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“It’s a conspiracy theory *and* climate change”

Of beastly encounters and cervine
disappearances in Himalayan India

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This article traces the introduction of the category of climate change into the Indian Himalaya. Climate change emerged as an explanation for recurring incidences of human-animal conflict and the disappearance of a protected species through the labors of the local state bureaucracy. Even as the narratives on climate change were being imbued with expert authority, counternarratives dealing with the very same phenomena voiced by long-term residents of the Himalayas were summarily dismissed by the state as constituting mere conspiracy theories. This article accords both these narratives equal space and details the effects of the explanatory force of climate change in this region. On the basis of ethnography centered on humans, big cats, bears, and musk deer, it argues for an enhanced ethnographic attention to the political work done in the name of climate change. The article questions the analytic utility of the concept of the Anthropocene and ends by outlining certain distinctive characteristics of climate change as a concept and call to act upon the world.

Keywords: climate change, conspiracy theory, human-animal relations, categorization, India

Whatever one’s belief in its effects, causes, or future manifestations might be, “climate change” possesses a powerful ubiquity in the present. Given its relative newness as a phrase and the power it has assumed to apprehend the world, it is worth asking how climate change marks an entry into place. This is particularly important for places where climate change is believed to be having a visibly deleterious effect, such as the Himalayas where this research is set. This article describes how climate change was brought into circulation as a state-endorsed category in a borderland Himalayan district in India through its linkage to the actions of hungry big cats and aggressive bears, as well as the fate of shy musk deer. Climate change emerged in



response to recurring incidences of human-animal conflict and as an explanation for the disappearance of a protected species through the labors of the local state bureaucracy and its associated expertise. Apart from an ethnographic description of how the well-recognized concept of climate change can travel into a remote region like the central Indian Himalaya, the second objective of this article lies in showing what sort of political work it can do. It asks what does climate change stand for; what can it explain and produce; and what can it silence?

The Himalayan region under discussion here has witnessed a large number of “environmental movements,” although this characterization remains disputed (see Mawdsley 1998; Rangan 2000; and Guha 2001). These include the now-iconic *Chipko* movement from which the phrase “tree-hugger” emerged and is now used—often pejoratively—to describe environmentalists and conservationists. People’s perceptions of and relationship with the environment in this part of the Indian Himalaya has been studied in some detail (see Dyson 2014 and Agrawal 2005). The ambition of this article lies elsewhere. It is to capture a moment when the category of “climate change” begins to gain ground as an overarching explanation for what Shekhar Pathak (2015) has feelingly described as “the fragile Himalaya.” The article begins with a detailing of three separate circumstances involving human interactions with big cats, bears, and musk deer that warranted or allowed for explanations rooted within a scientific discourse of climate change. The state’s officially proclaimed explanations are compared with local narratives that presented quite a divergent representation of the very same phenomena. These competing narratives were summarily dismissed by state bureaucrats as constituting nothing other than “conspiracy theories.” The two are elaborated in equal detail here in order to challenge the capacity of the hegemonic discourse of climate change to erase local specificities (Milton 2008) as well as the state’s capacity to silence narratives by labeling them conspiracy theories. It should be made clear, however, that this work is not trying to make an argument for the constructed nature of climate change.¹ The intention is quite simply to provide an ethnographic description of the moments that allowed for the category of climate change to make its presence felt; to describe the contexts within which it was utilized, for what specific purposes, and by whom.

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1. I should perhaps also make clear that I am not joining the ranks of the climate skeptics or denialists. On the contrary, I very much believe that the Indian Himalaya is a precarious, ecological zone that is, to use the language of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), extremely “vulnerable” to the impact of climate change. There is considerable evidence to support the claim that the Himalayas are witnessing rapid changes such as the melting of glaciers and extreme events (e.g., PSI 2010). In June 2013, it was precisely in the region under consideration that a massive devastating flood took place due to a multiday cloudburst and a related glacier breach. As June is the peak pilgrimage and tourism season, the 3-day flooding led to the death of over 5,700 people in official accounts. Poorly planned and excessive constructions, uncontrolled tourism, and corporate extractive practices have played a large part in this Himalayan tragedy. However, it is widely agreed that the extreme weather event of the massive cloudburst in advance of the arrival of the monsoons is almost certainly conjoined to the processes that are covered by the term “climate change.”

