



FOUNDER'S MESSAGE

ECOLOGY IS ECONOMY

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We are living in the Anthropocene. Humans are the direct and primary driver of systemic changes in our planetary system, terraforming the great forests and wildernesses of our time, shaping our geological underpinnings and transforming interspecies worlds. In the past, the relationship between people and planet was symbiotic, each helping the other to thrive. Today, the relationship has turned into one of unilinear exploitation, driven by our economic mandate of better, brighter, faster, cheaper.

This past year has lifted the veil on what the future might look like if we continue to exploit and destroy nature at the same rate as we do today. The pandemic and multiple disease outbreaks – bird flu, African swine flu and Ebola – are the result of people and domestic animals coming into increasing contact with wild animals: the result of rampant deforestation, land degradation and rising extreme weather events. 2020 was also the hottest year on record and climate-linked natural disasters cost the world \$210 billion: an increase of 26.5% on 2019. Despite pandemic fears, environment and biodiversity related risks remained at the forefront of both business and youth leaders in the World Economic Forum's 2021 Risk Report.

2020 has conclusively demonstrated, our interdependence with nature: economic, social and cultural. Around the world, governments and business leaders are slowly waking up to the fact that good ecology is good economy. But the move to adopt this principle has been a slow and uphill struggle – and the move to redesign economies and businesses for interdependence with nature has so far been inadequate to respond to the enormous scale of the challenges of our time.

Since 2007, the Balipara Foundation has been advocating for this redesigning of our economy around principles of interdependence with nature - Naturenomics™. This push for Naturenomics™ is what led us to design a holistic approach to conservation. A new design was needed for rural economies, to reconcile both human and ecosystem needs. For an approach to holistically tackle the conflict between these needs, we realized we had to centre the rural and forest-fringe communities who depend most on nature, face huge challenges to their livelihoods from ecological degradation and have traditionally been the main stakeholders if not managers of habitats and ecosystems. The result was the Rural Futures model, which recognizes that conservation is not just a science, it is also social, economic and cultural. Successful conservation means working with people to meet the human that drive habitat degradation, biodiversity loss and species extinction.

Over the years our vision and programmes have been honed to meet our evolving understanding of how ecology, economy and people intersect – understanding, in other words, the social dimensions of conservation. Today our programmes reflect this interdisciplinary ethos for creating interdependence, towards the goal of restoring the fragile forests of the Eastern Himalayas, from Nepal to Myanmar.

The need for a holistic, multidimensional approach to action in this region has never been more critical. The Eastern Himalayas retain 60% its forest cover today, but only 25% of the region's original habitats survive today. Deforestation in the region is rampant. According to the 2019 Forest Survey of India, 74% of net deforestation in India occurred in the North

East states. These shrinking forests have cascading effects on the regional landscape. On average, approximately 23% of the land in the region is desertified. Human-wildlife conflict is accelerating, particularly with large species like elephants: in Assam, over 300 people have died from this conflict between 2014 and 2019.

These forests are under threat today from development pressures, businesses and from communities seeking to augment their shrinking incomes. In a primarily agrarian region where the vast majority of farmers are smallholders, this has created a downwards spiral where communities seek to augment incomes by exploiting forests, accelerating the degradation that ultimately takes a toll on their farmlands – and their agricultural incomes.

Holistic conservation starts by breaking this cycle of poverty, natural asset overexploitation and deforestation. It also begins with understanding the relationships people have with forests, past and present, and the unmet needs that make exploiting forests a lucrative proposition.

Years of research and conversations with communities have taught us to re-examine many of our assumptions about this relationship. For many, their primary concern is a stable income which allows them to access basic assets like healthcare and education for their families. Many are aware of how this exploitation undermines their lives, livelihoods and futures – but simply cannot afford to think as far as five or ten years into the future. They are aware of how degrading ecosystems threaten the future of their homes and their lands, but lack the resilience and means to act on this knowledge and because of income limitations, are forced to act against it. Others mourn the disappearance of traditional ecological knowledge, but as youth migrate in search of better livelihood opportunities, the opportunities for this intimate knowledge of ecosystems to be passed from one generation to the next are limited.

Through these conversations with communities, our understanding of conservation has further been perfected and expanded, to include universal basic assets i.e. the natural capital based access and delivery of the basic assets people need to live well: education, healthcare, food security, etc. to energy & water, transformative living spaces, etc. In this past year, we piloted the RuFu® lab experiment in reforestation and agroforestry, with the aim of supporting communities to reinvest the wealth earned from this in independently delivering and accessing these universal basic assets.

If we mapped the intellectual value chain of conservation, it would cover a wide range of subjects ordinarily siloed off from each other: botany, zoology, geology, anthropology, economics, history, geography and more. As our work through Rural Futures expands, we see these interlinkages emerging ever more clearly and in turn, shaping our initiatives. From habitat restoration, our programmes have expanded to include natural capital for delivering universal basic assets, and research into indigenous knowledge through ethnobotany and rural/indigenous understandings of well-being and quality of life to strengthen conservation practice and enhance how we measure our outcomes and successes. We have moved from single approaches to human-elephant conflict by taking multidimensional approaches through monitoring, insurance schemes and alternative agroforestry models which all enhance income resilience for communities. In all of these, the interplay between the social, economic and ecological has been the backbone of our successes, which this report explores in further detail.

The future of the Eastern Himalayas today lies in recognizing ecology is economy. Last year at the Eastern Himalayan Naturenomics™ Forum, business and government leaders endorsed the need to develop an ecological budget, and the need to measure and value our natural capital. Change is happening slowly but surely. Our goal now is to accelerate this change and transformation in both thinking and action to restore, revitalize and rewild the Eastern Himalayas for resilient people, biodiversity and economies.