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Community-based Red Panda Conservation: Project Punde Kundo

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Trackers of the Red Panda Network succeed to show almost all our EcoTrip participants the elusive red panda..

Project Punde Kundo (the name for red panda in the local dialect) is an integrated community-based conservation programme of a landscape species, red panda, and its habitat. By protecting red panda and its habitat, the Eastern Himalayan Broadleaf and Conifer ecoregion (one of WWF's global 200 ecoregions), the Red Panda Network is protecting all species in it. The overarching goal of Project Punde Kundo is to create sustainable landscape-level conservation of red panda and the ecoregion. For Project Punde Kundo, the Red Panda Network defines sustainable landscape-level conservation as the protection of red panda hotspots, locations of a viable red panda population of 80 to 100 individuals, for at least 20 years.

Project Punde Kundo focuses on utilising local ecological knowledge and conservation ethics to establish a community-based system of data collection, conservation education and stewardship. The intention of the Red Panda Network is to create a system that will be self-sustaining within 20 years. The heart of Project Punde Kundo is its "Conservation in Action" strategy, centred on a three-step iterative cycle. The first step is the creation of a community-based monitoring project. The second step is the creation of a forest conservation area managed by the local community or a community-conserved area. The third step is the creation of "Conservation in Action" contracts, in which communities define how they

will sustain their protected areas in perpetuity. The model focuses on the active participation of local communities in every step of the process.

Project Punde Kundo "Conservation in Action" cycle:

- Community-based monitoring: An initial presence/absence survey for red panda is conducted. Once presence is confirmed, forest users called "forest guardians" are trained to monitor red panda and other wildlife populations within their community forests and help educate fellow villagers to keep these areas intact.



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Forest guardian of the Red Panda Network measuring a tree during the ongoing red panda habitat conservation and monitoring in Nepal.

- Community-based conservation areas: Local communities, through community forest networks, delineate community conservation areas that contain a viable red panda population for permanent protection.
- “Conservation in Action” contracts: Local communities create “Conservation in Action” contracts outlining roles and responsibilities for long-term monitoring and management of the community-based conservation areas.

The key to making community-based conservation areas and “Conservation in Action” contracts (steps 2 and 3) effective is to have a long-term sustainable funding source. Having a financial incentive for saving forests offsets the opportunity cost of cutting them down. The project is a part of the Panchthar-Ilam-Taplejung corridor, which is a red panda hotspot in Nepal. While building Project Punde Kundo for immediate impact with the support of its new and existing zoo partners, corporate and non-profit institutions, and individual members and donors in the short term, for the long term the Red Panda Network is in the process of creating a Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) Carbon Project. The REDD Carbon Project would provide a minimum of 20 years of funding for integrated conservation activities in the Taplejung, Panchthar and Ilam districts where the Red Panda Network has been active since 2005.

The Red Panda Network and some of our key partners plan to establish a community conservation endowment or trust that will fund conservation activities in the Panchthar-Ilam-Taplejung corridor in perpetuity. Thus, we anticipate funding for the project to initiate the long-term protection of a viable population of red panda in eastern Nepal.

To date, we are in the third year of implementation of Project Punde Kundo in the Taplejung District. We have established our community-based monitoring team and we are focused on expanding the stewardship activities of the team to include community education activities as well as the implementation of community conservation areas and “Conservation in Action” contracts. Our intention is that through the process of community-based monitoring and education, the community monitors will shift their perception of the forest from a source of survival to one of a natural resource having inherent aesthetic value and the basis for their long-term existence, shifting their roles from forest users to forest guardians. ■



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