CELEBRATING CONSERVATION HEROES
“Together Possible”. It is not merely a motto or a marketing statement, it is the very essence of WWF, rooted in our core principle of collaboration. Collaboration with communities, with corporations, and with governments. This ethos underscores that our journey to address conservation challenges does not exist in isolation but is built from the ground-up, through collective efforts. Through these we find the keys to unlocking success in our interventions.

Just recently, we at WWF-Pakistan recognised the efforts of some of our conservation heroes across Pakistan through our prestigious conservation awards, a practice we have been following since 2001. Each of the recipients of these awards, have made contributions to the field of environmental conservation that have left an indelible mark on conservation in Pakistan.

This edition’s theme, “Celebrating our Conservation Heroes” is in continuation of our recognition of the communities and the people that underscore the vital role these local champions play in our shared journey towards a sustainable and harmonious coexistence with our planet.

From the coastal shores of Sindh to the picturesque valleys of Galiyat, and from the bustling urban centers of Islamabad and Rawalpindi to the serene landscapes of Gilgit Baltistan, these stories resonate with the diverse tapestry of Pakistan’s regions and cultures.

As we immerse ourselves in these stories of change, we invite our readers to explore the power of collaboration and the collective might of communities and individuals determined to preserve their natural heritage. The diversity in the conservation work reflects the diversity of Pakistan itself, and through this myriad of stories, we bear witness to the multitude of ways in which we can make a difference.

This edition breathes life into WWF’s motto, “Together Possible.” Have a happy and informed read!

By Sheheryar Khan, WWF-Pakistan.
Named after renowned conservationists whose contributions paved the way for innovation and success, these awards paid tribute to those at the frontlines: our communities. Each of the recipients have made contributions to the field of environmental conservation and have left an indelible mark on conservation in Pakistan.
Abdullah, a 48-year old conservationist and member of the Kakapir fishing community, first became involved in marine turtle conservation at the tender age of 12, when he volunteered to work with a relative of his employed by the Sindh Wildlife Department.

Recounting those early days, Abdullah says, “I would keep a lookout for adult Green turtle and collect their eggs, moving them to a hatchery.”

Actively engaged in the voluntary monitoring and conservation of Green turtles nesting sites in the Hawks Bay area since the 1970s, Abdullah has many stories to share. “Sometimes, the adult female turtles veer away from their intended nesting grounds. When this happens, I rally community members, and together we locate and rescue the disoriented turtles.”

“I rescue the disoriented turtles by wrapping them in Ajrak (a traditional block-printed shawl) to ensure their safety and release them back into the water. This has to be done cautiously to avoid harm or disturbance.”

Individuals like Abdullah, who actively participate in fishing and community welfare, and dedicate a substantial amount of their time personally monitoring and protecting sea turtles, can offer a solution to conservation organizations in effectively safeguarding vulnerable species by forming a robust and consistent beach monitoring mechanism.
“I have witnessed events where dogs actively excavate the nests to prey on the hatchlings. But these turtles face many other threats too. Development on the beachfront and the waste left behind by beachgoers, including disposable plastics, and discarded fishing lines and nets are all obstacles for these turtles and their hatchlings.”

says Abdullah as he sheds light on the many threats and dangers to sea turtles.

“I once witnessed five dogs barking at a nest located across the WWF Wetland Centre. I dug the nest up 1/4 and found around 70 to 80 hatchlings entangled in a ghost net, which was obstructing their exit from the nest and preventing them from reaching the ocean.”

“I released them into the sea during low tide at night” he added proudly.
The traditional knowledge and cultural practices of Abdullah and his community offer an opportunity to strengthen marine turtle conservation efforts. Recognizing the significance of these turtles in the communities’ historical narratives, rituals, and beliefs; Abdullah, and many others like him, have a deep reverence for the species and demonstrate responsibility towards their protection.

They have an intimate understanding of nesting behaviour in turtles, which can be tapped to monitor and safeguard these habitats and deter poaching. These communities can effectively act as custodians.

Residing close to the nesting grounds of marine turtles and actively involved in fishing activities, these coastal communities are a key stakeholder and indispensable partners when it comes to marine conservation.

By shifting to sustainable fishing practices, including responsible fishing techniques and by participating in the safe handling and release of accidental catches, these communities can make significant contributions to reducing the mortality of marine turtles, whilst ensuring the sustainability of fish stocks and the overall health of the marine ecosystem.
Facing numerous threats to both their aquatic habitats and nesting areas, marine turtles are globally endangered. Marine turtles lack the ability to retreat into their hard shells for protection, unlike freshwater turtles, making them particularly vulnerable to predation and other hazards. Predation by natural predators, disorientation from artificial lighting, and obstacles on their path to the water pose risks to the hatchlings; whereas adults encounter a variety of dangers including entanglement in fishing gear, collisions with boats and vessels, ingestion of marine debris, pollution in their foraging areas, illegal trade, rising temperatures, etc.

Marine turtles are keystone species that contribute to the overall health and balance of the marine ecosystem. Various species play crucial roles that extend beyond their populations, including the maintenance of underwater vegetation in shallow water, supporting intricate food webs, influencing nutrient availability and productivity in marine ecosystems.
Community stewardship lies at the heart of conservation. This comes with the realization that people who share their homes with biodiversity and rely on the natural resources are also critical partners for their conservation. This unique commitment to inclusive conservation is not only integral to WWF’s core objectives but it also serves as a central purpose of achieving conservation outcomes that benefit both nature and people.

