**Outside/In: The Himalayan Land Grab [AUDIO TRANSCRIPT]**

Note: Episodes of Outside/In are made as pieces of audio, and some context and nuance may be lost on the page. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors.

**Justine Paradis:  Today, we’ve got a story about a slow-burning stand-off.**

**On one side, people angrily demanding the right to graze livestock on federal land.**

**On the other side, government officials determined to uphold the laws that say “no”.**

**You’d be forgiven for thinking that this story takes place in the Western United States: Wyoming, or Nevada.**

*[protest into news clip]*

News Anchor: Tensions reached the boiling point this week after simmering for years...

**Justine Paradis: That this is another Cliven Bundy type tale - about ranchers and militiamen refusing to pay taxes, or taking arms against the Bureau of Land Management.**

Cliven Bundy [TV CLIP] : It’s not my land, it’s your land! I protect my rights to forage, and the water, and the access to it - but I protect all of your rights!

*[fancy fade of some sort]*

**Justine Paradis:  But *this* isn’t a uniquely American tale. And our story today takes place thousands of miles away, in a place called the Tirthan Valley, in India.**

**Just outside the borders of The Great Himalayan National Park.**

Justine Paradise: Did you go into the park yourself?

Yardain Amron: It’s interesting, I actually did not.

**Justine Paradis:  This is freelance journalist Yardain Amron. He traveled to the Tirthan Valley in 2019 and 2020.**

Yardain Amron: It’s a long one a half day trek to the entrance, the official entrance of the park.  And this is actually strategic, when the park designers liked that design, because it keeps people out of the park.

*[O/I mux creeps in]*

**Justine Paradis:  Today, the Great Himalayan National Park is one of India’s famous natural treasures. A growing vacation destination - a picturesque remote getaway.**

**But before anybody was ever invited to visit - the people who created the park it... first had to tell the locals to leave.**

**This is Outside/In, a show about the natural world and how we use it. I’m Justine Paradis. Today’s episode is the first of two stories produced by freelance journalist Yardain Amron.**

**First up: The Himalayan Land Grab.**

Sanjeeva Panday: ...let us try and grab this area. Let us try and *grab* this area under a PA system.

Vasant Saberwal**:** What is the big deal?  Why you have to separate nature from culture?

**What exactly happened when the government put a border around this unique mountainous landscape … and told the locals to keep out?**

Narottam Singh**:** When you create the park and make bans of all kinds, what are these people in the villages in the 10km radius going to do?

*[mux swell and fade - rising sound of park SFX]*

**Yardain Amron: The Great Himalayan National Park in India, is about a quarter the size of Yosemite. But the way the mountains wind and sweep across the horizon, it looks and feels endless.**

**There are alpine meadows, glaciers, dense old growth forests…  The park is home to mosses and lichens, blue sheep, musk deer, and the endangered western horned Tragopan - a pheasant that looks like a mix between a chicken and a tropical bird of paradise.**

*[Western Tragopan call - mux creeps in]*

**But National Parks are defined by *two* things— first - an abundance of wildlife and majestic landscapes…and second -- no permanent human presence.**

**It’s that second part that has been so contentious here - and it’s also why it took two whole decades to make this park a reality.**

**Four whole villages  were relocated in order to create this uninhabited wilderness.**

**But more complicated, are the 150 villages right alongside the border.**

**Some fifteen-thousand people who weren’t relocated - but who before the creation of the park - had relied on these forests for centuries.**

**Villagers with an intimate, entangled relationship to the natural world around them, and no real concept of Western style-conservation. Of protecting nature from humans.**

**When the Indian government inaugurated The Great Himalayan National Park in 1999, these villagers were dispossessed of their land and their livelihoods**

**And what the architects of the park hoped would be a celebration… turned into something very different.**

**Widespread protest.**

*[Protest sound swells up - add reverb, let it get loud, and then fade]*

**So how did it get to that point?**

**National Parks aren’t made overnight - and in the case of the GHNP, It’s a process that began about fifteen years earlier, in the late 80s.**

**At that time, people living in the Tirthan Valley had free reign over the lands that bordered their villages.**

**Shekhar:** Those people were very poor and that’s not something you could just take away from them. I mean the herb collectors for example came in hundreds, sometimes thousands to collect herbs from all over.