If the primary category this article works through is “climate change,” then the second one is “conspiracy theory” understood in its colloquial sense as “*prima facie* examples of irrational beliefs. Conspiracy theories—according to this intuition—are bunk, bogus, irrational, the result of paranoid ideation or, frankly, just weird” (Dentith 2014: 2). This is precisely the sense in which the counternarratives were discussed (and dismissed) by state officials. While English-speaking bureaucrats did explicitly use the phrase “conspiracy theory” many of the other official—who are less proficient in the English language—used words that referred to the residents as idiots (*bewaqoof*), donkeys (*gadhe*), illiterate rustics (*unpad gawar*), “wild” of-the-jungle (*jungle*), or even just of-the-mountains (*pahari*). What was underlined, whether in the English or Hindi languages, was precisely the irrational and idiotic nature of the counternarratives. The colloquial sense in which the phrase “conspiracy theory” is understood, as opposed to academic critiques, neatly captures the disparagement and dismissiveness of the counternarratives. Beyond the capacious and descriptive utility of conspiracy theory, I utilize it here given its capacity to vividly express political imaginaries in South Asia. Despite its analytic value for anthropologists, there has been a striking lack of engagement with conspiracy theorizing in South Asia (but see Iqtidar 2014). This lack of engagement may emerge partially from issues of translation. There are direct translations of the word conspiracy into, for instance, Hindi (*shadhyantra*) but not equally comfortable ones for conspiracy theory. Academic analyses of conspiracy theories draw either from English language sources (the media, archives) or from work in urban, middle-class areas (or both). My use of conspiracy theory in this piece is directed at rehabilitating the concept within South Asianist literature, and, simultaneously, at making a particular intervention in the extant anthropology of conspiracy/conspiracy theories. This burgeoning literature (e.g., West and Sanders 2003; Fassin 2011) tends to put aside the truth-value of conspiracy theories to study their content as constitutive of critical social commentary. While drawing inspiration from this literature, the ethnography presented here brings something else to light, viz. what the labeling or categorization of certain narratives as “a conspiracy theory” by local elites is capable of achieving. Furthermore, when conspiracy theory and climate change are studied in tandem it is almost always done to ask why the latter is so susceptible to the former. David Runciman (2014), for instance, provides cogent reasons for what it is in the very nature of climate change that allows for a particularly virulent form of conspiracy theorizing. This work, on the other hand, presents a scenario where it shows how both climate change and conspiracy theories—as powerful categories holding self-evident explanatory value—are brought into play with regard to the *very same phenomenon* and, furthermore, what the effects of their coexistence are in the high Himalaya.

This article follows Sheila Jasanoff in asking “what is at stake when an impersonal, apolitical, and universal imaginary of climate change, projected and endorsed by science, takes over from the subjective, situated, and normative imaginations of human actors engaging directly with nature” (2010: 235). Erasing or silencing speech through the projection of a seemingly apolitical concept of climate change and the characterization of natives as absurd conspiracy theorists is self-evidently problematic. The sharp-edged critiques of the very real failings of the state were somewhat dulled through their categorization as conspiracy theories by the state

and their supplantation by the category of climate change. Having said that, once climate change makes its presence felt as a state-endorsed category it does possess the capacity, particularly in the twinned contexts of the Himalayas and charismatic megafauna, to generate global attention and, even, the possibility of a new politics. The specificities of the critiques by the mountain people (*pahari*) discernible within what were dubbed conspiracy theories do get somewhat obscured. However, the urgent need to draw attention to this region and its fragilities does not similarly flounder under the rubric of climate change.