WWF-Pakistan’s own conservation journey spans over 50 years now, which is full of inspirational stories and transformative initiatives. These efforts have not only mended the broken bonds between communities and nature but have also birthed champions dedicated to safeguarding biodiversity and embracing sustainable stewardship. Starting from the northern areas of the country which is the home of the snow leopard, to the Indus delta and the coastline home of countless unique species, this journey offers stories of bringing several species back from the brink of extinction to the saving their habitats as an outcome of dedicated efforts for inclusive community conservation. Each story of community conservation is unique, and a beacon of awareness on what people can achieve when they take up the custodianship of nature. Among these, the narrative of the Indus River dolphin and the Bhulan Dost programme standout as a testament to the enduring potential of such endeavors.

The Indus River Dolphin, referred to as Bhulan locally, holds a special place in Pakistan’s natural heritage. Quite recently, it received special recognition as the ‘Queen of the Indus’ under the Sindh Wildlife Protection, Preservation, Conservation, and Management Act of 2020. This endangered flagship species is exclusive to the Indus River system, with the only viable population residing within Pakistan’s geographical boundaries. While a handful of dolphins have been reported in the Beas River, a tributary of the Indus, in India, it is functionally endemic to Pakistan.

Bhulan Dost (English for ‘Indus dolphin’s friend’) is an evolved version of WWF-Pakistan’s persistent engagement with fishers of the Indus River who have been instrumental in halting the decline of the river’s dolphin population and even doubling it over the past two decades.

The programme is a seamless blend of citizen science and community-based conservation, with the overarching goal of monitoring and protecting this rare and exceptional species.
The Bhulan Dost, citizen scientists who reside along the Indus River are however unique. While some may not be literate in the traditional sense, they all possess a gift, a superpower, known as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). This evolving knowledge has been passed down through generations, cultivated through their profound connection with nature and their centuries-long interaction with dolphins. I once asked a fisherman about his deep knowledge of dolphin behavior, and he told me that he was born on a boat and had spent his entire childhood on it. His boat was not just his home but also a vantage point to observe dolphins and fish daily. Surrounded by dolphins and fish, he considered the river his teacher and these creatures, as his lifelong friends.

These dedicated Bhulan Dosts and Sahelis play a crucial role in collecting essential data on the Indus River Dolphin, including its sightings, age, and the times they are observed. Their efforts significantly expand monitoring coverage, which is indispensable for planning further conservation actions.

Monitoring is of utmost importance as it helps identify areas where dolphins might get stranded in shallow waters and allows for the timely addressing of issues like unsustainable fishing practices.

These community conservationists also keep a vigilant eye on the threats faced by dolphins, marking their observations on paper sheets. These sheets are made readily available to fishermen, enabling them to record such observations quickly and easily during their fishing activities. At the same time, their contributions extend well beyond monitoring, and they also play a crucial role in rescuing and safely releasing not only dolphins but also other species like freshwater turtles.

However, what truly sets this programme apart is the profound impact it has on the very fabric of the villages and communities it touches. Comprising a dedicated group of 232 individuals within the Bhulan Dost Programme, these Dolphin Dosts become messengers of Indus dolphin conservation, sustainable fishing practices, and the protecting nature. Their influence reverberates through their Goths (villages) and communities. These individuals are catalysts of change, increasing the proportion of well-informed and well-engaged citizens within the Indus River Dolphin’s home. This, in turn, will propel dolphin conservation efforts to a scale we have not yet experienced in Pakistan. Their collective efforts are poised to make an enduring difference, both for the dolphins and the communities that call the Indus River their home.

Written by Hamera Aisha, WWF-Pakistan.
In the small village of Siddique Dablo near Keti Bunder, Zebu Khatoon lives alongside her husband, daughter and brother-in-law. The family’s primary means of sustenance revolves around fishing as is the case with most people living in this Indus delta community.

For some time now, Zebu has been undertaking a kitchen gardening training course by WWF-Pakistan. While her husband and brother in law are away fishing - which can go up to a few days at a time - Zebu, her daughter, and a few other women of the village have been taking part in this training. As part of the training, these women are provided lessons on cultivating vegetables in their own yards using household waste as compost. This inspired Zebu to start her own endeavour.

One day when Zebu’s husband and brother in law returned from one of their fishing expeditions, to their surprise, they found a delectable meal with the fish they caught waiting for them. Zebu Khatoon and her daughter diligently harvested fresh vegetables from their own backyard garden. The two men eagerly inquired about the origin of these newfound vegetables with great pride and excitement.

Zebu proceeded to share how they had successfully cultivated their very own fresh produce right outside their humble abode.
Regrettably, though, they had found it challenging to sell any excess vegetables they yielded from this newfound skill due to their domestic obligations at home. With eyes filled with intrigue and longing for further information on this remarkable technique, Zebu’s husband yearned to know where his wife had obtained such invaluable knowledge. She mentioned the wooden box that they had been generously provided during their lessons, which contained detailed instructions and user-friendly techniques.

As her husband soaked in all this information, an idea began germinating in his mind that had immense potential for growth and prosperity. After much contemplation and discussion, Zebu and her husband were determined that they would endeavour to sell any surplus vegetables they harvested during their fishing escapades in nearby villages. With renewed determination, Zebu took extra care of the vegetables, knowing they were destined for sale. They soon harvested abundant produce that could be sold in areas where such vegetables were not commonly available.

Each day, Zebu would gather the freshly harvested vegetables and carefully pack them in baskets, ready to be transported on their fishing boat. Her husband became the vegetable vendor, selling their homegrown treasures in villages along their fishing route, including the village of Bagaan. People in these areas were inspired by the sight of fresh, locally grown produce, and they, too, started their own kitchen gardens.

