

My First Plantation Season: Learning Ecological Restoration Through Experience

Beginning My First Plantation Season

This was my first plantation season while working as an intern in ecological restoration. I had a theoretical understanding of ecological restoration, but I had never experienced it firsthand. This year, in Chamba, while working with the Himalayan Restoration Project, I got the opportunity to experience plantation work and understand the different aspects of ecological restoration.

The monsoon season is considered the best time for planting. Before joining the plantation work, I had no idea how the entire process would happen, and I was eagerly waiting to experience it. We started digging pits in May so that we could complete the work before

the monsoon season. This year, our project aimed to plant around 10,000 saplings across 10 hectares of land in Chamba. Most of the restoration sites were private farms, along with a few forest lands. The number and arrangement of pits varied according to the size and conditions of each farm, and the saplings were planted accordingly.

Understanding What Plantation Really Involves

Coming from the plains, my idea of plantation was very different. I had mostly seen plantation drives where people plant saplings one after another, often as a one-day activity. What I experienced in Chamba was completely different from what I had imagined.



This is what the Lesser Himalaya look like-beautiful, unpredictable, and never quite as simple as it seems.
© Shreya Yadav.



Loading the saplings with nursery staff for transportation to restoration site. © Adarsh Jagadeeshwaran.

all of this was done did the actual planting begin.

This made me realise that plantation is not simply about putting a sapling into the ground. There is planning, species selection, transportation, site assessment, distribution, planting and finally protection of the saplings.

The process started much before we reached the field. We prepared species-wise sapling lists according to the elevation and conditions of each particular farm. Every morning, we started by loading and counting the required saplings before transporting them to the site.

Planting My First Sapling

The first sapling I planted was in a deodar forest fragment in Jhalein village. The site was covered with *Cedrus deodara* trees and was neither very steep nor particularly difficult to access. Plantation there was relatively easy and enjoyable.

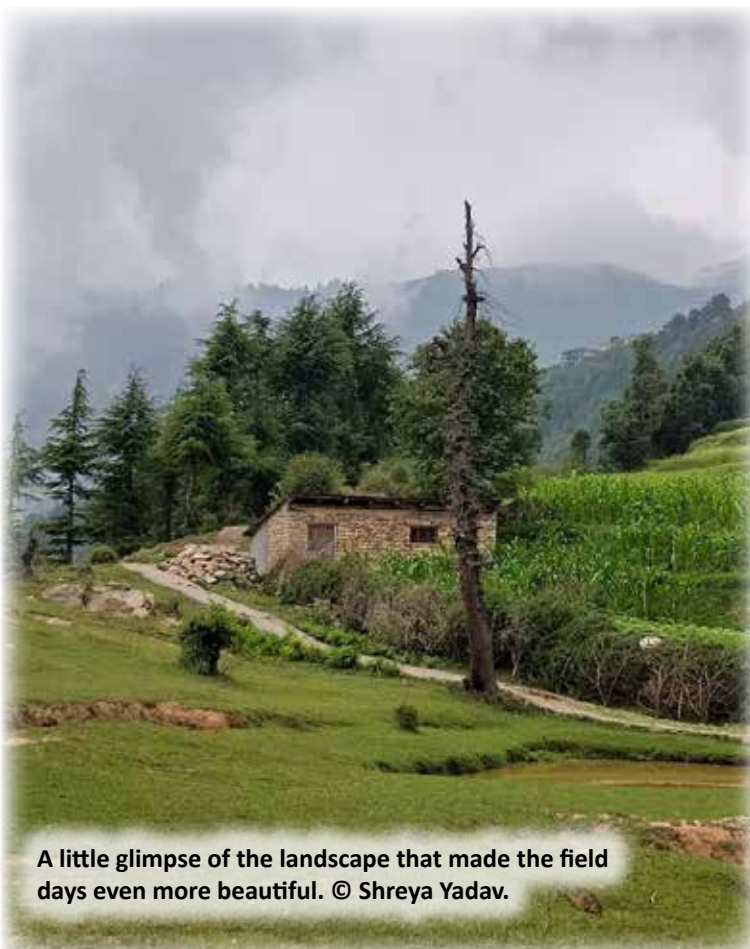
Once we reached the plantation site, we had to unload and distribute the saplings among the pits. Even this required planning. We had to make sure that the same species were not planted together and that species requiring shade like *Populus ciliata*, were placed in suitable, shaded locations to improve their chances of survival. Only after



Unloading the saplings near our restoration site, which will be further carried in buckets to the site. © Sachin Verma.



