

Understanding Human–Wildlife Interactions in Drass, Ladakh

Focus Group Discussion Report



Supported by: High Asia Habitat Fund

Report by: Kuhelika Bisht & Anshruta Anirudh

31st August 2026

Background & Objective

The Himalayan Brown Bear Trust (HBBT) conducted a series of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) across Drass to better understand how local communities perceive and experience human–wildlife interactions, particularly interactions with the Himalayan brown bear.

The aim was to understand the concerns, motivations and challenges that communities face, as well as what they feel could work in their own villages to reduce conflict and support coexistence.

The discussions were conducted with three groups:

- **15** Youth (19–26 years)
- **9** Men (40+ years)
- **10** Women (30+ years)

Participants came from villages across Drass, including Mushkow, Goshan, Holiyal, Bearas, Bhimbat, Masjidga and Nowpora and a few more.

The discussions were semi-structured and began with broader questions around the future of Drass and people's relationship with the brown bear and their environment, before moving into human–wildlife **interactions, conflict and possible solutions**.

YOUTH GROUP.

Participants: Approximately 15 young people, aged 19–26

Villages represented: Mushkow, Goshan, Holiyal, Bearas, Bhimbat, Masjidga, Nowpora and others

Duration: Approximately 2 hours

Vision on Drass

What would you envision for Drass after 10 years?

If you had a magic wand, what would you change about Drass?

Participants imagined a Drass that is cleaner, greener and more developed, with better education, healthcare, infrastructure and employment opportunities.

They wanted:

- Better education and healthcare
- Better infrastructure
- More businesses and employment opportunities
- More greenery and environmental protection
- Greater recognition for Drass's culture and winter sports
- More protection for wildlife
- Development that does not come at the cost of Drass's culture and landscape

When asked what they would change if they had a magic wand, **unemployment** came up strongly, along with **education, conservative mindsets, environmental damage** and **climate change**.

There was a clear sense that young people want Drass to develop, but **not lose what makes Drass what it is**.

Relationship with Wildlife & Key Concerns

To what extent does wildlife affect your daily life?

Most participants said that wildlife does not create major difficulties in their everyday lives. However, they felt that people who are economically weaker are more affected when wildlife causes losses.

Financial loss was identified as the main concern around living with wildlife.

At the same time, participants did not see conflict as a reason to kill wildlife.

There was also a more positive side to the conversation. Participants felt that **brown bear tourism** has already brought benefits to some villages, particularly Mushkow and Holiyal.

However, there is still very little awareness among people about brown bears, how to respond to them, why they are important, and what benefits they can bring.

Understanding the Causes of Conflict

What is the ideal scenario for you of human-wildlife?

Participants spoke about the changes happening around their villages and how these might be affecting wildlife.

They mentioned:

- Overgrazing
- New roads through the mountains
- Increasing construction and machinery
- Disturbance to bear habitat
- Waste around villages

There was a strong feeling that as human activity increases, wildlife is being pushed closer to villages.

One participant spoke specifically about Mushkow, saying that the environment has been damaged by overgrazing, machinery and increasing development.

The idea was summed up simply by one participant:

"If we don't disturb the bear's environment, they won't disturb ours."

Mitigation Measures

What are some mitigation measures that you think work?

Awareness came up repeatedly.

Participants suggested:

- Making brown bear awareness more visible on social media
- Youth spreading awareness within their own villages

-
- Brown bear books in schools and public reading spaces
 - Videos and other simple communication materials
 - More community discussions like the FGD itself
 - Nature guide training
 - Expanding brown bear tourism and ecotourism to more villages

There was also a strong feeling that people need to understand the **value of the brown bear**, and not only the problems it creates.

One participant said:

"For most others, they only see the problems that the bear brings. They don't know about the benefits."

The group felt that youth could play an important role in changing this through both **online and offline communication**.

Participants also felt that **government involvement** in conflict mitigation and awareness is currently limited, with NGOs taking a more active role.

They felt that government could play a larger role in:

- Awareness and education in schools
- Community-level awareness programmes
- Mitigation measures
- Supporting nature guides and tourism
- Making brown bear awareness part of wider education programmes

There was also a feeling that awareness should not only come from NGOs, but become something that is taken up more widely by **institutions and communities**.

Key Insights from the Youth Group

1. Young people want development, but they want to retain Drass's identity.

They see environmental protection and development as things that can happen together.

2. Financial loss is the main concern around wildlife.

However, participants did not see this as a reason to kill bears.