**Yardain Amron: Villager’s brought their livestock to feed in the alpine meadows. They hunted for food. They collected plants and herbs for firewood, medicine, or to sell for profit. They visited their gods, who lived for part of the year inside the forest.**

Shekhar Singh **:** In the good old days, the GHNP staff couldn’t stop, or think of stopping thousands of people who went in for herb collection, or thousands of sheep that went in for grazing. There was no question of stopping them.

[mux swell]

**Yardain Amron: This is Shekhar Singh, by the way, a trailblazer of India’s environmental movement who worked for the government at the time.**

**When the process of creating the park first went public, in the mid 90s, it was his job to try and get all of the bordering villagers to stop doing these things.**

**But remember, they relied on these lands - food and fodder and firewood are a matter of survival. So Shekhar couldn’t simply ban them from entering. Instead, the aim was to change their way of life.**

Shekhar Singh [English, Delhi Apartment]**:** The basic principle was this: that you have to find alternate sources of income, which are if anything easier and preferable to the ones in which they were using in the parks and sanctuaries.

[mux swell and fade]

**Yardain Amron: This strategy is called ecodevelopment. The phrase was coined during the UN’s first general assembly on the environment, in the 1970s. The idea is that development - in the Global South anyway - had to be mindful  of the environment.**

**Shekhar knew he couldn’t get all of the villagers on board at first - but that wasn’t the point.**

Shekhar Singh: But if we can get maybe 10 percent or 15 percent of the people to stop going inside...So what would happen is the time that they would not be out there they could use to make more money. So as people saw these people were getting better off…

**Yardain Amron: ...more and more people would join, Shekhar hoped, as people saw this new way of life.**

**The 10 kilometers in this border area, home to some 15,000 villagers, was dubbed the “ecozone”.  Eco, as in ecological… but mostly … eco, as in economics. Better living through capitalism.**

[mux swells back in]

Shekhar Singh:You know let me tell you one thing, it was day to day planning. Because this was not one of those things where you sat down and said this is the plan, now go and do it.

**Yardain: Shekhar and his team weren’t on their own. They had more than a million dollars in outside funding from the World Bank.  an organization that had high ambitions for this type of what they saw as sustainable development.**

**And so, in partnership, they set to work. They made little plantations outside the park for medicinal herbs, firewood, and fodder.**

**They did a flurry of market surveys to figure out what kind of alternative livelihoods were viable: things like handicrafts, apricot oil, vermicomposting, ecotourism...They held village level meetings, and used participatory techniques, like where everyone gets a stone and votes by throwing it in a basket.**

**In principle, these “Village Development Committees” were supposed to be inclusive, to give locals agency about how their lives would change.**

[mux swell and post]

**But the local people whose lives were to change --  they were divided about the park and eco-development. Some saw opportunity for their remote valley. But many more were skeptical.**

Shekhar Singh: The thing was, there was deep suspicion of government. People felt all this is alright, today you’re promising it, tomorrow what if the whole thing falls through?…

*[mux creeps in]*

So it's not easy. In fact let me tell you, I think we only had 30-40 percent success. I think in over 50% of the cases, we were not really able to read what people really wanted.

*[mux tingle]*

But the only thing I would say is we were fortunate we got Sanjeeva Pandey there.

Sanjeeva Pandey:  So when I joined…  …when I saw what World Bank  was doing, I was really really aghast so to say.

**Yardain Amron: This is Sanjeeva Pandey… who in 1998, became park director of the work-in-progress GNHP.**

**By this point, hundreds of thousands of dollars and countless hours had been spent trying to transition local villagers away from subsistence living.**

**But the effort was NOT going well.**

Sanjeeva Pandey: I remember distinctly I, and I talked to these World Bank people: ‘What are you doing? I mean, this is not the way to do things. I mean, they were kind of distributing those doles.

Yardain Amron:Wait, giving them what?

Sanjeeva Pandey: Doles. D-O-L-E. Doles. Dole is, what do you say, the beggar is asking for doles.