Plantation in Cedrus deodar forest fragment in Jhalein Village. © Adarsh Jagadeeshwaran.



A little glimpse of the landscape that made the field days even more beautiful. © Shreya Yadav.

The weather was also in our favour that day. The sky was covered with clouds, and there was a green patch with a small puddle near the restoration site. I planted my first sapling with a lot of love and hope for its future. I could feel the soil on my hands, and at that exact moment, I felt completely connected to the work. There was a sense of pure affection and satisfaction that I had not expected. It was a small act, just planting one sapling, but for me, it marked the beginning of experiencing ecological restoration beyond textbooks and theory.

In the middle of the plantation, it started raining. There was no proper place to protect ourselves from the rain, so we took shelter under a tree for some time. Later, I continued planting wearing my raincoat. I actually enjoyed planting in the rain, and the smell of wet soil made the experience even more special.

From Saplings to Tree Guards

Planting the saplings was only one part of the work. After plantation, we also had to install tree guards to protect the young plants.

I helped by flattening the tree guards and handing them over to the workers for installation. The entire process, from loading and counting the saplings in the morning,

transporting them to the site, distributing them, planting them and finally installing tree guards gave me a completely different understanding of what plantation work involves.

At the end of the day, we had to check the site, make sure everything was in place and then wrap up the work. After spending the entire day working physically, being tired at the end actually felt satisfying. I realised that there is a different kind of satisfaction in knowing that your tiredness came from something you genuinely contributed to.

The Challenges of Plantation in the Himalayas

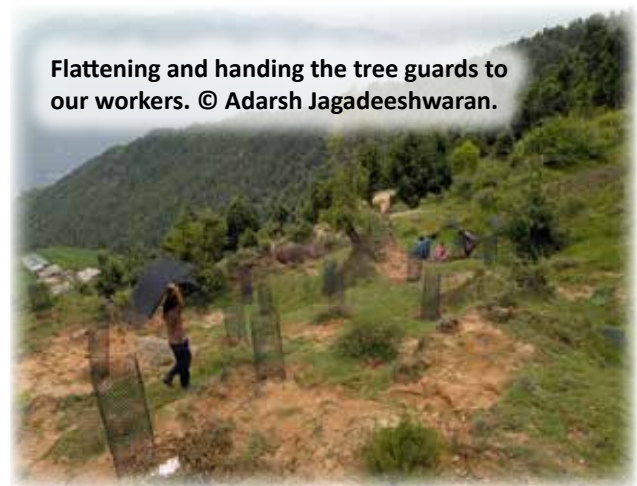
As much as plantation is fun, it is always full of problems, unexpected challenges, and lessons that you don't really understand until you experience them yourself. Personally, the challenges I faced while working in the Himalayas were quite an eye-opening experience.

Sometimes, reaching a plantation site itself involved a long trek. Some sites were steep, and after rain, the paths became slippery, making walking and climbing much more difficult.

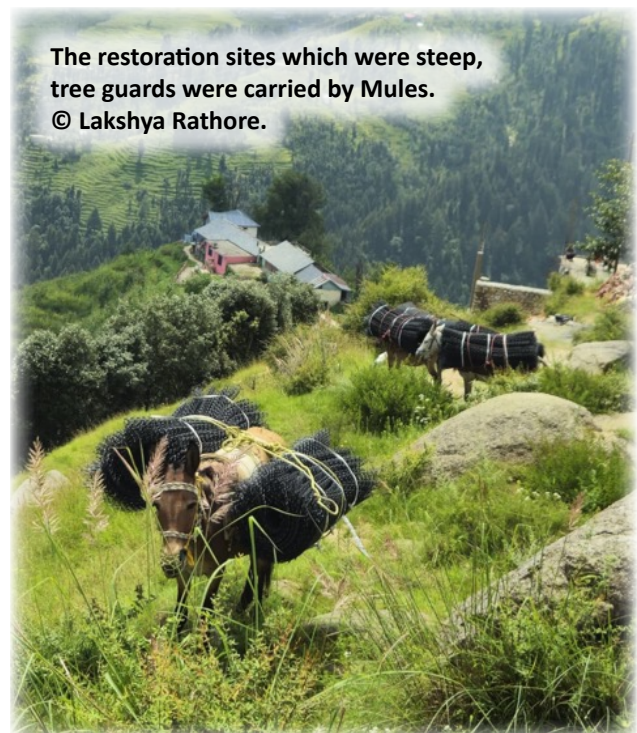
The physical demands of the work were very different from what I had thought before. There was one site in Bhuii village that was completely covered with tall grasses. Simply walking through the grass was challenging, and finding the pits and planting the saplings made the work even more difficult. It was also challenging for the workers to dig the pits and install tree guards because the grasses had tightly bound the soil.