This article draws on my doctoral fieldwork conducted in the north-Indian Himalayan state of Uttarakhand over 2006–8. I spent close to a year living in a small mountain town called Gopeshwar that functions as the administrative headquarters of a district called Chamoli. The district shares a long border with Tibet and is also located within easy distance of Nepal, a borderland location that holds significance for much of what is to follow. Located largely in the Upper Himalaya, 60 percent of the district is permanently covered in snow. Vast swathes of this Himalayan region have been declared “Protected Areas” by the government of India with Chamoli itself containing a wildlife sanctuary as well as a UNESCO-declared biosphere reserve. All through my time in the Himalaya I was pulled into a wide array of human-animal relations ranging from terrifying conflict with large predatory beasts to overt familial love for stray dogs. Regularly, there were demonstrations, meetings, protests, petitions, newspaper articles, and general chitchat centered on animals and human engagements with them in the small government offices I was working out of. Many an expert committee was set up and dozens of visits by environmentalists/conservationists or general development-*wallahs* from distant urban spaces to Gopeshwar town/Chamoli district took place. From a world saturated with navigating human-animal relations on a daily basis, this article recounts below three distinct cases involving leopards, musk deer, Himalayan black bears, and humans. It shows how they all link up to, as per state categorizations, climate change and conspiracy theories.

The state and the nonstate

A word on my utilization of the “state” is in order. There is now a wide-ranging anthropological corpus that has imaginatively overturned narrower, institutionalized understandings of the power, magic, and hold of that thing we call the state (e.g., Das and Poole 2004; Fuller and Benei 2001). My own longer work has attempted to rethink the perennial grumblings with the developmental Indian state by training an ethnographic lens on two (seemingly) progressive legislations and through a foregrounding of quotidian bureaucratic labor, time, and matter (Mathur 2015b). This article, however, resorts to a less expansive conceptualization of the state in order, first, to faithfully describe the events that transpired while maintaining informant anonymity. Hence when it refers to the state or says something is endorsed, articulated, or sanctioned by the state, it is speaking of a clutch of top state functionaries who were posted at the time in Chamoli district. Such an understanding of the state—as a personified entity; manifested in the very body of certain officials—has been noted in particular in marginal spaces such as frontier regions where there is a slighter presence of the state apparatus (cf. Ssorin-Chaikov 2003).



In addition, the state is utilized as distinct from both what are glossed together as “long-term residents” of the region and from other expert bodies such as World Wildlife Fund biologists or NGO representatives. In this particular instance, I move away from positions that argue for a blurred boundary between the state and its citizens (Gupta 1995) as well as those that demonstrate the state under conditions of neoliberal governmentality operates through a rearrangement of expertise and functions with and through NGOs and international bodies such as the World Wildlife Fund (Ferguson and Gupta 2005). With regard to the latter, the argument of this article hinges on a close focus on the actions and discourse of powerful district officials who, while acting under the influence of a fast-growing consensus on climate change and long-standing perceptions of Himalayan degradation, did act largely unilaterally. I will discuss the role of expertise in each of the cases discussed below but let us, for the moment, turn to why the state is located in top district officials and, relatedly, why they are strongly distinguished from the group of people described as “long-term residents” of the region. Elsewhere I have detailed the sharp divide between the top echelons of those who govern or the state-people (*sarkari log*) and those who are governed in the Uttarakhand Himalaya, particularly in the more “remote” regions like Chamoli district (Mathur 2015a). The latter overwhelmingly self-identify as *paharis* or mountain persons, an identity that formed the central plank of the movement that was waged by them for a separate “mountain state” in the 1990s. The outcome of the mass mobilization by the mountain persons in opposition to what they described as a form of internal colonialism by the plains people (*maidani*) allowed for Uttarakhand to be carved out from its parent state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2000 (Mawdsley 1997; Kumar 2011). One of the central arguments of my work is that subsequent to the creation of the much desired “mountain state,” the distinctions between the mountains and the plains and between *paharis* and *maidanis* has only been exacerbated (see Mathur 2015b). One manifestation of this dichotomization is visible among the top state officials of the district who were considered to be at a remove from the realities of mountain life and only ever expressed a deep desire to escape the Himalaya for cities in the plains. Interestingly, even when the top state officials hail from the mountains themselves, they continue to openly express their longings to escape from the “remote” and “backward” mountains of Uttarakhand and desperately seek out transfers and postings to the large, expanding towns in the plains (*maidan*). I have argued that in the case of these bureaucrats, it is their membership to a status group and a professional cadre that matters and not their origins as mountain persons. In contradistinction to the representatives of the state, the people described as long-term residents of the district are *paharis* who have lived here for most of their lives and remain on—either out of lack of options or a genuine attachment to the mountains—in the face of massive streams of out-migration that are rapidly depopulating this section of the Indian Himalaya. The state as embodied in the actions of the highest echelons of its administrative and forest bureaucracy and the *pahari* distinction does, it is contended, hold true empirically. Additionally, the intention is not to collapse differences of class, caste, gender, language, age, and occupation among the *paharis* and argue that they are a homogeneous group particularly when it comes to forms of environmental knowledge and engagement (see Guneratne 2010; Dyson 2014). However, the narratives ascribed to the *paharis*