**A dole (spelled D-O-L-E, like the banana company) is British English slang for a government benefit.**

**In this case, stoves, handlooms, televisions, pressure cookers, lanterns. In his book *Conservation Refugees*, Mark Dowie calls this tactic “cargo conservation,” or the exchange of commodities for compliance.**

**Worse yet, an audit of the eco-development funds found that 70 percent had been spent, not on alternative livelihoods for the people but park infrastructure: the headquarters, guard towers, rain shelters, office complexes. Even a nature interpretation center, filled with life-sized models of animals you can find inside the park.**

**Sanjeeva Pandey knew the World Bank funds had been badly misused.  But he *was* a true believer in the overall mission of conservation - of keeping people and developers out of the park . India is a fast-growing nation - and conservation he believes, is the most effective way protect places like the Tirthan Valley**

**Here he is, from a documentary about the park called Turf Wars, talking about what he refers to as a Park Administration or PA system.**

Sanjeeva Pandey (Turf Wars)**:** The writing is on the wall. If you don't go there, if you don't keep these wilderness areas under a PA system—then people are going to be there, a whole lot of developmental activities are going to be there.

**Yardain Amron: For conservationists like Sanjeeva, the problem, fundamentally, is people. We, humans, are the virus that nature needs protection from.**

Sanjeeva Pandey: So before that happens, let us try and grab this area. Let us try and *grab* this area under a PA system.

**Yardain Amron: But this land-grabbing approach was the exact mentality that conservationist were at least in theory trying to move away from. Around the world, some 15 million people, almost all indigigenous, have been displaced by conservation areas.  And critics of this conservation-as-development approach. They argued that the problem wasn’t people in general—especially not indigenuous people with their relatively small footprints. The problem is that by  pushing people from their local economy into a global market economy, ecodevelopment would actually introduce more commercialization in the area…  which in the  long run would increase pressure on the park.**

**Here’s Shekhar again, that leader in India’s environmental movement. He knew this - about how conservation can impact indigenous communities - but says he felt stuck.**

Shekhar Singh: So I thought very hard about this criticism because we had very formal opposition...Now I felt in the long run they were correct. But there was an inevitability about it, which I didn’t know what to do about. Supposed I’de said, no we’re not going to do ecodevelopment out here. I think the pressures would have grown faster in a worse way. But I didn’t see a way out of it. I recognize and agree in fact with the dilemmas that you raised, but what is the answer?

**Justine Paradis: Outside/In will be right back after a break.**

[*BREAK*]

**Justine Paradis: This is Outside/In, a show about the natural world and how we use it. Today, freelance journalist  Yardain Amron reports on the story of The Great Himalayan National Park… a process that first began in the mid 1980s. But creating a national park is hard… especially, when the people living with it  aren’t too fond of the idea.**

**Here’s Yardain.**

**Yardain Amron: By the time Sanjeeva  took over the park in 1998, officials were drawing down what had so far reportedly been a soft approach to enforcement -- and, acting in response to stricter laws passing in the country -- moving to harder ones.**

**They weren’t just trying to convince folks not to go into the park - they were actively policing its borders, or at least trying to.**

Narottam Singh: So there were forest guards starting to tell people that, ‘Ok you cannot enter this area. You cannot enter this area'. So there was a lot of conflict because they didn’t understand what was going on. They were dependent on the forest.

**This is Narottam Singh -- my friend Vibha is translating for us by the way. Narottam is  a local…   who became one of the first forest guards of the GHNP. He grew up in the Tirthan Valley. The job was a big opportunity - but it pitted him against his own friends and neighbors.**

Narottam Singh: When you create the park and make bans of all kinds, what are these people in the villages in the 10km radius going to do?

*[protest sound]*

**In 1999, as the park headed towards official inauguration, tensions boiled over.**

**Protests spread up and down the Tirthan. Park signage was destroyed and the gate to the headquarters was pulled down. Effigies of Sanjeeva were burned.**

**And a rumor spread —more of an allegory actually—that a leopard had been imported and released in the park, that it fed especially on goats and sheep, and that a tag in its ear read ‘Made in America’.**

**Narottam found himself square in the middle of it all.**

Narottam Singh: So it was a very odd time for me because I had to make a living, I had to eat food, I had to feed my family. So I was getting that from the park, from the job...And I wanted to walk the path of the government, whatever the vision they had, and I thought maybe it was right, but I wasn't sure...