Unloading the tree guards for installing in our restoration site. © Payal Chaman.

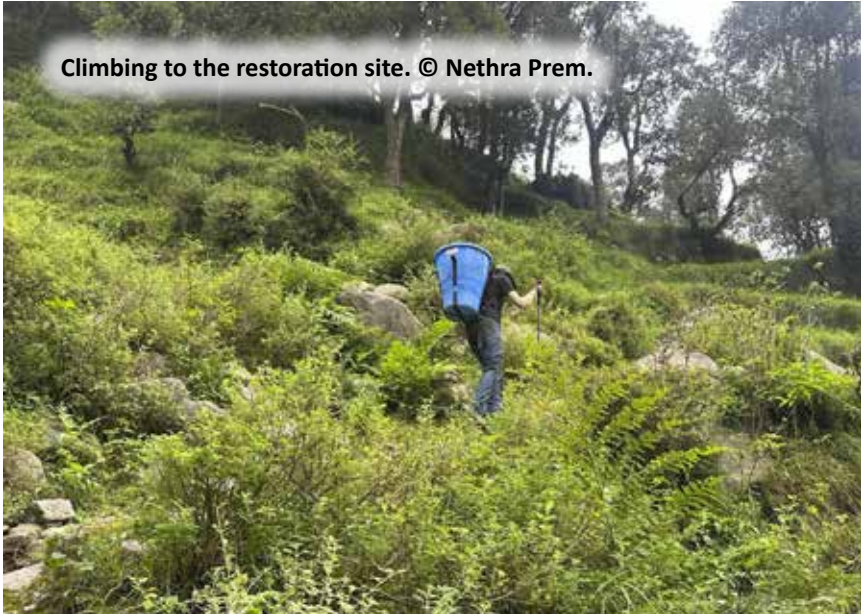


Flattening and handing the tree guards to our workers. © Adarsh Jagadeeshwaran.



The restoration sites which were steep, tree guards were carried by Mules. © Lakshya Rathore.

Climbing to the restoration site. © Nethra Prem.



During the plantation of the deodar forest fragment, I met a group of women from Jhalein and Langa villages who were working with us.

Initially, I interacted with them only a little. Later, during the plantation work in Jhalein and Langa, I had the opportunity to have longer conversations with them. Their warmth and nature

During the plantation days, these challenges sometimes felt overwhelming. But later, I realised how much I had learned from them. They gradually helped me develop the strength, confidence and capability to work in the Himalayan landscape. I began to understand that fieldwork is not always about having ideal conditions; it is about adapting to whatever conditions the landscape presents.

fascinated me so much that I found myself becoming fully engaged while working with them. Talking to these women while working made the long and physically demanding days much more enjoyable. I even had lunch with them, and they served me with so much love and care that the experience stayed with me. One thing I realised was that when you meet good people, they can make even difficult work

The People Who Made the Work Special

Working in a village where you do not know anyone can sometimes feel strange. You go to work, see many unfamiliar faces, exchange a smile with some people and then return to the field station. Does it feel weird? I don't know about everyone, but to me, it did.

When unexpected rain brought a chill to the mountains, we found warmth and hospitality in a worker's home.
© Nethra Prem.



After work fun with Jhalein and Langa village group ladies. © Payal Chaman.



feel easier and more enjoyable. The villages of Jhalein and Langa were far and steep, but because of these women, I felt encouraged to return to the same villages continuously for three days without feeling as tired as I otherwise might have.

Even now, whenever we see each other, we greet each other happily, and they invite us for tea or lunch. Something that initially felt like an unfamiliar

village and unfamiliar faces has now become a place where I know there are people I can happily meet and greet.

What My First Plantation Season Taught Me

My first plantation season taught me that ecological restoration is much more than planting trees. It involves understanding the landscape, selecting suitable species, planning the work, working with local communities, protecting the saplings and continuously adapting to challenges in the field.

More importantly, it taught me through experience what I could never have fully understood through theory alone. I learned how physically demanding restoration work can be, how unpredictable field conditions can be, and how important people and relationships are in making conservation work possible.



