

spiti valley:

snow leopard project

LIFE UNLIMITED REPORT

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After two months of drawn out board exams, our trip to Spiti was a reward well deserved and what we believe will be the beginning of many more. Google does a lot more productive talking than we probably do on the Spiti Valley but apart from the 'awesomes' and the 'insanes' we may use in the next couple of passages, we do have a lot to share.

The journey to Kibber, was long, but wasn't too tiring. Perhaps it was the anticipation of reaching Kibber that kept us excited. It was quite amazing to see the landscape around us change so radically; from the fir-covered Lesser Himalayas in Simla to the shingle desert of the Trans-Himalaya, only getting snowier and colder as we went along. The roads there are really something and it is incredible how those bus-drivers manage to handle the non-power steering buses on those curves!

It was exciting to see the snow even though it was quite far away at first

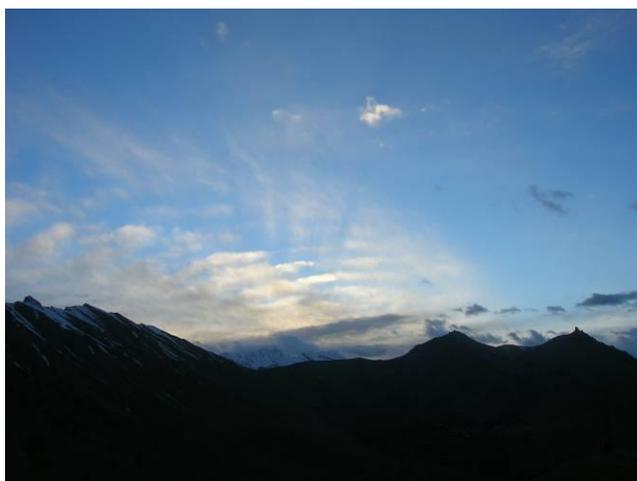
(most of us hadn't seen much snow before). We managed fairly well

and luckily the altitude didn't affect us too much on our journey. Reckong-Peo and Kaza were nice towns we stopped at, where we had more than a fair share of Momos and Thukpa.

But nothing in Kaza or Peo quite matches up to Kibber. The landscape is ethereal, so intense and sublime. You could spend hours wondering how something that appears so barren can be host to so much life.



[View of Kibber from Chicham](#)



Kibber is a village of people so unpretentious and simple you can't help but respect and trust them. Chhapel, Thinley, Rinchen, Dorje, Sushil, Kalzang treated us like family and made every effort to ensure our comfort. Most of the men (and some women) of the village belong to the Kibber Youth Council that takes an active part in the conservation work (the High Altitude Programme) that

the NCF began. Some of them including Thinley and Sushil work for the NCF. Their work involves them surveying the area, estimating the population of animals, ensuring that the snow leopard has enough wild prey so it does not attack livestock. They are also equally concerned about the produce the village makes each year as well as wild plant life.



In order to change the way the village viewed the snow leopard and other endangered wildlife, their first objective was to convince them that the delicate balance was being destroyed by killing these animals that they believed were a 'nuisance'. Yet that really isn't enough to tell a farmer who has lost all his horses to a leopard

attack or his fields to grazing blue sheep. An initiative begun by the NCF and managed almost entirely by the Kibber Youth Council is an insurance scheme for livestock, where the whole village pays a premium periodically. Their compensation plan is a well devised one, which takes into account the age, gender and kind of livestock. Over the years their policy of live and let live has helped increase the number of wild prey for the snow leopard, therefore reducing attacks. They also have a system where the villagers on rotation take all the animals to graze (trying to alternate between pasture lands so as to avoid overgrazing). It's really an amusing state of pandemonium in the morning (when they leave) and about 4p.m. when they return!



Morning cacophony- what a sight!

We were impressed by their dedication to their work. They were very knowledgeable about the plants, animals and the terrain. They showed us the differences between the classes of Blue Sheep and Ibex, and by the end of the trip we could somewhat determine their class and gender! They were more than happy to answer any of our questions and they volunteered information and stories of their adventures on our treks.