3. Awareness is a major gap.

People often experience the problems caused by bears without understanding their ecological significance.

4. Human activity is seen as part of the problem.

Participants connected roads, overgrazing, waste, and habitat disturbance with increasing encounters.

5. Youth see themselves as part of the solution.

They suggested using social media, village-level conversations, schools, tourism and nature guiding to change perceptions.

MEN'S GROUP.

Participants: 10

Villages: Holiyal, Rambirpora, Bhimbat, Pashkum, Mushko, Jugand

Duration: 2 hours

How does wildlife affect their lives?

For the men's group, the conversation around the brown bear was largely about **livelihoods, livestock and safety.**

Participants spoke about the conflict going back to the 1990s, with more than 100 attacks reported over the years. They spoke about sheep, goats and cows being killed, houses being damaged, and the financial loss that comes with this.

A sheep costs around ₹10,000, while a cow can cost ₹70,000 or more. Participants felt that the compensation they receive does not come close to covering this loss.

But the loss of livestock is not only about the money. Traditionally, cows, sheep and goats were also a form of financial security. If a family suddenly needed money for a wedding, education or another expense, they could sell a few animals.

One participant described this as a **financial fallback that no longer exists.**

At the same time, the group acknowledged that the decline in livestock is not only because of the brown bear. Young people are leaving Drass for education and jobs, there are very few private-sector opportunities locally, and there are fewer people left to look after livestock.

How do they see the conflict?

There was a strong feeling that the current approach to conservation is looking at the issue from only one side.

Participants were clear that they do not necessarily want the brown bear to be killed. Several people said that the animal should be protected and that they understood its ecological importance.

But they also questioned what conservation means for the people living alongside it.

If a family has to stay awake at night to guard their livestock, put up concertina wire, light fires and constantly worry about an attack, how long can this continue?

One participant put it very directly:

"You are looking at this from only one side. Think about the person on the other side, they are human beings too."

There was also concern about the possibility of a future attack on a person. Even if attacks are rare, participants felt that the possibility cannot simply be ruled out.

Why do they think conflict is happening?

Participants had several ideas about why brown bears are now coming closer to villages.

They mentioned:

- Changes in livestock and hunting
- Overgrazing
- Roads and other development
- Increasing human activity in the mountains
- Waste and easily available food around villages

-
- Changes in the availability of natural prey

There was a general feeling that bears now have easier access to food around villages, particularly through garbage.

Participants also observed that bears seem to attack livestock that are tied up or confined more often than animals grazing freely.

The wildlife patrolling team offered another perspective. They said they encounter brown bears regularly and do not see them as inherently aggressive. According to them, bears generally leave people alone when they are left alone themselves. Problems are more likely when people chase or disturb them, particularly when a bear has a cub.

What are people already doing?

People are already trying different ways to protect themselves and their livestock.

These include:

- Barbed wire and concertina fencing
- Wire mesh over windows
- Stronger doors
- Keeping livestock outside in some areas
- Firecrackers and fires at night
- Dogs for security
- Staying awake and guarding livestock
- Calling the wildlife department when a bear is seen

The wildlife department has also provided some households with mesh, barbed wire and firecrackers, and has stayed in villages during periods of increased bear activity.

But there was a question about how sustainable these measures are.

One participant who had put concertina wire around his cowshed asked:

"Can people really be expected to do this for the rest of their lives?"

Another said that if people have to put grills and fencing everywhere, it starts to feel like **living inside a jail**.

There was also a concern that protective measures are being given only to selected households rather than everyone who needs them.

What do they think could work?

The group suggested some practical measures.

Protect people and livestock

- Build proper, secure cowsheds
- Provide doors, mesh and other protective measures to households
- Give poorer households priority
- Strengthen older mud houses and livestock enclosures

Create some separation between people and bears

- Create a buffer zone higher up in the mountains
- Use fencing where appropriate to prevent bears from coming down
- Protect bear habitat while keeping villages and livestock safer

Have people from the villages involved

- Train and pay people from the villages to work with the wildlife department
- Have people stationed closer to villages so that they can respond quickly
- Reduce dependence on volunteers

Improve waste management

- Properly dispose of waste so that bears do not have easy access to food around villages

Improve compensation

- Compensation should be closer to the actual value of livestock
- The process should be simpler
- People should not have to spend an entire day travelling and completing paperwork to receive a small amount of compensation

The basic message was:

Protect the people and their livestock, and protect the bear too.

Compensation

Compensation was one of the biggest points of frustration.