The practice of kitchen gardening began to spread from village to village, encouraging others to grow their own food.

Inspired by her success, many women in their village have also embraced kitchen gardening, and the knowledge has continued to spread since. Zebu’s journey from dependence to resilience was an example for others to follow.

Today, Zebu is a proud and independent woman, contributing to the household income alongside her husband. Recently, when cyclone Biparjoy threatened their area, Zebu took the initiative to secure their family’s safety. With her financial resources, she arranged for transportation, ensuring they could leave before the storm’s landfall. Zebu’s tenacity and independence turned into a ray of hope for her tribe as they realised they no longer needed to wait for aid from the government in times of need. Her story continues to inspire others, instilling in the area traits like resiliency, independence, and living more sustainably.

Written by Mona Zia, WWF-Pakistan.
UNSUNG HEROES

TURNING PASSION TO PROFESSION

A resident of Rahimabad, Gilgit, Rozina Babar turned her passion for flowers into a viable source of income for herself and other women in her community. In 2017, she approached the agriculture department of Gilgit-Baltistan with a business proposal that inspired many. Today, over 450 women from 22 different organizations are working on floriculture in the region.

RESCUING THE BHULAN

Previously a fisherman, Abdul Jabbar gave up his job to join the Indus river dolphin rescue team. Working with limited resources, he monitors the river and despite time of day, is one of the first responders when a dolphin is stranded in a canal or trapped in a shallow water body.

CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

A symbol of strength, Haseena Tumrani is a woman field trainer and an ardent advocate of women’s rights. Married at 16, with limited access to education and career opportunities, she battled a slew of challenges to pursue work not just for herself, but to uplift other women in her community. She hasn’t looked back since and despite sustaining major injuries in an unfortunate car accident, continued her work with WWF-Pakistan.

BEFRIENDING BLUE FORESTS

Belonging to a tribe of camel grazers, Tajan Jat went against the tide by understanding the economic, societal and environmental value of mangroves. Today, he leads plantation drives and encourages his community to do the same. In fact, his efforts mitigated his community’s long-standing conflict with the Dablo communities, that had been involved in mangrove plantation since 2007, and resulted in Keti Bunder being a major mangrove plantation area.

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The world is grappling with the uncertainties brought about by climate change. As the global population goes beyond 8 billion, resources are becoming increasingly scarce. In this context, mountains, which constitute 25 per cent of the Earth’s surface and are home to one-tenth of the world’s population, can play a vital role in building a sustainable future. Mountains are responsible for providing 60-80 per cent of the world’s freshwater for drinking, agriculture, and industrial use.

Additionally, they host half of the planet’s biodiversity. The melting glaciers in these mountains serve as one of the earliest indicators of climate change, raising alarm bells about the impending catastrophe.

Nestled in the Karakoram, Western Himalayas, and northern Hindu Kush ranges, Gilgit-Baltistan is a region rich in towering mountains and numerous glaciers. It stands as one of the most vulnerable areas to climate change, given the presence of globally significant mountain ranges and glaciers, second only to those found in Antarctica and the Arctic. Due to resource scarcity, men in the region are compelled to migrate to other parts of the world to support their families. In this scenario, women assume crucial roles in environmental protection, social development, and economic sustainability within the mountains. They serve as guardians of biodiversity, preserving traditional knowledge and upholding their culture.

Throughout history, women have contributed equally to the tasks traditionally assigned to men. However, due to unequal resource distribution, their contributions often go unnoticed.
In recent years, women from these regions have showcased their talents in various fields, becoming farmers, market sellers, business women, artisans, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. In low and lower-middle-income countries, where agriculture is a vital sector for employment, women work tirelessly as agricultural workers and primary providers, especially during periods of drought and unpredictable rainfall, to secure income and resources for their families.

**Mountain women have not only empowered themselves through hard work but have also paved the way for a brighter future for their families.**

As farmers, women in the mountains have maximized their crop production through techniques like tunnel farming. By cultivating tomatoes, cucumbers, and other vegetables, they have improved their economic conditions and contributed to the overall prosperity of their communities. Additionally, domestic women work tirelessly from dawn till dusk to support their families.

Apart from excelling in farming, women have emerged as community leaders, addressing various societal issues and amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals.

Soni Jawari is a historical example, and present-day figures like Sadia Danish, Amna Zamir, Samina Baig, Aneeta Karim, Diana Baig, Natasha Baig, and many others are following in her footsteps.

Throughout history, women have actively engaged in practices that preserve their traditions and support their families financially. Northern women have particularly excelled in cross-stitching, not only promoting their culture but also securing their children’s future through the income generated from this talent. Nausheen Barkat’s journey as an emerging entrepreneur exemplifies how an idea can transform into a successful business. As the CEO of the ‘Asqr’ honey brand, Nausheen Barkat has gained recognition through various media platforms. Her work has not only made her a successful entrepreneur in the North but has also empowered women in her region. Other women have benefited from this brand by learning the art of beekeeping, which provides the purest and healthiest honey globally.

WWF-Pakistan would like to pay its heartfelt tribute to the late Seema Iqbal, a young filmmaker from Gilgit Baltistan who recently lost her life. Seema had won awards in consecutive years at the Bam-e-Dunya film festival and her short films have been screened at both national and international platforms. We also remember her as a great supporter of WWF’s activities and her untimely passing is a great loss for her family as well as for Pakistan.
Nausheen Barkat's story is not unique. In the realm of talent, Natasha Baig, a renowned singer from the mountains, has found her own voice through her passion for singing. Her story serves as an inspiration for girls, emphasizing the value of hard work.

