

31st August 2012

Payson R. Stevens
Friends of GHNP
PO Box 810
Del Mar, CA 92014

Dear Payson

I lived and worked in Himachal Pradesh for twelve years, from 1999 until 2011, and been a Friend of GHNP since 2004. During my time in Himachal I was involved in a wide variety of projects related to conservation of medicinal plants. I also worked as an international consultant for FAO and TRAFFIC throughout India and Bhutan. My first experience of the Great Himalayan National Park was in 2004 when I organised a trek to search for a CITES-listed species called *Nardostachys jatamansi* (also known as jatamansi or Indian Spikenard). I was delighted to find a healthy population growing in the park; I have been on many expeditions searching for jatamansi in other areas of Himachal Pradesh but have only ever found it growing inside the GHNP.

In 2004/2005 I worked with the GHNP authorities and a local NGO to assess the progress of a community-based project to cultivate endangered medicinal plant species in the buffer zone of the park. Encouraged by the results of this study I began to explore how I could contribute to the GHNP's efforts by linking local farmers with international markets as a means of creating sustainable livelihoods for local villagers.

In 2007 I helped set up a local company called Biolaya Organics Pvt Ltd and teamed up with a local farmer in Shanghar village in the Sainj Valley. Over the next four years we experimented with growing a variety of different CITES-listed species. The seedlings for these trials were all purchased from women's self help groups who had been supported by the GHNP Authorities to create medicinal plant nurseries for this purpose. Of all of our experiments the most successful was with an endangered species called *Picrorhiza kurroa*, the roots of which are used as a liver tonic in Ayurvedic medicine. In 2010 we harvested approximately 150kg of dried roots and succeeded in exporting this to a company called Banyan Botanicals in the US. This was the first time that any 'CITES appendix II' species had been sustainably cultivated on a commercial scale in Himachal Pradesh, and it is hoped that this successful experiment will have created a model for others to follow and further develop in the future.

I believe the wealth of biodiversity and the outstanding beauty within the park is in itself worthy of the GHNP being named a World Heritage Site. To be recognised as such would shine a spotlight on the pioneering work that has been initiated by the GHNP authorities and its community of dedicated supporters, and would help bring in further support and expertise to continue developing sustainable livelihoods in the buffer zone. I believe the GHNP's emphasis on combining conservation and development is truly exemplary and that with wider support from the international community it can become a valuable model for other protected areas around the world.

Yours Sincerely,



Ben Heron

Director, Biolaya Organics Pvt Ltd / International Consultant
benheron77@gmail.com
Mob. +44 771 9392367