest Department sometimes intervenes, it cannot legally prevent Sarpanches from carrying out conservation actions within Van Panchayat areas.
- Generational shift: While earlier Sarpanches were mostly elders working voluntarily, younger people now step forward, but often become discouraged when they realise the workload is heavy and there is no financial support
- Forest Rights Act (2006): Key FRA concepts, Community Forest Resource Management Committee and Community Forest Resource Management Plan, were introduced as pathways for community rights and long-term governance.

- Collective action models: The example of Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, was noted for collective action, and it was mentioned that the government has constituted a committee of Sarpanches in Uttarakhand.
- Direct access under new amendments: It was shared that, under recent amendments, Van Panchayats can access direct funding (including CSR funds), provided there is awareness and clarity on provisions and processes.

## Outcome

The shared outcome of Day Four was a consensus that:

- Authority should remain with communities, not the Forest Department.
- Direct funding channels are essential for strengthening Van Panchayats.
- The Forest Rights Act offers a long-term pathway for community-led governance.

## Way Forward

- Study and training: Van Panchayat representatives committed to studying FRA provisions independently and will request a follow-up meeting or a dedicated training session if further clarification is needed.
- Institutional strengthening: Those present emphasised sustained community control through institutional strengthening of Van Panchayats, direct funding streams, and recognition processes (including timely SDM-issued election certificates)



*A group picture with the Munsiri team, Maati Sangathan members, and the Van Panchayat leaders*

## Follow-up Actions

- Explore possibilities of a youth alliance for the Munsiri region
- Explore linkages with the TDS youth alliance in the state and other national youth alliances

- Plan more co-learning sessions, both online and offline
- Follow up with Ruchinilo from Kenono Foundation, Nagaland, regarding their research and experiences on carbon credits, particularly the work in Sendenyu village with CJM Siddhartha
- Plan an exchange visit to Nagaland in the next phase (if possible)