Participants felt that the amount received is often much lower than the actual value of the animal. Examples were given of cows worth around ₹70,000 receiving only a small fraction of that amount, and sheep worth around ₹10,000 receiving ₹5,000–6,000.

There was also frustration around the process itself.

Residents spoke about having to arrange photographs, geotagged evidence, doctors, post-mortems and different officials. For someone who has to work for a daily wage, even making a claim can mean losing a day's income.

The wildlife department explained that the process is actually simpler in some situations, particularly when an animal is killed inside a house. They also explained that photographs and other evidence are needed to establish that the animal was killed by a brown bear and not another predator.

The discussion showed a clear **gap between how the department understands the compensation process and how it is experienced or understood by residents.**

There was also some confusion about where forms need to be submitted and who is responsible for moving the paperwork forward.

What do they think about the brown bear?

The group had a mixed view of the bear.

On one hand, participants spoke strongly about the losses it has caused and questioned why local people should bear the cost of conservation.

On the other hand, several people said that the brown bear is important for the ecosystem and should be protected.

One participant pointed out that if brown bears were eliminated, the population of wild goats could increase and create another ecological problem through overgrazing.

There was also recognition that the bear is becoming an attraction for tourists.

However, participants questioned how much of this tourism actually benefits local people. Their feeling was that only a relatively small number of people currently benefit directly from brown bear tourism, while many more households bear the costs of living with the animal.

At the same time, there was some recognition that this could change. Holiyal was given as an example where a tourism operator has rented a house and created several local jobs.

What role should the wildlife department play?

Participants wanted the wildlife department to have a stronger presence in the villages.

The department currently has a night patrol team covering Drass, with around 10 people patrolling between approximately 10 PM and 4 AM. They have also distributed SOS numbers and ask people to call when a bear is seen.

However, the department itself acknowledged that **manpower and the size of the area they have to cover make it difficult to respond immediately.**

There was strong support for involving people from the villages themselves. Participants felt that local people could be trained and employed to work with the department, which could also create some local employment.

There were also concerns about how protective infrastructure is distributed. Some residents felt that doors and other measures had been given only to selected households.

Key Insights from the Men's Group

1. Livestock is more than a livelihood.

For many families, cows, sheep, and goats were also a financial safety net. Losing them means losing something they could fall back on in an emergency.

2. The group is not against conservation.

Several participants said that the brown bear should be protected. Their concern is about who bears the cost of that protection.

3. Safety is becoming a bigger concern.

Even where attacks on people are rare, the fear of what could happen changes how people live and how much time they spend guarding their homes and livestock.

4. Compensation is a major source of frustration.

People feel that the amount does not reflect the actual loss, and that the process can be difficult to navigate.

5. People want protection on both sides.

The expectation is not necessarily to remove the bear, but to find a way to protect people, livestock and the bear at the same time.

6. Local people could be more directly involved.

There was strong support for training and employing people from the villages as part of the wildlife response.

7. Tourism is seen as a possible opportunity, but not a replacement for traditional livelihoods.

Participants questioned whether brown bear tourism currently benefits enough people to compensate for the loss of livestock, while also acknowledging that it could grow and create opportunities in more villages.

8. The relationship with the bear has changed over time.

Participants spoke about how brown bears were not commonly seen when they were children, and how their presence has become much more noticeable since the 1990s. They connected this change to shifts in hunting, livestock, development, waste and the wider landscape.

WOMEN'S GROUP.

Participants: 10 women aged 30 to 60 years old

Villages: Holiyal, Pandras, Mushkow, Bearas

Duration: 2 hours

What have been your encounters with bears?

The women had stories of encountering bears both as children and more recently.

One participant remembered a brown bear coming into their backyard around midnight, about two years ago. Another remembered being chased by a bear when she was a child, while she and a group of girls were in the mountains collecting cow dung. They managed to run away, but one of the girls fainted and had to be dragged away before the bear left.

Another story was about three girls from Holiyal who had gone to collect dung and found around ten bears feeding on garbage near the Bhaku Transit Camp. Army personnel saw them and asked them to move away because it was dangerous.

When asked what they feel when someone says "bear", the immediate response was simply:

"Dar." — Fear.

At the same time, the women did not describe the brown bear as an animal that necessarily attacks people. There was a distinction made between brown and black bears, with the feeling that brown bears are less likely to attack. But when a bear comes into a village, there is naturally fear because it is a wild animal.

What do you understand about the behaviour of bears?

A lot of the women's understanding of bears comes from **experience and stories passed down through generations**.