Zahra Noreen, a self-made young woman with a creative mind, is the CEO and co-founder of the ‘She Dev’ incubation center. She Dev empowers young women in the field of IT.

In the field of education, Nishat Riaz is a prominent figure who has not only served her region but has also made a global impact in the field of education. She stands as an inspiring example for younger generations, proving that nothing in life is impossible. Samina Baig, a brave and young woman from the mountains, has conquered the seven highest summits in the seven continents, including Mount Everest. She is the first female Muslim mountaineer to achieve this remarkable feat.

The aforementioned women are leading examples from the region who have excelled in their respective fields. However, many more talented individuals are waiting to be recognized due to a lack of resources and platforms. In the face of the climate change crisis, mountain women have the potential to contribute to a sustainable future. By providing them with appropriate recognition for their traditional contributions and offering them the right platforms, their capabilities can be harnessed.

In Gilgit-Baltistan, there are young women pursuing professions such as filmmaking and journalism who need proper platforms to nurture their talents. This would also greatly benefit the region’s tourism industry by promoting it through the media. The Bam-e-Dunya Film Festival, the largest film festival in the history of Gilgit-Baltistan, has already provided recognition to young female filmmakers. Similarly, the government should facilitate pathways for young female filmmakers to fill the void in the filmmaking profession.

The success stories of mountain women are countless. From historical times to the present, women have proven themselves as guardians of the mountains.

While some women have gained recognition for their talents, there is a vast list of untapped potential waiting to be explored. By acknowledging their contributions, regardless of how small they may seem, and providing them with the right stage, these women can actively contribute to a better and sustainable future.

Written by Salima Aman, Shining Light Academy Gilgit and Intern at WWF-Pakistan.
In the outskirts of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, two communities, Farash Town and James Town, were burdened by the lack of access to clean water and the challenges it brought. Both communities were confronted with numerous challenges, such as the absence of a public water supply, reliance on expensive private tankers, brackish groundwater, and waterborne diseases. All these issues were compounded by increased impacts of climate change in the forms of changing rainfall patterns, inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure, and governance deficiencies.

The plight and concerns of these communities necessitated a response, an intervention that could possibly alleviate the circumstances of the people of these communities. In response to these pressing water-related issues, the Australia-Pakistan Water Security Initiative (APWASI) was launched as a collaborative effort driven by a shared vision of bringing about transformative change.

Central to this initiative is the active involvement of people, making it genuinely focused on the needs and aspirations of the community.

Throughout the planning and implementation phase of this program, from the installation of various interventions such as rainwater harvesting systems, water filtration units and ablution water reuse systems, the engagement of individuals remains crucial to its intended success and impact. Community participation is crucial for the long-term sustainability of any such program, be it a private or government led initiative. Community members not only participate in the decision-making processes but also assume the responsibility of managing these initiatives at the community level, ensuring that their voices and contributions shape the outcomes - after all, they are the beneficiaries of the program.

To ensure that the water-sensitive interventions under this initiative truly address the unique needs of the community, the residents of both towns actively participate in the design process. Through a series of focus group discussions, community engagement sessions, and the establishment of community-based organizations (CBOs) and village organizations (VOs), their perspectives are heard, which are highly valued, and their input plays a vital role in shaping the initiatives.
In the heart of this initiative lies the essence of its power—the people themselves. Among them stands Pastor Alvin Sadiq, a man of deep faith and a tireless advocate for justice. He understood the transformative power of water—not only to nourish the body but also to uplift the spirit. Driven by an unyielding desire to alleviate the suffering of his fellow community members, Pastor Alvin made a selfless and profound gesture: he donated a piece of his own land for installation of a water filtration unit for his community. This act of generosity was more than just a transaction of physical space; it was a sacred offering, a tangible symbol of his unwavering commitment to a better future.

Furthermore, the women of these communities have also been empowered and turned into active stakeholders, unlocking their potential and nurturing their participation. Through community awareness sessions, these remarkable women have found their voices, shared their experiences, and played a pivotal role in decision-making processes. Among these remarkable individuals stands Yasmeen Akhter, an inspiring figure, and a genuine leader among her peers. She recognises that empowering women means empowering the entire community.

Her unwavering commitment to women’s involvement in decision-making and capacity building has been inspirational to say the least, igniting a spark of empowerment that radiates throughout the community.

The transformative journey was not solely driven by Pastor Alvin or Yasmeen Akhter. These are not individual cases and nor can projects of these scales be reliant on the goodwill and leadership of just one or two individuals. In the broader scheme of things, this project has sparked a shift in the communities’ mindset, a shift from reliance on affluent and influential individuals to a shared sense of responsibility and unity. The people, inspired by the transformative power of Water Sensitive Cities (WSC) approach, have willingly embraced the opportunity to contribute funds, not only for the upkeep of water filtration units but also for the maintenance of other vital communal amenities.

Through a collaborative effort, the communities have united in pooling their resources. In James Town, pastors passionately collect funds within their churches, delivering sermons filled with the spirit of solidarity and compassion. Simultaneously, in Farash Town, the streets bustle with energy as community members actively engage in street-level fundraising initiatives, ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to contribute and participate in the process. To ensure effective management of these funds, village organizations (VOs) have assumed the noble responsibility of collecting grassroots donations. Working hand in hand with them, community-based organizations (CBOs) diligently oversee and maintain records of these transactions.

