

World Environment Day (WED) 2014 Celebration

WED Celebration in Central Himalaya

CEE Himalaya in collaboration with JSW Foundation, Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation, and RCE Srinagar organized the World Environment Day (WED) on June 5, 2014 at Ujeli, Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand. Unlike the last few years' practice of celebrating the WED with children or community, this year's celebrations were dedicated to the mule owners and operators of Uttarkashi who had played a commendable role in the 16-17 June 2013 Uttarakhand disaster that resulted from the cloudburst leading to subsequent flashfloods and landslides. This disaster led to huge loss of human lives, property and infrastructure. In the WED celebration 20 mule operators and owners with their 52 mules participated in the program. The CEE team, during WED celebration, stressed the fact that mules are an important mode of transport during emergencies as well as during normal life. While the mules are easiest, pollution free, environment friendly means of transport, they are very useful at the time of emergencies, landslides and floods when roads get destroyed, cut off and other modes of transport don't work that are a common occurrence in the hilly areas. The mule owners and operators are a poor community and therefore needs to be addressed on priority.

The mule operators and their mules served as the backbone of the rescue and relief work carried on by the government and other humanitarian agencies. They not only rescued people but also carried heavy packets of relief material supplied by the government while no other means of transport could operate in the heavy water flow and severely damaged roads.

The WED celebration was organized at the convenience of the mule operators and therefore the event started at 6:00 AM. During the day they work and they would not like to lose their wages. It was for the first time that such an event was organized for mule operators and an agency engaged them for such an event. There was great enthusiasm and the mule owners had reached the venue before time. They were very eager and keen to attend the program and attending such an event for the first time they were curious as well as skeptical. Through the WED celebration CEE tried to create awareness, made them realize their importance and provided them a platform to share their problems and difficulties. The participants were introduced to the WED celebration, local environmental issue and sustainable mountain development in their own simple language. A discussion was organized around the errors that human being have made during the course of development. What kind of development path we should have taken was also discussed? What was the reason for the June 2013 tragedy and how the loss could have been minimized?

Apart from recognizing their contribution to the rescue and relief operations post 16-17 June 2013 tragedy, the CEE Himalaya team also encouraged them to share their problems and their expectations of help from the agencies and the government. They discussed in detail their lifestyle and the problems that they had to face on daily basis, while earning their livelihood.

As per the discussion and sharing, the main difficulties faced by the mule owners/ operators are as follows:

- The mule owners are a mixture of non local and local people; they generally belong to the plains of U.P. like Saharanpur and migrate to Uttarakhand for livelihood reasons. They live in a group of 4- 5 in rented houses of about Rs. 2000 per month.
- The average cost of one mule is around 60,000 Rs. and it is a great loss if the animal dies.
- The mules have to be registered at the Municipal office every year in March. The cost of registration is Rs. 200 per mule.
- A mule owner earns a wage of average Rs. 260 per day and there is apparently no work or earning in the rainy season. They are usually employed by contractors and tourists. There is no job security.
- The work season lasts from April to October that is also affected by the weather and climate change. The survival with this meager amount is difficult.
- There are no grazing lands to feed the mules. They are stall fed and given Husk (Bhusa), Gram (chana) and Jaggery (gur). The overall diet of a mule is around Rs. 100 per mule per day which is expensive considering the wages they receive.
- There is no arrangement of drinking water for the mules, the available water bodies are fenced and thus the mule owners have to fetch and store water for their animals in containers.
- People throw waste and poly bags on the roads that are consumed by mules leading to digestive diseases. A mule usually does not survive for more than 15 days after the consumption of poly bags or other waste material disposed off by the locals.
- There is no proper shed or shelter for mules and it becomes very difficult for them to save the mules from rains and children who intentionally hurt the mules with stones and sticks.
- Many operators lost their mules in the last year's disaster. The government could not rescue the mules on time as a result of which around 35-40 mules died per day for the lack of fodder. Though the government increased the compensation money for dead or missing mules during disaster from Rs. 11,000 to Rs. 51, 000; it is not the solution for the problems that they face daily.
- There is no insurance or loan facility available for mule owners in the area.
- There are no arrangements for the healthcare of mules. Availability of hospitals and medicines should be there.
- Mules also suffer from cruelty at the hands of some owners who beat and injure them with rods and sticks.

The program ended after serving of refreshments. The mule operators and owners felt optimistic after attending the programme and expected better arrangements of shelter, water and health facilities for their mules from the government, charitable and humanitarian agencies.