They spoke about how people traditionally tried to scare bears away using fire, noise and firecrackers. There was also a general understanding that a bear will usually not harm people if it is left alone and not disturbed.

They felt that things have changed in recent years, with bears being seen more frequently around villages. The availability of food and garbage around settlements was seen as one possible reason for this.

There was also a sense that people themselves need to be more careful about how they behave around bears.

How do you handle a bear encounter?

When a bear is seen, people usually gather and try to drive it away using firecrackers, noise or other methods until the wildlife department arrives.

The women spoke about using dogs, lights, fencing and other measures to protect their homes and livestock.

Some villages have also seen bears stop coming into certain areas after solar lights were installed.

However, these measures do not always work. Bears have found ways around fencing and can still enter homes or courtyards.

There was also a concern that protective measures are not available to everyone, and that things like iron doors, fencing and lights can be expensive for individual households.

What do you know about compensation and support?

One of the clearest things that came out of the discussion was that **many people do not know what support is available to them.**

Some participants did not know that the wildlife department provides compensation when livestock is killed. They also did not have the department's emergency number.

The women felt that there are probably many other things the community does not know about, including what to do during an emergency and who to contact.

The discussion itself became a useful awareness exercise. As one participant said, they had only found out by sitting together that wildlife losses could be compensated.

There was a feeling that **better information could change how people respond to these situations.**

How do you think coexistence can happen?

The women did not feel that the answer was to simply remove the bears or fence them out completely.

There was an understanding that the brown bear is part of the ecosystem and has a right to live in the landscape too.

At the same time, people need to feel safe in their own homes and while carrying out everyday activities.

The idea was to find a way where **neither people nor bears are harmed.**

They also felt that the growing interest in brown bears and tourism has helped people understand that the animal has value beyond the conflict it creates.

Key Insights from the Women's Group

1. Fear is a big part of living with bears.

The first response to the word bear was simply "fear". Many of the women also had their own stories of close encounters.

2. Wildlife is part of everyday life.

Women encounter wildlife while doing everyday things like collecting dung and going into the mountains.

3. There is a lot of local knowledge.

Stories and experiences passed down through families shape how people understand bears and respond to them.

4. People are already trying different things.

Firecrackers, dogs, lights, fencing and night-time watch are all being used to keep bears away.

5. There is a big gap in awareness.

Some women did not know about compensation or even have the wildlife department's number. The discussion itself helped answer some of these questions.

6. They don't want the bears to disappear.

There was an understanding that bears are part of the landscape too. The aim is to find a way for **both people and bears to be safe**.

7. Tourism is changing how people see bears.

The women felt that tourism has helped people understand the value of the brown bear and has created some opportunities for local people.

8. People need to feel safe.

The focus was less on removing bears and more on having the right information, support, and basic protection to live alongside them.

Annexure: Questionnaire

Key Focus Areas

- Nature and frequency of wildlife conflicts.
- Impacts of such conflicts on livelihoods, cultural practices, and wellbeing.
- Existing coping and mitigation strategies (formal/informal, traditional/modern).
- Community expectations and priorities for future action.
- Mechanisms for collaboration and collective action.
- Perception and challenges of Livestock compensation model

Ice-breaker Prompts

- Your earliest memory of encountering wildlife
- What would you envision for Drass after 10 years?
- If you had a magic wand what would you change about Drass?
- Do you remember your very first interaction with wildlife or a brown bear?
- When someone says bear what emotion do you feel?

Questions

- What are the most important concerns for your village about living with wildlife?
- What is an ideal human-wildlife -scenario for you?
- How have your daily lives been influenced by the presence of wildlife here?
- Why is it important to talk about wildlife issues together?
- How does your village currently manage wildlife concerns, and what would you improve?
- Which traditional practices or knowledge about wildlife do you consider valuable?
- Can you recall any recent wildlife incidents and how they were handled?
- What types of wildlife conflicts are most common? How frequently do they occur?
- How do wildlife encounters affect your family's livelihood and wellbeing?
- What is the procedure for applying for compensation according to a resident and according to an employee of the wildlife department?
- What traditional or new methods have you used to prevent/respond to conflict?
- Who in the village is responsible for making decisions about wildlife incidents?
- What kind of support (from the government, NGOs, or others) would help the most?
- What kinds of solutions do you see working in your area?
- Are some families or groups affected more than others? Please share examples.
- What unintended consequences have arisen from current mitigation measures?
- What would you improve or change to make these methods more effective?
- What is your responsibility in helping your valley deal with this conflict?