*[mux creeps in]*

...And on the other hand it was my fellow brothers from the villages and they were protesting. So it was a period of great conflict for me because I didn't understand what they were suffering, what they wanted, what was not being met…

*[protest sound]*

**Yardain: In a climactic move on August 15th, 1999, timed with India’s Independence Day, locals broke the park boundary with their livestock. They marched their animals into areas they use to graze with no consequences.**

**Yardain: Fines were administered, arrests were made, and the forest department even threatened to call in paramilitary forces.**

**A  similar protest in 1982 by locals at a national park in Rajasthan ended with the police opening fire and killing nine people.**

*[more protest sound]*

**Yardain Amron: This sound, by the way, also comes from the documentary *Turf Wars*…  Vasant Saberwal was one of Turf War’s producers.**

**He told me that many park planners believe subsistence living is an outmoded and uncivilized way of life.**

**Vasant Saberwal:** So any notion of you know we want to work with communities, we want to use ecodevelopment, we want to do things jointly, it’s rubbish. Because upfront you believe these people to be simple minded simpletons, who need advice and expertise and they need to be shown the way.

**Yardain Amron: Intentions aside, Saberwal believes villagers have never been given a satisfying explanation as to why they should have to leave, or adapt. .**

**How can their home be an oasis, but also require protection from the very people who’ve safeguarded it?**

Vasant Saberwal: And so when you talk to people and suggest to people that their use of the park leads to degradation, they say, ‘we’ve been using this park for the past 150-200 years .. If our presence here has been such a threat, why would there be biological diversity over here… And for local communities that live along elephants and tigers, they don’t get  why you have to separate nature from culture? Why is that so critical?

*[mux]*

**Yardain Amron: In late 1999, despite the outcry from locals, the Indian Government officially opened up The Great Himalayan National Park.**

**It was framed, by some, as a success. But in 2002, the World Bank admitted in a report that the sustainable  development experiment had failed.**

**Many if not most of the families living in the eco-zone were still reliant on the park for food and fuel.**

**Alternative ways to make a living didn’t take, or weren’t wanted in the first place. The Village Development Committees were totally defunct.**

**In their report, the World Bank consultants wrote, quote “project-financed investments [in the Great HImalayan National Park] tended to be routine forestry works without imagination, without community involvement and without clearly targeted linkages to conservation.”**

**In another section about forest departments and NGOS, the report said: “The institutions created were neither inclusive, nor transparent, nor accountable to communities”.**

**Mostly, the authors blamed the quote “unsatisfactory” performance of the “implementing agency”— AKA the Indian government.**

**It was a convenient conclusion for the Bank—absolving itself of any blame.**

**Nonetheless, today, the Great Himalayan National Park is considered by and large a huge achievement. Not because of ecodevelopment, per say…but because of ecotourism.**

VLOGGER:In the last episode of my offbeat Himachal series, I trekked to the Great Himalayan National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. COMING UP…

VLOGGER 2: I love that all these buildings are so old and there isn’t a single modern structure...

**Yardain Amron: Kick the locals out…but let the tourists in?**

Stephan Marchal:  Tourism spoils. It spoils.

Dimple Kamri: These people weren’t working before, some of them have never worked. That’s what you need to do! You need to create jobs, you need to create employment for them.

**That’s next week, on Outside/In.**

**Justine Paradis: This episode of Outside/In was reported by Yardain Amron, and produced by Yardain Amron and Taylor Quimby.**

**Editing by Taylor Quimby and Justine Paradis, with help from Felix Poon and Jessica Hunt.**

**Our Interim Executive Producer is Rebecca Lavoie.**

**Our theme is by Breakmaster Cylinder, additional music in this episode from Blue Dot Sessions.**

**Please support stories like this one - Outside/In is made possible because of people like you, who listen, and then decide to chip in. You can support the show at our website, outside-in-radio dot org.**

**Outside-in is a production of New Hampshire Public Radio.**