were common across a wide spectrum of actors ranging from college and school students that I tutored to random chats in the bazaar or longer discussions with local NGO workers, reporters, activists, and other residents. With slight variations, which are impossible to capture in this one paper, there was a consensus on the narratives described below.

An anthropology of the state with its argument for distributed forms of power and its innovative focus on mundane practices, social relations, affect, or materiality, among other tools, was much needed. That said, it remains important to remember that there remain deep-seated class and status distinctions between representatives of the state and their citizens, particularly in poor, unequal, postcolonial settings such as India. This is not to argue that the state can be, or should be, collapsed into the actions of a few senior officials. Rather, it is to remind ourselves that it remains true that the actions of these powerful local representatives of the state in their frontier outposts have important consequences and in the eyes of the locals, they *do* constitute the state as they know it. Furthermore, it is within the discourse of these state officials and in the sorts of expertise they assume that information flows up the state hierarchy to Uttarakhand's capital city of Dehradun and then eventually further up to New Delhi. The bureaucrats written of here perceived themselves to be marginal and when considered strictly from their location in the pecking order of the bureaucratic Indian state, they are so. However, this position in institutional flowcharts hides the immense power they possess to interpret and represent the Himalaya. The reports and letters they write and file, the words they utter, the deductions they make and the categories they employ have lasting, if not life-changing, effects. Let us now turn to some of these bureaucratic pronouncements on climate change and conspiracy theories.

The man-eating leopards of Chamoli

Chamoli district is severely affected by human-big cat conflict. The phenomenon of man-eating leopards and tigers has a long history in this part of India (Atkinson 1881; Corbett 1947). In some of the earliest available statistics, the colonial Gazetteer, which records deaths caused by “wild animals”—primarily big cats but also bears—in this region of Uttarakhand in the nineteenth century notes: “From a return of inquests held in Garhwal between 1850 and 1863, the number of deaths from the attacks of wild animals was recorded at 276 during that period. . . . Taking the decade 1870–79, the returns show that 211 persons (123 males) were killed by wild animals” (Atkinson 1881: 15). Crucially, the Gazetteer admits “This return is avowedly imperfect, as it only includes the deaths reported to the authorities and the animals killed for which rewards have been claimed (16).” Presently, too, the construction of state statistics remain unreliable for a variety of complicated reasons. These include underreporting of incidences, especially when they occur in distant mountain villages, the painfully convoluted documentary regimes associated with the production of state statistics in India, and the flat refusal of officials to accept certain cases of attacks as legitimate. The refusal to recognize certain cases of attacks by wild animals arose from lack of the required evidence but also often from the fact that an official acceptance of an attack would force the state

to financially compensate the victim and that is not always possible (see below). What this results in is the generation of watered-down statistics, something readily acknowledged by officials when off the record. The official figures that I obtained from the authorities on deaths by big cats in the entire state are presented in Table 1. The state claims that a total of sixty-one deaths were caused over three years by man-eating big cats in Uttarakhand. This figure, it should be pointed out, was ridiculed for being absurdly low by everyone (including the official who provided this paper truth to me, even as he handed me the file). During my fieldwork, and especially during the three-month period we had a man-eating leopard residing in Gopeshwar with us, many people including conservationists and foresters, complained of the increase in attacks on humans by big cats. As there are very weak and conflicting statistics on man-eating big cats and almost nothing that could evenly cover a historical stretch of time, it is hard to properly corroborate talk of increase or decrease. The point remains that there is a widespread belief that big cats are becoming more and more violent toward humans in the Indian Himalaya as well as in other parts of India, including heavily populated urban spaces.