And their wildlife-spotting skills: un-believable! They simply scanned the area (comparable to standing on Malabar Hill and looking out onto the whole bay, from the hill to Navy Nagar) and spotted animals and plants with their naked eye that we couldn't even see with binoculars and their help pointing them out. We are sure we wouldn't have noticed half as many plants and animals had it not been for them.



Blue Sheep 8 meters away!

Even though Rishi, the NCF wildlife researcher (doing a study on snow leopards) couldn't be with us throughout the trip, he made sure that we took back as much as possible from our limited days. It was great to hear about his prior experiences with



Rishi, (NCF Researcher, Tiger Expert)

wildlife and his plans in Spiti. A major part of his work involves recording sightings of snow leopards using camera traps. Snow leopards are extremely elusive wildcats. Sightings are therefore extremely rare (therefore camera traps)!

This was where we volunteered. The whole region Rishi planned to do his project in needed to be surveyed for ideal cameral

trap locations: the craggiest of spots often

least accessible to man (perhaps we exaggerate a little) were



Hour-old leopard pug mark

in fact the neighbourhood hotspots for snow leopards.

Looking for suitable camera trap locations



Andrew and Chhapel

was very exciting for us all. Finding pug marks, scratches, scat and kills would always take away all our fatigue. We were hoping that we might come across a snow leopard on one of the transects, but it wasn't meant to be. We think we might have even come very close to one, but not noticed it. On a transect we came across fresh pugmarks and we were told they were only about an hour old, and we had passed that place only an hour and a half before that! I guess we'll have to go back to Spiti sometime to get an actual glimpse of a Snow Leopard.

On our very first transect from Kibber, we were very lucky to see a herd of 27 Ibex and got a chance to observe them for more than half an hour. They were fascinating to watch, so sure footed they were as they climbed up and descended the steepest of slopes with ease. During the trip we also saw a



Daniel and Sahir at 5038 meters above sea level!

number of Griffins, a Tibetan Woolly Hare, Red Fox, Golden Eagles, Snow cocks and a number of other birds.

Trekking in Spiti and trekking in the Sahyadris are two totally different ball games.

Thinley, Rinchin, Chhapel, Kalzang and Dorjee took us to places that we would never

imagine reaching! Besides the terrain, our bodies reacted differently from how they do when trekking around Bombay. In spite of it not being hot at all (very cold on the contrary, and very sunny), which is generally why we get exhausted, we found ourselves getting tired much faster.



Pranav and the kids at the NCF camp

During our stay, we were lucky enough to attend one of the camps conducted by Pranav Trivedi, an educator and senior member of the NCF. We learnt so much from him. They hold 3 day camps for school children from the Spiti Valley to make them aware of their environment and how they can affect it for the better. This is part of a 3-step long term programme to encourage children to give back to the planet. Pranav's expertise enabled us to get a very close look at a herd of blue sheep one evening. He helped us to discreetly approach them from below and let them know that we meant no harm.

At camp, most of us experienced snowfall for the first time and it is something that we'll remember for a long time. On the whole, this trip has been awesome, enriching in every possible way. We have learnt so much from our visit to Spiti. It gave us a chance to be exposed to very successful wildlife conservation and has only increased our interest and appreciation for nature. We have many to thank including the people of Kibber, the NCF and very importantly, LU, a very generous bunch of people without whom we wouldn't be able to manage both Spiti and the next half of our grand plan: Silent Valley. We are also very grateful to have been able to share this trip with three other friends Andrew, Alisha and Sahir, without whom our visit to Kibber would have been incomplete.



Our Last day in Kibber, L-R: Sahir, Tania, Lamaji, Pranavji, Kalzang, Dorje Bodh, Daniel, Lamaji, Rinchin, Chhapel, Alisha (unfortunately, only some of us)

Daniel Sequeira and Tania Louis