With nursery team after loading the sapling in rain. © Anuradha.

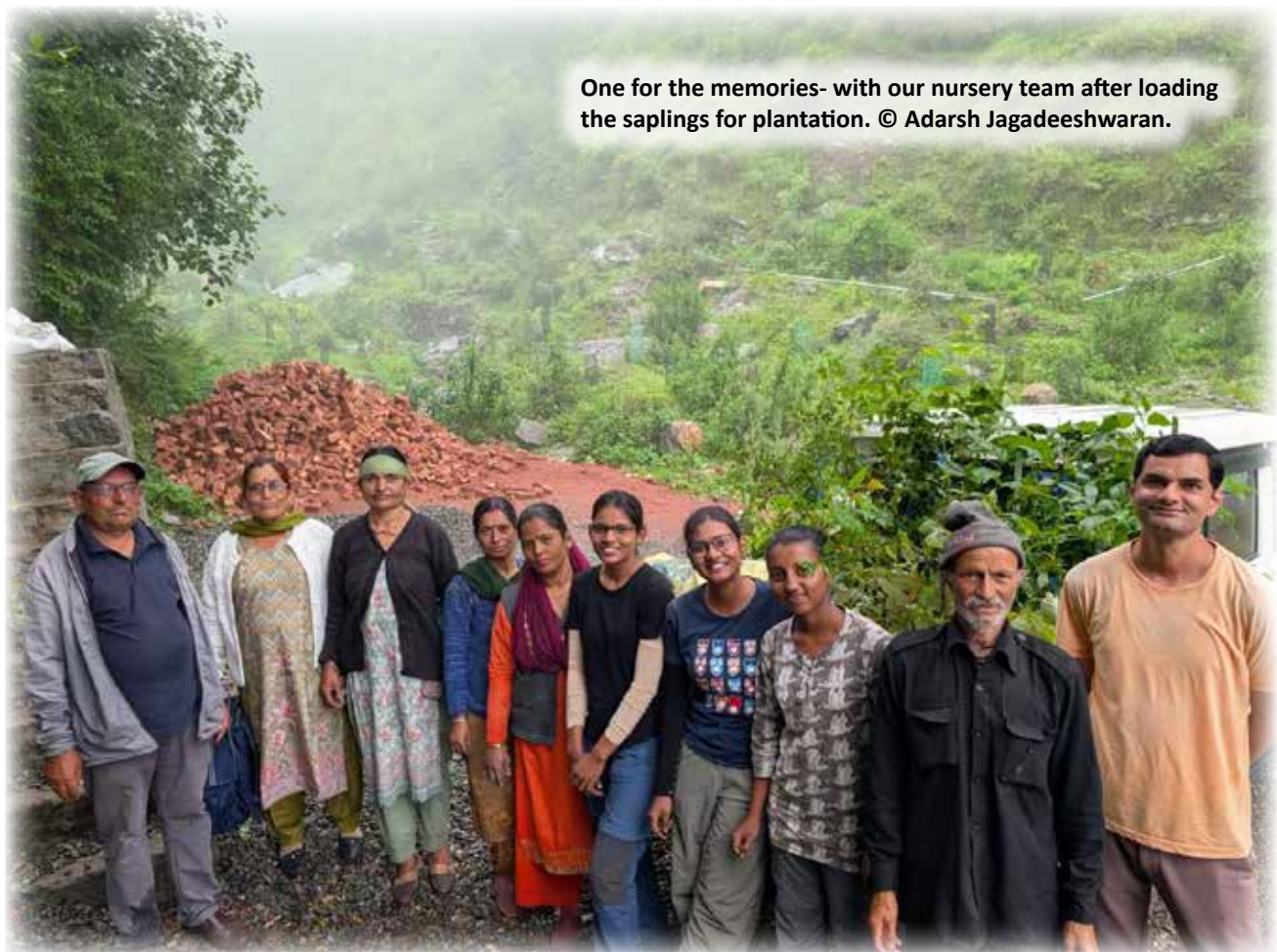
HRP Activity Update

I started this plantation season with curiosity about what plantation work would actually be like. I came out of it with muddy hands, tired legs, new experiences, stronger confidence and a much deeper understanding of what it means to work for ecological restoration in the Himalayas.

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One for the memories- with our nursery team after loading the saplings for plantation. © Adarsh Jagadeeshwaran.