WED Celebration in Western Himalaya

World Environment Day was celebrated by CEE Himalaya on June 5th, 2014 at one of the Anandshala schools named Government Middle School (GMS) Salamabad, Uri in Jammu & Kashmir. Total number of participants for the program was 159 that included 151 students, 7 teachers and 2 CEE staff members. The school is not easily accessible as it is on the Line of Control (LoC) along India's international border with Pakistan. The area is under strict vigil of Indian Army. The school is one of the earthquake resistant model schools constructed by the CEE after the 8 October 2005 earthquake in which a large number of buildings including schools were destroyed. These earthquake resistant schools reconstructed by CEE were named Anandshala and were handed over to the J&K Directorate of School Education. Anandshala model schools developed by CEE are 'schools of joy' where teaching and learning is interactive, locally relevant and fun. Along with providing education, these schools serve as resource centers for capacity building and Disaster Risk Reduction related trainings and activities.

Ms. Narender Kour, in-charge of the GMS, introduced the team CEE Himalaya and its work to the students. Mr. Riyaz Ahmad Mir of CEE welcomed all the teachers and students, discussed the agenda of the WED event, and introduced the theme "Raise your Voice, Not the Sea Level". He spoke about the hazards caused by emission of harmful gases and other products into the atmosphere. He stressed that every individual must strive to alter their lifestyle in order to reduce his /her carbon footprint.

Principal of the school spoke about nature and environment and said that it is important to conserve nature today for a better tomorrow. He said that society needed to start from a scratch as small steps lead to big changes. He lauded the effort made by CEE Himalaya to reach out to students to sensitize them towards important issues that are affecting the world on large scale.

Children were given the message about up keeping mountain health by enhancing green cover, taking care of water sources and rivers, valuing local plants, food and culture which are unique and sustainable.

Extempore, Slogan Writing, and Painting competitions structured around the theme of WED 2014 were organized. Students participated enthusiastically and expressed their views through their drawings, presentations and lectures. Winners of the competitions were felicitated by CEE Himalaya.

Mr. Mubashir Sultan Zargar of CEE Himalaya addressed children highlighting local environmental issues, small scale conservation projects that students can do in their schools and at home, several school programmes of CEE being run in J&K. Mubashir extended the vote of thanks after prize distribution to the winners. The students enjoyed the WED celebration and expressed that they would like to be part of similar events in the future as well.

The Indian Himalayan Region is prone to impacts of climate change and certain adverse impacts of climate change are prominently noticeable here. Uttarkashi district has the origin of holy

rivers Ganga and Yamuna. The two of the four 'chardhams', Gangotri and Yamunotri are located in district Uttarkashi. Gomukh (the place of origin of holy river Ganga) has receded about 4 km because of glacial melt during recent past. The water discharge in rivers has increased because of enhanced melting of glaciers due to rise in temperature. Climate change related impacts on agriculture, food security, health, tourism, wildlife, environment etc were discussed and how local communities can climate proof them and develop resilience to withstand the changes being foreseen.

CEE's interventions in Indian Himalayan Region being supported by Climate Change and Development Division of the Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation (SDC) through the Embassy of Switzerland in India, New Delhi were discussed. Under SDC supported programme CEE has documented the impacts of climate change on the local communities as they have noticed it across IHR and how communities have prepared themselves, developed resilience and mitigating systems have been documented by CEE. Another effort supported by SDC is capacity building of media on climate change and development issues across IHR. This is being done through organizing workshops for media people and sensitizing them to cover climate change issues at greater length.

Sustainability attains greater concern everywhere but more in the IHR. CEE is the nodal agency for implementing Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) in India. RCE Srinagar supported by the United Nations University, Institute of Advanced Studies, Japan has been striving to work on sustainability issues through education and communication across IHR. During WED celebrations activities and scope of RCE Srinagar were discussed. More organizations were called upon to join RCE Srinagar and the RCE network.

Natural disasters including those induced by Climate Change have been quite frequent in IHR. Their magnitude and frequency has increased during recent past. The sector of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) has been of special significance in IHR. RCE Srinagar has engaged itself in DRR and has been trying to create awareness, develop school disaster management plans, village contingency plans, organizing mock drills on first aid, rescue and relief operations. Community based disaster management has been CEE's thrust area. CEE has trained local youth, built their capacity and organized them in disaster response team to be the first responders during any disaster before external help arrives. WED and celebrating other environmental days every year has been an important activity of CEE Himalaya.