

Process of ethical engagement with communities in India

Day 3 | 12 July 2026, 2:30-4:00 PM

Global movements towards ethical data sovereignty push us to consider how we do conservation and research with communities in India. Community-led conservation, interviewing local communities and indigenous people (IPLC), and participatory research are common in our work as conservation practitioners, researchers, and students. Through this SIG, we interacted with current practitioners and discussed existing protocols for IPLC engagement.

- Karishma Pradhan, in her welcome remarks, shared the motive behind organising this SIG to discuss existing problems in IPLC engagement and the need to develop guidelines to mitigate or address them in a participatory and collective manner.
- Deepshikha Sharma presented the PARTNERS framework as a toolkit for ethical community engagement
- Shweta Shivakumar presented a tool that uses a human rights-based approach to mitigate human-wildlife conflict.
- Mr Jibi Pulu, an Idu-Mishmi community leader from the Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh, spoke about how The Idu Mishmi Code of Research Ethics (IMCRE) committee. He shared why, as a community, they felt the need to create a set of guidelines and a committee to regulate research that takes place in their ancestral community lands and with their community members.
- Dr Mayank Kohli shared a case study of an important policy-level change which was grassroots-led and research-backed, adopted by Himachal Pradesh for pasture use and management. This work was a collaborative effort of the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, the National Centre for Biological Sciences, and the Centre for Pastoralism. This highlighted the importance of engaging with different stakeholders to create impact.

After a brief round of introductions, all the participants were divided into three subgroups based on the type of work they do with communities or on their scope of interest:

(A) Research: Researcher who has or would engage with community, either through research or otherwise (B) Conflict: A community member or a conservation practitioner who is regularly confronted with issues of human-wildlife conflict, or engaging with communities for the conservation of a species (C) Community Systems: A conservation practitioner or community member, who has engaged with local governance, social, cultural and political issues, and human-nature relationship.

We deliberated on the pathways we employ at our organisation and projects. Are they inclusive, ethical and respectful, centring the rights and knowledge systems of a community and their environment? What do inclusive and respectful local participation, social justice, and community-based conservation mean in practice? What are some of the best practices that we as practitioners can imbibe into our research and conservation interventions to respect the local

communities' right to be included in decision-making of conservation interventions and resource use? We found that the discussions across the three groups centred around:

- 1) Relationship and trust building with communities: research tends to be short-term, and hence community trust building has been challenging. Proposed intervention from the group was to go along with people who previously worked in that area and go with a community representative who is aware of the project and speaks about it confidently.
- 2) Transparency and empathy: external members have preconceived notions about community practices (eg: hunting of wildlife) that make them closed to community practices. Proposed intervention is to begin with empathy and curiosity - it is an opportunity to learn, bond and find local capacity.
- 3) Community consultations: This theme came up in all three groups as important for problem statements such as cultural appropriation, intervention implementation, research plan, ethics of permission and equality of representation. The proposed intervention was to discuss the projects with gram sabhas, make a collective decision on the intervention mode, and prioritise community conservation approaches
- 4) Prioritisation of community needs: The problem statement for this was: how do we determine the sustainability of conservation interventions? The proposed intervention was Prioritisation of where interventions need to be implemented, to be done with appropriate stakeholders (high influence and high impact). Understand the response of intervention and then identify the people who actually need it.
- 5) Training of researchers on ethical engagement with communities: Untrained engagement leads to disrespect of community time, resources and rights. Organisations should create a mandatory orientation and training programme on research ethics, understanding one's positionality and share a list of guidelines on ethical engagement of researchers with community members.
- 6) Data ownership, interpretation and sharing: this was a prompt given to Group A, and they discussed that the solution is that, since researcher interpretations on how community customs are represented, how respectfully and objectively the data is being presented is key. Our primary duty as researchers is towards the community. Even at the expense of other duty holders like the Forest Department, who know about local vulnerabilities, becoming hostile when we do not share the data with them for privacy reasons. Eg: locals are hunting pangolins vs the lack of livelihood alternatives drives pangolin hunting.
- 7) Prior knowledge of community customs: Problem statement is: How do we inform and get the community's approval for any project? The proposed intervention was not to view it as an individual approach or a one-time operation. First, familiarise ourselves with communities through meetings and discussions; approach local bodies and headmen. This helps find focal bodies to build trust and network.

Our next step is to align with existing guidelines of ethical engagement and data sovereignty for suggested frameworks to implement at the organisation, university and researcher level.