Through their united efforts, the community achieved milestones that once seemed impossible. The local water filtration units that were installed have been officially handed over to the communities. This moment marked a defining achievement, celebrating the community’s commitment to building a better and sustainable future.

Pastor Alvin’s and Yasmeen’s inspiring vision attracted others to join them on this transformative journey. These grassroots endeavors showcased the power of community action, proving that real change begins from within, and that collaborative strength can conquer even the most daunting challenges. Their unwavering commitment to their community transformed Farash Town and James Town from places of hardship into beacons of hope. Their journey continues to inspire others, reminding us of all the power we possess to create enduring change and construct a better future for generations to come.

Written by Maryam Eqan and Rafia Mahmood, WWF-Pakistan.
Trees undoubtedly have a vital role in sustaining natural and human environments as they protect watersheds, provide habitats for wildlife and help to stabilize otherwise fragile ecosystems. Besides providing many essential products for rural and urban consumers, they also play an economic role, with the main source of timber and pulpwood producing significant amounts of national income and foreign exchange in a number of countries. Pakistan in general, and the province of Punjab in particular, have a narrow forest resource. More than 90 per cent of the fuel wood and about 72 per cent of timber requirements are being met from trees growing on the private farm lands, based on agroforestry/social forestry/community forestry as compared with the state forests. It is obvious that trees have to be grown in conjunction with agricultural crops on private farm lands.

Not only do trees readily provide fodder, fuel, small timber, shade, shelter and protection from hot and cold winds, improved environment and biodiversity, but they are also a very useful source to improve the socio-economic conditions of farming communities through sale of wood, especially in the off-season and when there are crop failures due to natural calamities.

WWF-Pakistan under its Food and Markets Programme has initiated the Agroforestry project and is supporting rural farming communities to earn some extra income from the low yielding piece of lands they own.
To attain the maximum benefit from the activity, project team engaged both male and female members of the community which led to improved socio-economic resilience of the participants. Women workers were provided with seeds, polythene bags, and equipment to run small tree nurseries aimed at providing readily available tree stock for the agroforestry plantation drives in the area. Instead of buying plants from nurseries, project team bought the tree saplings from the micro-nurseries developed by rural women.

Within the context of rural farming communities, an emerging practice is quietly transforming lives and landscapes – agroforestry. This sustainable approach is proving to be a vital source of additional income for families, especially those who own lands with low yields. As individuals like Wahid Bukhsh and his wife Zahooran bibi found, the cultivation of trees alongside crops offers not only financial stability but also contributes to the overall well-being of the community. Through this initiative, local participants, both men and women, have come together to nurture tree nurseries that serve as valuable sources of saplings for agroforestry efforts. This grassroots endeavor has empowered families to diversify their income streams and embrace environmentally conscious practices that benefit not only them but also the landscapes they call home.

Wahid Bhaksh and his wife Zahoraan bibi, are one such couple who have been participating in the agro-forestry and micro-nursery initiative supported by WWF-Pakistan’s Food and Markets Programme.
Bakhsh is a smallholder farmer who owned 1.5 hectares of saline land which was not a good source of producing high yielding crops. However, he has integrated agroforestry into his agricultural land-use system by establishing a block plantation of Acacia trees. This helps him enhance the land productivity and the added benefit of earning a supplementary income in the coming years by selling trees.

Before taking up the agroforestry practice, Bakhsh did not have a steady source of income. In fact, conditions had been very tough for the family. An accident had rendered Bakhsh unable to take up full-time employment while their land remained unconducive for conventional farming. His wife, Zahooran Bibi narrated their family’s hardship and upturn in fortune, “It was a hard time for us, as due to an accident my husband is not able to work full-time. We both are blessed to be a part of the agroforestry project, as it is helping us to maximize the utilization of our available resources.

In the heart of rural Pakistan, stories like that of Wahid Bakhsh and Zahooran bibi are silently scripting a tale of transformation. Their journey, emblematic of hundreds in their village, unfolds against the backdrop of an initiative that seeks to empower communities in the face of climate change and economic uncertainty. Trees, once merely a part of the landscape, have now become avenues to a brighter future for many. Through agroforestry, individuals like Wahid Bakhsh have found not only additional income but also the promise of a more resilient, environmentally conscious, and prosperous tomorrow. Nurturing tree nurseries, women and men alike have embraced an alternate source of livelihood, building resilience to the challenges posed by changing climate. These endeavors bear testament to the power of grassroots efforts in creating a harmonious relationship between communities and the nature they call home.

“I grow tree nurseries in my backyard and earn a handsome amount within a few weeks, this is amazing.”

Written by Iqra Asghar, Manager Sustainability, Sapphire Textiles.
Forests are key ecosystems that harbour an exceptional amount of biodiversity, regulate key aspects of global carbon cycle, weather patterns, and contribute directly to national income and the local livelihood. A significant area of the world’s forests is owned and/or managed by local communities, a practice that is growing rapidly across the globe. For rural households living near the forests, as much as 22 per cent of their income comes from timber and non-timber forest resources. About half of the income from forests is non-cash that includes food, fuel, fodder, construction materials, and medicine.

Linkage between improved livelihood and forests protection is not only a necessity, but also a goal. This approach is a wise strategy in finding a balance between the needs of people and survival and growth of forests. By compensating communities and fostering social capital to conserve and manage their shared property, it is not only beneficial for the environment, but it also strengthens the community’s social relationships and sense of ownership of the forest. Trust and social capital play a significant role in economic development and collective action to protect the environment.

