

Conservation Bulletin

Nature hiking and outdoor learning to cultivate young minds: Green School Project in Salyantar, Dhading district

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Imagine a moment where young students are hiking in a forest with a binocular, notebook, and pen, observing the perching birds and searching for their descriptions in field guides, making comparisons, discussing, and taking notes. Amazing, isn't it? It is fascinating to observe young enthusiastic students learning from nature. The Green School Project (GSP), a joint initiative of Welthungerhilfe (WHH) and Friends of Nature (FON) Nepal, currently implemented in four schools in Salyantar, a rural region of Dhading district is trying to achieve this in reality.

After the pilot project in Korak area of Chitwan, the second phase of Green School Project (GSP) started in 2016 in Salyantar, Dhading as a new concept for Nepal, inspired by Green School in Bali, Indonesia. GSP is a concept that aims to equip school children with environmental know-how and help reduce the ecological footprint of schools. It is a must in rural areas like Salyantar where schools have limited resources and students are rarely exposed to extracurricular activities and outdoor learning. The project uses resources inside and outside the school to sensitize students and teachers on environmental sustainability, with active involvement of the community. The main goal of the project is to seek green leaders and equip the future custodians with the requisite knowledge of the total environment, both natural and social, the problems associated with it and the necessary skills for solving them. GSP primarily works with eco-clubs which are formed in the schools with technical assistance of GS team, Eco-committees, School Management Committee (SMC), and Parent Teachers' Association (PTA).

GSP organizes nature hikes for school children during leisure time and public holidays to nearby forests and other areas. The students and teachers are oriented about the chosen theme of outdoor learning and groups are formed. The groups are guided by GSP team and encouraged to find as many information they could from their surrounding area.

Bird watching is a popular conservation education activity of the GSP. So far, we have organised four bird watching hikes. Students and teachers were thrilled to understand the basics of bird watching, differentiating between various species of birds, handling of equipment and field guides.



PHOTO 1: Young children of Salyantar enjoying bird watching.

Ganga Pariyar, a class nine student, while peering through binocular to see a red-billed blue magpie, shared her experience and exclaimed, "Oh, the bird is so close!", during a hike to Phatikhamba area of Salyantar. This was her first experience of seeing and handling a binocular.

During these hikes, participants are encouraged to closely observe the birds, compare and differentiate sizes, colours, and patterns, types of beaks, colour of feet, or any remarkable and distinct signs, their nomenclature, etc. which stirs their enthusiasm and interest.

During a bird watching hike, Mr. Ram Prasad Itani, a teacher of Salyantar Secondary School and advisory board member of Salyantar Eco-club, was enthusiastically inspiring and guiding the students to move a little faster towards the jungle, so they could spot many bird species and observe them. However, we didn't see many birds during the trip. Mr. Itani later shared that the hiking experience was an eye-opener for him as he noticed that the population of birds has drastically decreased compared to his early days. He pledged to tell other people in the community and make them aware of this

Bird watching not only teaches us to recognize avifauna but also enhances participants' knowledge about habitats, behaviour, and the importance of birds. Regular birding activities can help monitor the diversity and population of birds in the area. GSP has plans to conduct butterfly hiking, other biodiversity-themed hikes and conservation awareness activities in the future. Such

activities help students develop a positive attitude towards wildlife and nature conservation.



PHOTO 2: The bird watching team.

Schools can and should play a vital role in enthusing children to understand and appreciate nature by devising extracurricular activities such as nature hikes, flora and fauna identification, interaction with field

biologists and experts, field trips, and nature-based competitions. We have observed multiple benefits of these activities which include improved self-esteem and self-reliance, enhanced motivation of students, improved outdoor skills and communication skills, improved health of students, low drop-out rate, and waste reduction around schools and in villages.

Young children are the future custodians, thus helping them develop a bond with their natural environment at an early age is pivotal in long term nature and biodiversity conservation. GSP is an important and innovative way of achieving this goal. Guiding these school children and teaching them about the importance of conservation will help them become proactive advocates for biodiversity conservation in the future.

Biosketch

BIKASH GHIMIRE is a forestry graduate. He is working as the Project Officer in the Green School Project.

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