Summary:
The project aimed to restore and create a maintenance plan for a 300-year-old pond (Nhyal Danda Aahal) in Pumdi Bhumdi, Kaski, Nepal. The pond was destroyed after a civil war, and in order to bring back the tradition of local restoration programs, this project acted as a spearheading initiative.

Project Description:
How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project?

My initial goal was to finish the restoration over the 8-week span but one of the main obstacles was the weather. The project overlapped with monsoon season and I thought of starting the planning ahead in May, however, the monsoon started earlier and lasted longer this year. Regardless of the weather, I was still able to host community meetings with over 65 people and events which helped the project move ahead.

Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project?

The host site is special to me because it is the pond that my father, grandfather and many of my villagers learnt to swim in. Looking at its current state was quite devastating because the once overflowing pond stood dry in middle of the monsoon season. I was aware that for the project to succeed, the locals would have to actively participate. Hence, from the very beginning of the proposal writing the locals have been extremely helpful in sharing historical facts and being involved in the project. When I reached the site, we held our first meeting with the Tagurho (Ghotane) clan and established a working committee. The Tagurho clan have been cleaning and maintaining the pond for over 300 years so their active participation in the project was essential for the restoration to be sustained.

What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why?

Even with continuous rainfall for the past few months the pond site had not been able to hold the water and it was leaking through different areas underground. Once we realized the main problem, it was easier to find spots where water leakage needed to be properly blocked. However, after holding multiple meetings with the working committee and the youth club we realized that monsoon would not be the best time to start the restoration so we focused on community engagement programs for the first few weeks and began the restoration in late August.

Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

N/A

Reflection:
How do you define peace?
After the civil war, peace and stability had become an alien concept. A place where there is a concept of societal harmony and respect for each other’s identity would be peace for me.

In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term?

My project targets environmental sustainability, but through this approach it untangles the traditions that we lost after the civil war. With youths and adults coming together to work on restoring the pond, it highlights the importance of harmony. It brings light to the indigenous knowledge and the ways of living at Pumdi Bhumdi prior to the war. This is a small effort to have long term impact in not just restoring the pond but also bringing back the awareness which once existed.

What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issues or utilized approaches/strategies?

One of the major challenges was trying to find why the pond site was unable to hold water even during the peak monsoon season. To further understand the reasons, I reached out to the locals and few engineers. The locals claimed that there had been a thunder lightening on top on the village in 2001 which killed all the trees surrounding the pond. This made the soil weak and since there were no roots underground to hold the water, the pond lost its natural ability to maintain water all year round. Others claimed that once a concrete slab was put over the walls of the pond, it no longer had water in it. The engineers visited on site and did some soil tests along with listening to the reasoning that the villagers gave. They concluded that water was leaking through different points and making small puddles through out various areas.

The villagers and I wanted to ensure that the pond was restored naturally. So I interviewed more elders to understand how it was done traditionally. Upon my research, I found out that each day the pond used to have around 200 cows and buffaloes that would play in it and laminate the leakage spots with dung. But after the civil war, many villagers were either killed or displaced which meant that the cattle also decreased. Today, only 50-60 cows and buffaloes take a dip in the pond which would not be enough to naturally laminate the walls.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you?

I was extremely touched and surprised by the immense amount of support I received when I reached my village. Even though, they had been helping me through out the process, it seemed quite surreal to me that people would be willing to trust me with this project. The project constantly challenged me to put myself outside the box. That came from applying to actually executing the project and it pushed me to be open into changing the plans according to what would be best for a sustainable result.
Nhyal Danda Aahal (Pond) Restoration Project
Nepal
Bates College
Nissim Gurung

*Personal Statement:*

I had a lot of fun doing this project and I am very thankful to have had the opportunity to take this grant home by starting a small movement. Even though it was initiative taken by me, I am leaving my village with a committee of 55 people who are committed to ensuring that this project will be standing many years from today.