The conservation of natural resources often relies on voluntary contributions and payments for environmental services policies can aid these efforts by providing funding for the maintenance of forests and other natural vegetation.
The Mohra community in Nathiagali, KP, located in the moist temperate zone of the Himalayas, is working with WWF-Pakistan to conserve their community forest land under the ‘Forest Restoration Action Project’ a partnership between WWF-Pakistan and Serena Hotels. The community follows the principles of community forest protection and through past experiences, they have learnt the importance of their forest resources and how to effectively conserve them.

The community quickly understood the concept of incentive-based conservation and designated a 41-hectare forest patch on communal land as a “Conservation Site”. The site is home to more than 32,000 trees and is capable of absorbing 4,183 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions. The main objective of this site is to create a protected area where logging and grazing is prohibited, allowing the forest to naturally regenerate.

According to the community members, “Erosion and landsliding have become major issues at Mohra, where forest cover has been removed and stabilizing those slopes demands huge financial resources. Forest conservation will help control erosion, protect the watershed and the regeneration of conserved zones will help increase the forest cover.”

To make up for the reduction in their dependence on forest resources, the community is given improved quality seeds to grow fodder for their cattle, kitchen gardening seeds, and fuel-efficient stoves to significantly decrease the consumption of biomass for cooking and heating. The provision of these stoves will further decrease the workload for the female community members who are mostly involved in collecting fuel wood from the forest. Additionally, the community was given a solar geyser, a clean energy operated device that was installed in a mosque. To ensure the preservation of the conservation site, this project will also support the provision of green jobs which will ensure that the conservation continues beyond the project’s life.

By taking advantage of the benefits of incentive-based conservation, more communal land is now being included in the project for planting, as the community is increasingly interested in restoring the forest to address issues of slope erosion and other related forest services. Community participation is essential for the success of conservation practices, and the incentive-based mechanism is a crucial tool in the conservation of natural resources. The Mohra community serves as a model for this approach.

Written by Khurram Saeed, WWF-Pakistan.
I felt like someone was choking me.

Sher Khan is describing the night of the avalanche on Yukshin Gardan Sar 7550m, Shamshal.

His hastily perched tent was lifted by the storming snow in the dark of the night. When the rumble tossed them into stillness, and the initial shock subsided, Sher Khan with his teammates slowly shimmied their way out of a compressed tent. They felt their way to their shoes in the darkness and burrowed out into more darkness and a subzero sky. The young men prayed hypothermia away. Then they huddled together and waited for some morning sun.

“Did you not worry for him when he went off into the mountains?” Sher Khan’s wife, Azra takes her seat next to us. I draw her into the conversation. A mischievous levity across her aqua blue eyes.

“No.” After an awkward silence, she adds, “because he never asked me if he could leave.” We laugh at the firmness of her words. “Maybe if he had asked me, I would have worried.” She added.

Amidst our chuckles she says that Sher Khan would never have considered her request to stay home and not summit the mighty mountain ranges of the Karakoram, so why even bother asking. She is a very strategic woman. She conducts herself with a certain purposefulness and poise.

His obsession with the mountains began soon after their marriage back in the 60s. I wonder how she was so stoic about his extreme sports even back then in her youth. “I never came back and told her what happened on the mountains.” He never even told her about that time when he slipped and fell into an eight feet ice crevice. Never whispered about being pulled out by the sheer upper body strength of the other mountaineers with him.

This of course a time when both the people I speak to were young. Sadly, mountains and people age at different rates. Now the pair has grandchildren. Azra knits for her grandkids and Sher Khan keeps all the mountain secrets from them, out of fear that they might catch the mountain bug. He is a brave man, but even he has his limits.

These are no ordinary mountain people. They don’t just live along the mountain. They are defined by it. They also define it. They have peaks named after them on K2. Sher 1 and Sher 2 and such. On a space time quantum, this is near immortality.

We sit in the cozy veranda of the Prince and Princess of Hunza. The temperature is irritatingly perfect, the mountains glisten and tower over our teatime chat. We are amidst the royal family. They seem bejeweled by nature’s bounty surrounded by large enough dahlias to be loofas – purple, pink, yellow, white, and even maroon. The house is like a tiny fort, you walk up to on cobble stones, but minimalist.

While the princely states in united India like Hyderabad and Junagadh had money, gold and diamonds, other valuables, Sher Khan says, “All we had were the mountains.” Nothing is extravagant. Nothing reeks of more than necessary. Perhaps because this far away from the source of commerce, pomp makes little sense. There is a quiet disposition in nature that makes people focus on substance.
With this backdrop, Colonel Sher Khan is regaling us with so much human spirit, ambition, and awe. Also, this extraordinary sense of service to an idea of legacy. It’s not much, but it is rare. As rare as monarchies.

Ours is a modern time where cat videos on TikTok define our adventure. These days are more about comfort, and those at the top want to accumulate even more. Sher Khan Uncle, as he allows me to call him, is all about parkouring above the normal range of discomfort.

When I came to Gulmit by road driving eighteen hours of a serpentine road from Islamabad, the path was marred by landslides. I thought I would do some mountain homage of my own. I thought maybe I can hike to the Rakaposhi base camp this trip or do at least one overnight camp somewhere – there are so many wonders to choose from in the north of Pakistan’s Gilgit Baltistan province. Two years ago, I’d walked the K2 base camp trek.

Ever since the 16,000 feet ascent on foot from the village of Askole, I’ve been rather lost. The concrete, regimented, Microsoft-Outlook enslaved world that I stared down at from my palm sized phone, just shrunk. I had to unshrink myself. I got here, then, I caught a cold. I cough and something tightens in my chest – the air fleeing my lungs mocking my dreams to take long assenting walks beyond the glaciers. I had to stay in my room and sip the tomorrow tea.