Table 1: Official accounts from the Chief Wildlife Warden (CWW) on number of human deaths caused by Leopards in Uttarakhand.

Year	Oct–Jan (Winter)	Feb–May (Spring/ Summer)	June–Sep (Monsoon)	Total Deaths
2004	19	4	4	27
2005	10	3	2	15
2006	16	2	1	19
Total	45 (70%)	9 (17%)	7 (13%)	61

Speculations on the causes of the supposed increase in man-eaters is rife. It is, as noted above, not a new occurrence: the aforementioned Gazetteer described the hill tiger as a “quarrelsome creature” and the leopard as “very common all over the hills and in parts very destructive” (Atkinson 1881: 16). Generally it is believed that big cats turn on humans—an otherwise alien prey—when they are unable to hunt their “normal” food due to old age or injuries (Corbett [1947] 2007). However, many of the man-eaters that were being shot down in Chamoli district proved to be young and healthy leopards. Another interesting trend that was observed was that the majority of the attacks were occurring in the winter. Table 1 notes that approximately 70 percent of the deaths took place in the winter. And, indeed, it was widely agreed that there was a huge spike in the appearance of man-eating big cats in the colder periods. Pulling these two strands together, the district authorities came up with a theory on the cause of the supposed increase in man-eaters. According to them, in the winter leopards are pushed down by snowfall from the higher reaches of the Himalayas to spaces inhabited by humans such as Gopeshwar. Previously, there was abundant prey available for them (sheep, goats, deer, and so on). However, due to resource degradation and biodiversity depletion in the Himalaya, the leopards now find themselves faced with sparser options for hunting out their regular prey

and are, thus, constrained to turn on humans. This disappearance of regular prey for the leopards is directly related to the set of processes that fall under the rubric of climate change. It follows, they claimed, that the perceived increase in human-big cat conflict is a direct outfall of climate change in the Himalaya. This explicit connection and explanation was one that was voiced in response to angry and terrified citizens, in official meetings, and in my interviews with the state officials.

The famous hunter-turned-conservationist of Uttarakhand, Jim Corbett—whose writings on man-eaters in this region remain extremely popular—had also expressed his concern over the increase in conflict between humans and big cats in the early twentieth century. He considered big cats to be “fine gentlemen” and puzzled over why these “large hearted, handsome” animals were attacking humans with increasing ferociousness. The residents of present day Chamoli district had a variety of different theories on why there has been such a marked increase in attacks on humans by big cats and they were different from the climate change narratives produced by the state. One theory went that due to large amount of poaching, leopards were getting angry at humans and were therefore killing them in order to seek retribution. The most popular theory, which was asserted by the vast majority of town residents, though, was that the true provenance of the man-eaters was located in the plains. This theory on the origin of the man-eater went that when leopards grow old in their zoos in the plains then the *maidanis* (plainspersons) send them up to the mountains to die. At other times, when zoos get overcrowded with leopards then, too, they ship them up to the mountains. As these leopards are used to being provided with meals and some are, in any case, too old to hunt wild animals, they turn on the easiest prey of all—humans. My office-mates, for instance, only half-jokingly accused me, as a plainsperson, of being responsible for the vast numbers of man-eating leopards that visit the mountainous Chamoli district. They would somewhat laughingly but also quite in earnest, ask me why “you people” (Indians from the plains) had conspired to send up these zoo-leopards to eat up humans in the mountains. This particular theory has to be understood in the context of the mountain-plains animosity that continues to dominate this region, which I mentioned at the very outset. The statehood movement had referred to a systematic and historic form of neglect coupled with active exploitation of this region’s rich natural resources such as water, timbers, minerals, and herbs that has been going on from the colonial period right through to the present postindependence nationalist state period. Releasing old leopards and tigers from zoos up to what the plainsmen merely consider “jungle” or “*pahar*” (mountains) with no heed paid, as usual, to the perils this posed for its inhabitants was considered just another event in a long list of actions that combine abuse and neglect of the mountain people (*paharis*) by the plainspeople (*maidanis*).

