Nhyal Danda Aahal (Pond) Restoration Project
Location: Nepal
Sponsoring College: Bates College
Project Leader: Nissim Gurung (Nepal; UWC Changshu China)
Dates: June – August 2021

Summary and Background:

I come from the southern belt of the Annapurna mountain range in Kaski, Nepal. At the top of my village, there used to be a pond called the “Nhyal Danda Aahal.” With the reflection of the freckled snow rocks on the water, it was a special place for all of my fellow villagers. My Baaje (Grandfather) and Baba (Father) learnt to swim in that very water. However, all I see now is a dried up piece of cement block in the middle of a road. Disheartened by the current state of the pond and lack of youth involvement, I decided to design the “Nhyal Danda Aahal(pond) Restoration project” – with the help of Kalaban Ghaderi Youth Club and local students at the Shree Bhagwati Basic School. It is an environmental program which encourages the youth of my village, Pumdi Bhumdi, to advocate for a sustainable peace through joint community service. This project is a two-month long program with an emphasis on bringing back the traditions of sustainable infrastructure restoration which were lost after the Nepalese Civil War.

Growing up in the Himalayas, I have always been very close to nature, and I have a strong sense of protecting the environment. Upon researching for this project, I found out that the World Health Organization (WHO) monograph series states that the, “Local communities play an important role in rural water-supply programs.” Recognizing that the majority of the households in my village are dependent on agriculture and livestock as a means of survival and income, it is critical that the pond be restored. Adjacent to Nhyal Danda Aahal are two smaller ponds which have also dried out due to lack of water in the principal pond. Farmers from the village used to have agricultural land around the water body that has become dry and infertile without proper soil moisture.

The Nepalese Civil War:

In 1996, a Civil War between the communist party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government of Nepal broke out. More than 17,000 people were killed and approximately 200,000 people were internally displaced. The decade-long conflict ended in late November of 2006 and resulted in tragedies which brought massive destruction across the nation. The political instability led to invasions of villages in rural areas, disrupting the existing peace and restoration practices in these communities. During that time, water was drained out of Nhyal Danda Aahal and cement was put all over its foundation. This was an attempt to “renovate” the pond. However, the “renovation” resulted in an instant drying out. The once area of still, fresh water lost its natural ability to restore water. Children can no longer learn to swim in the pond, like their ancestors did for over 300 years. Wild birds from the jungles can no longer pay a visit. And the village cattle no longer have access to drinking water in close proximity.

Prior to the war, there was a youth club in the village that actively addressed community issues and worked towards collaborative solutions. Due to internal displacement, many local youths were either lost or killed in the insurgency, and the youth club basically vanished after the war. My proposed project would reinvigorate the club by providing a rallying point for collaborative efforts and shared accomplishment.

Pumdi Bhumdi Village and Its Youth:

Pumdi Bhumdi is a village in Kaski, Nepal. With a population of 700 people and 157 households, the villagers are small in number but extremely diverse. The ethnic caste composition in my village consists of 41% Dalit, 40% Gurung, 17% Brahmin, and 2% Bhujel. They have lived in the same community for generations, and the youth in my village have always had a huge influence on communal peace and development. In the 1970s-1980s, the youth organized tree plantation programs, renovation workshops, and even helped build the first road to our village. This tradition came to an abrupt halt when the civil war began. Many youths left the village and never returned; others are aimless because the tradition has
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been lost and therefore they do not know where to begin. Even when they come with plans or strategies, there is a lack of funding to implement their projects, and their energy dissipates. My proposed project would catalyze the reconstitution of youth identity and effort in the village.

Project Details and Implementation:

The project will take place over the course of 8 weeks in the summer of 2021, beginning in June and ending in August. The first 2 weeks will be dedicated to meetings with the village representatives and schools to determine how the program will proceed. Since it will be the monsoon season, students will have school break to either work at their family farm fields or have leisure time with their friends. With less academic stress, we can expect greater participation in the project. I will personally be in close contact with the Shree Bhagwati Basic school’s headmaster in ensuring that the planning stage of the project goes well. I will also go to the youth club meetings and school to explain the objectives of the project to the youth. The program will be available for students in high school and above. With a focus on preparation, mid-June will be the time to buy all the necessary supplies needed for the project such as mud, shovels, hammers, stones, buckets, and so on.

Starting in July, the restoration program will begin with the help of local skilled workers and volunteering youths. Throughout the period of restoration, I will give workshops regarding the importance of environmental conservation at a grassroot level and how the youths in my village can engage in such activities. With community engagement, the restoration is expected to be completed in early August. We will then meet to draft a long term goal regarding the maintenance contribution from the village. In Mid-August I will send the final report to Bates College.

Project Outcomes and Sustainability:

When I was finishing my high school in UWC Changshu China, I was surrounded by students from over 100 countries. Living together with people from different cultures, language, and religions whilst also having the privilege of getting an insight into their worlds gave me an epiphany. In the summer of 2019, I went back to my village and realized that it was no different from the composition at my school. The ethnic diversity within the community and my country was a real life example that uniting people with a common cause can result in sustainable peace. Hence, I am determined to take matters into my own hands by taking a small step towards organizing a restoration program that will sustain village life for years to come.

After this project is complete, I want to work with the youth club to design an environmental sustainability curriculum for the students at the Shree Bhagwati Basic school so that they can sustain the restoration. With the leadership of the youth club, the curriculum will call for students to meet at the beginning of each month and dedicate themselves for various activities such as plogging (an eco-friendly exercise where people pick up litter while jogging or brisk walking), art projects to fundraise for restoration maintenance and so on. I want the youth and the children to collaborate and come up with different ideas to sustain the message of the Nhyl Danda Aahal Restoration project.

At this point in my country, the civil war has pushed us back in time. It has taken our farms, villages, and lives. Even though the insurgency ended 15 years ago, the civilians are still reaping the repercussions of the war. The end of the conflict left villagers with an attitude of never being able to recover and never being able to come back. My vision for peace calls for local agency and encompasses all individuals from my village. I look forward to this initiative producing a wave of influence in the neighboring villages by also bringing back their traditions of sustainability and environmental restoration. Understanding the suffering from their past, I want to help them move forward by taking this small step in hopes of re-establishing the lost urgency to preserve our environment for a sustainable future.