I asked around for the nearest alternative to clawing up cliffs. This is how I was led to Sher Khan, the first Pakistani to lead and summit Rakaposhi back in 1979. I asked him who he is and he said with a shrug, just an “amateur mountaineer.”

I asked him what he thought about the Netflix show about the Nepali mountaineer Nimsdai Purja and his fourteen 8000m peaks. Sher Khan said people like Purja are professional mountaineers. Rushing through multiple mountain peaks is not his way of doing things. Think of him as a mountain home body.

He grew up in Karimabad. Lazy days would mostly be consumed by his little boy eyes staring into the soul of the majestic Rakaposhi – Its arms to its sides in the day in a power pose, and just as large in the night luminating the universe like a full moon, shooting silver into the milky way above it.

Like little boys in those times, he was whisked away to Burn Hall boarding school at age five and most of his life his father as large as the mountains, while his mother busied herself with the children, his siblings and running a large princely estate.

Unlike many in the royal families that were part of the independence movement, his father joined the army, and given Sher Khan’s reverence to two giants in his life, he followed. Naturally I wondered if his privilege played a part in opening doors. Only in his early life, he explained. Eventually, his identity was never his royal past, but only built around his service to the army, which is loudly for being formidable, no matter who you ask.

To understand the meaning-chasing passion of the young Sher Khan, know that Mohammad Shah Khan spent an active role in the liberation of Gilgit and Kashmir in 1948. Shah Khan is the pioneer of mountaineering when it comes to the Karakoram Ranges. But Sher Khan pioneered even further.

“Yes, my father ascended the great Rakaposhi in 1958, but he couldn’t summit. He left something for me to do.” Now it was his turn to have the mischief, the child-like world-making in his eyes. Which makes me think maybe he speaks mountain.

When you speak mountain, the mountains call you, and you call them. The mountains seek you and you seek them. The mountains hurl across you and you hurl yourself across the mountain. The people I know who do mountain-courtships are troubled. Including myself.

Sher Khan is a man with a big life well lived, with no major tragedies tailing him. May he stay blessed. His children are happy. His parents passed soon after each other around 2016, but that is not something that qualifies as extraordinary grief.

Then why? “I love the mountains.”

Like all love, this one too requires a secret code that only you believe in. It requires blood and sweat and maybe some tears, all because love is enough. Plain old love. His love for the rocky summits required everyone else around him to also make room. His wife would relocate to her parents or his parents when he went on his excursions. There seemed to be a matter of fact-ness to this business. Mountains called, mountains were obeyed.
Sher Khan’s mother did however create a ruckus when he was scaling the Everest. She caught wind of his plan and was livid. He had a satellite phone, so he called her from the Everest to calm her down. She yelled for an explanation. He took advantage of her knowledge of landlines and asked her: “How could I be speaking to you from a phone if I was really up on some mountain!” Thankfully for him, she believed him and that was that.

“As for my wife, she always understood my love for the mountains.” That was that.

He attempted Everest from Tibet. That wasn’t how that route was usually done.

That’s Sher Khan, the mountain lion for you. Without Sherpas, without oxygen and without any external assistance. He calls the way he climbs, “fair climbing.” It is fair because it is simply one man vs one mountain, no clutches.

He also climbs mountains because he said he is smart. He prepares all year round every day by building a strong cardio routine. He reads up everything about the mountain he attempts, before he attempts it. “I have all my fingers and toes because I respect these structures. When it is time to stop, you stop. It doesn’t matter how close you are to summiting.”

So, three things then, the army, the mountains, and the choice of humility instead of blind ambition to get your flag in the ground at the top before anyone else.

This year, a young Pakistani mountaineer fell and hurt himself very bad. He sadly ended up dead, on a narrow trail, and others in the entourage stepped over his dead body to keep moving so they could make good time on top of K2. Metaphorically, they stepped over the honor that the locals like Sher Khan have about what comes first.

People always come first. Then mountain.

This scandal rocked the niche climbing community, but it is very common to look at the people you summit with, as dispensable, especially if you are not white. Especially if you are not rich.

The top moment in Sher Khan’s climbing career is being on the Rakaposhi. He romanticizes with the idea that his wife and kids are looking at the mountain he is summiting, waiting for him to come home safely. “The mountains aren’t going anywhere. You can come back another day. Your family wants you back. You have to choose their worry over everything else.”

He may have his toes and fingers still, but he also attributes that to something more than just smarts. “I have a strange amount of good luck.” He was lucky even academically. He was among the lucky two out of thirty in Abbottabad high school who got into the military. Usually however, luck lurks around passion. Sher Khan was inspired by the people at the military college, his elders, his teachers and the students from all over the country. It made him choose his profession in cavalry over and over again until he retired a colonel. A lifetime to the country, punctuated with a lifetime to the mountains.

“I have made a name for myself and I have been the object of pride and admiration from the people, but it all began with me trying to follow my father, and to really copy him.” Shah Khan’s father was an old aristocrat, a ruler of Hunza, passing on to his sons what Pakistanis love to call a “strong personality.”

This is how you make a mountain man – luck, passion, good genes, training (everyday all year round), a fair means philosophy, weather reading, learning when to stop and turn back so you can live to tell, and a then there is a sprinkle of mountain friendships you need.

In 1982, Sher Khan’s friend Reinhold Messner jointly embarked on Gashabroom and Broad Peak in one and a half days all at once, one after the other. No oxygen tank, because if you use a clutch once there is no going back. No sherpas, because if you have them carry your weight then they deserve the titles and the wins, not you. No one should peg ropes for you but yourself, because it is about climbing, not shared climbing.
"All your human systems fail when in the Karakorams." The organs are not meant to pulse when you cut off everything they need. It is like waterlogging a cactus. Cells are rather frail and don't muck around when it comes to water, warmth and air.

Then there is also the fact that the bag you carry is very heavy. Ten kilograms of emergency equipment including food, tents and back up equipment. Feels like 50 kgs when there is little oxygen.

Sher Khan Uncle inadvertently insults me as he explains the level of difficulty in these ranges compared to what I consider a mountain. "You can't go trot on the tiny Margallas in Islamabad and then think you are ready for the Karakoram mountains. You may as well stay home." I nod humbly. I can see how the big personality and small personality binary works.

I want to almost "copy" Sher Khan Uncle. I doe eye him.

"Reinhold and I followed our curiosity and marked a world record without really wanting to." Friends make you do silly things, I guess, then they Gashabrom-ed thrice, because why not.

Let me pause and tell you that these are rather large mountains we speak of in hush tones. Think the distance between the atom and the nucleus. Think mural and miniature. Think the Pacific and the water you use to brush your teeth. The scale itself of these towers give you an aneurism. Some small personalities retreat, and others charge forth into its dizzying spell.

I am following my own curiosity when I ask Sher Khan Uncle how he knows where to go in the middle of the white deserts, steep and sharp, sometimes like teeth and sometimes like tongue. He laughs a bit. "Oh, I know this place like the back of my hand. I know all its possible routes."

Now he is being a nutty professor by explaining something by explaining something only he experiences, but feel it is intuitive for those others who trot the Margallas rather than stay home. "I have always been lucky enough to have made first assents around here. In 1984 Yukshin Gordan Sar stood as the highest unclimbed peak in the world."

Then in 1979 Sher Khan made the first assist at Rakaposhi by making a new route at the North-West Ridge. Also, Passu peak, an all-teeth mountain, the first ever assist was also his to claim back in 1978.

"When you fall and injure yourself, you just have to gather your pained body and walk back home." He mentions falling into the crevice with the same nonchalance as his assents. Anyone who hasn’t sipped from the water of mortality, through grief perhaps, will not understand the paradox here. The need to keep climbing. The need to humbly walk back.

How do you know when to walk and when to stop? Sher Khan went up the mountain right after the avalanche almost asphyxiated him. "We had to immediately climb it again, we just had to. You die once."

The line that separates life from death, from heading home and charging forward, living-once philosophy and going-home-to-your-wife-and-kids, is really thin. One wrong move can twist your ankle. Look too hard into the glaring sun snow and your retinas get fried. Try and perch a tent tired, and you will be swept away by an avalanche. There is nothing to it but the will of the mountain, and the will of the mountain maker. Philosophies run out. The mountains are thus only a metaphor for love, and in this strange terrain, sometimes you win and sometimes you lose.
Whereas our hero keeps summiting after an avalanche, on Mount Everest he stops only a hundred meters before the top. His friends nudge him forward because so-near-yet-so-far is not for everyone’s nerves. He refused and asked them to turn back to go home.

“If we continued up, we would have flown off the ridge.” You must listen to the wind. You starve your greed and nurture your sense of self preservation. This, to Sher Khan is about a faith. Time, therefore, is an ally, not a foe.

What should a hill trotter like me do with my mountain bug? Uncle, true to his word about not encouraging family to play with danger, asks me to do other things instead of summiting mountains.

“There are so many good places to go to instead of climbing mountains. Try the Rakaposhi base camp. The Nanga Parbat base camp. K2 Base Camp is done, no need to do more. You have kids, just stop.” I’m looking now, for his fatal flaw. He must have one.

He has two in fact. I ask him about his relationship with water, and he almost shrieks. Sher Khan is a toweringly tall man, with a back so straight it is almost a twenty year old’s spine instead of someone in their seventies, but at the mention of water, he almost hisses at me.

I press on this angle. “I hate water!”

After dinner, Azra Aunty lets me flip through the chrome faded family album, and there in the middle of the smiling daughters and cherubic baby sons, is Sher Khan, in a white collared shirt and a tie floating parallel to him, in the water. He is trying to be good humored but really, he wants the world to end immediately. Someone, it seems, had learned about his distaste for water and pushed him into swimming pool.

The other flaw: he also hates people who litter the mountains. He doesn’t say it, but I know he believes there is a special place in hell for them.

The government has dedicated liaison officers to prevent this. They check tourists and make sure no trash goes up. These officers sign in here and go off home elsewhere. Alternately, there are ways to do it right. For instance, charge discourteous tourists a fee and use the money to fund a cleanup drive with climbers who can bring the inorganic debris back. He rants about this for a good long time.

“Climate change is not coming; it is already here. Just go to the glacial snout right now and listen to it melt right before your ears. It was never thirty degrees in Gulmit, and now it’s always over thirty degrees in the summer.”

I consider him, this man who is seeing the dearest things to him go away. His father’s passing. And now the mountains transforming into something unrecognizable. I check my earlier assumptions and correct myself. Indeed, there is no bigger extraordinary grief than those two losses after a lifetime of reverence. All grief is extraordinary. You just have to like something a lot. “Everything is melting.” He said looking at the general direction of the skies.

By Aisha Sarwari, Director Public Affairs, Communications and Sustainability Pak & Afg at The Coca-Cola Company