In a parallel observation, Annu Jalais (2005) documents the widespread belief that tigers in the Sundarbans forests in West Bengal turned against lower class and caste Bengali refugees as the tigers somehow knew that the state has granted them greater citizenship rights and entitlements to living in Bengal than they have to the unwanted refugees from Bangladesh. The Sundarbans tigers in Jalais’ study had become “arrogant” and “self-important” due to the state’s policies, which have converted them into “citizens” and the refugees into mere “tiger-food.” Similarly, when the *maidani* (plains) and zoo origins of the Gopeshwar man-eater were directly discussed, he was described as possessing no manners and absolutely no fear of

humans. Mannerless and rude (*badtameez*) as well as cunning (*chatur*) were the adjectives used most often to describe the leopard (*bagh*). This inhabitant of zoos in the plains positively reveled in the attention of humans and was therefore actively seeking them out. The overwhelming identity of being a *pahari* (mountain person) that I describe above extends to animals as well. Thus the Gopeshwar-*wallah bagh* or the man-eating leopard of Gopeshwar was clearly not a *pahari*, he was certainly from the plains (*maidan*) and that explained his lack of civility and rudeness (*badtameez bagh*). One evening a rather inebriated journalist accosted me on the road and held out his hand in the gesture of a handshake. I did not return the gesture. On this, he said in appreciative tones, “very good.” He proceeded to tell me that if a big, yellow cat with polka dots does precisely this (give out a paw to shake my hand) then I will know it’s the *adamkhor* (man-eater) from the zoo in the plains and I should do just what I did right now—i.e., not return the handshake. In the zoo the leopard has gotten used to seeing humans and therefore thinks nothing of shaking hands with them and has, probably, according to the journalist, been taught the “trick” of hand shaking much like pet dogs are. At other times, people would semijokingly say that they know this *maidani bagh* (leopard from the plains) misses the company of humans but he really need not impose himself so aggressively onto the *paharis*, though in doing so he is merely following the historical precedent established by his fellow *maidanis* (plainspeople). During the winter of my time in Gopeshwar, the man-eating leopard that was, as his arrival was popularly described, “visiting us” came out and sunned himself on a ledge near the bazaar at noon in full sight of the gawking Gopeshwar-ites. Sometimes he would be seen strolling through the main roads of the town, walking around the busy town temple and, generally, appearing to seek out human company instead of—as “normal” leopards would do—shun or shy away from humans. This “abnormal” lack of fear of humans and the “cheekiness” of the leopard left everyone in town absolutely convinced that he is hailing directly from a zoo in the plains.

This version of the reasons for the occurrence of man-eating big cats in Chamoli district was entirely rejected by state officials who were keen to maintain the link between “climate change,” one that they considered based on science and rational deduction. They compared this scientific version of why there were so many human-eating big cats in Uttarakhand in contrast to the released-from-the-zoo story that was popularly believed by district residents. This latter theory was considered to be nothing other than a particularly silly conspiracy theory and was, hence, entirely and automatically dismissed. In my own research, I found plenty of eyewitnesses who swore to having seen leopards from the plains being driven up in huge vans and then released into the jungles. But I was unable to get any official confirmation of this story either in my archival research or in my interviews and general conversations with agents of the state.

The case of the vanishing musk deer

Musk deer (or *Kasturi Mriga* as they are known in Hindi) is a highly endangered deer species. In 1974 they gained a “vulnerable” listing in the Red Data Book of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources

(IUCN). Around the same time the Government of India along with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) established a musk deer sanctuary in Uttarakhand under the IUCN's "Threatened Deer" program. Called the Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary, it is spread out over an area of 975 sq. km, making it the largest protected area in the Western Himalaya (Tiwari and Joshi 1997: 51). Sections of this sanctuary fall under Chamoli district. Further conservationist steps were taken up in 1982 by setting up a captive breeding center for the deer just outside the sanctuary at a place called *Kanchula Kharakh*. The captive breeding center was set up with the intention of preserving the deer and reintroducing the species into different habitats. According to official musk deer censuses, there were sixty-one musk deer in the Kedarnath sanctuary in 2001 and sixty-three in 2003. In 2005 the number in the sanctuary dropped to thirty-seven. Questions were raised on the rapid depletion of the population of musk deer especially in the knowledge that this species is highly vulnerable to poaching. The male musk deer carries in his abdominal region a musk pod that is used in Chinese medicines. As the WWF has noted, musk is one of the most valuable products in the natural kingdom. One musk pod could sell for anything between \$70 and \$90, which is a small fortune when converted into Rupees for this impoverished region of India. Furthermore, the porous boundary with Nepal and the easy access to the Tibetan border makes Uttarakhand a hotspot for the smuggling of contraband animal substances. On a regular basis there would be reports of poachers and smugglers operating in Chamoli district with leopard and tiger skins and body parts as well as the musk pod constituting key smuggled substances. In contrast to this informal information, there had been only two officially reported cases of musk deer poaching from the Kedarnath musk deer sanctuary in the years preceding 2005. In an interview in 2005 explaining the dramatic drop in the musk deer numbers, a senior forest official cited "climactic conditions" as responsible for this phenomenon.² During my fieldwork in 2007, it came to light that there was only *one* deer left in the putative breeding center at Kanchula Kharakh. According to official estimates, between 1982 (when the center was established) and 2007, forty-two deaths took place in the center leaving a lone musk deer—a female named Pallavi—there. The causes of these deaths remained fuzzy with talk of lungworms and other infectious diseases contributing to the abject failure of the breeding center. As is the norm with the Indian state, a committee was appointed to study the mysterious deaths and the failure of the breeding center. A variety of experts from the Central Zoo authority of India, members of wildlife organizations such as the Wildlife Institute of India, the WWF, and other "deer specialists" came up to the district to investigate. The result of this expert study was to corroborate the account already provided in advance by the forest department, which was that the breeding center had failed due to "climate change." Let me quote directly from the official statement released by the official spokesperson for the forest department: "Climate change seems to have made Kanchula Kharakh no more suitable for musk deer breeding and could be the major reason behind the deaths."³

2. "Musk Deer too going Sariska Tiger's Way," *Times of India*, September 10, 2005.

3. "Bamboo Project to Rescue Musk Deer," *The Tribune* (Dehradun Edition), April 26, 2009. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090426/dplus.htm#1>.

Briefly, the argument put forth by the forest authorities was that the increase in temperatures caused by the changing climate was what killed off the musk deer. The recommendation made by the forest department was that the breeding center should be moved up to a higher altitude where the climate was more suitable for the proliferation of musk deer. When similar questions are asked of the almost total disappearance of musk deer from the sanctuary as well, officials continue to routinely allude to the impact of climate change rather than to extraneous causes such as poaching. The musk deer is characterized, almost in Victorian terms, as “shy,” “delicate,” and particularly susceptible to the Indian heat. The shyness and delicate constitution of the musk deer also makes them incapable of, it is believed, adapting to global warming. In addition to the increasing temperatures, the depletion of its preferred nourishment—a bush called *Kedarpati* (*Skimmia*)—was identified. *Kedarpati* grows at a height of 6,000 to 10,000 feet (the same altitude as musk deer inhabit) and prized by locals for its medicinal values and for its use in the making of incenses. With soil erosion, higher temperatures, and increased utilization by locals, *kedarpati* too is becoming harder to find.⁴ This lack of natural nourishment coupled with greater heat is, according to official accounts, leading to the rapid disappearance of the “delicate” musk deer from the Kedarnath musk deer sanctuary. Interestingly enough, this particular narrative on climate change was arrived upon by a few forest divisions *before* the “expert” committee comprising WWF and related organizations made their way up to the sanctuary. The only role they appeared to have played in the production of this narrative was to rubber stamp a predetermined “expert” opinion.

Local narratives, though, vehemently disagreed with this explanation for the vanishing of musk deer from their district. They described a past in which one could on a daily basis see musk deer sauntering around the district including its large towns and villages. The deer were considered rather gregarious instead of shy, for they were unfazed by humans and the urban environs of Gopeshwar. Instead of focusing on climactic conditions as the cause for the disappearance of musk deer, they identified two problems. The first was the discourse of an “uncaring” state that is not interested in doing what it claims to be doing but instead ties itself up in the mechanical enactment of its paper-based activities. The musk deer is Uttarakhand’s state animal and according to their wildlife census data, there are 279 musk deer residing in the state at present. Yet, not a single one had been reportedly sighted in the Kedarnath sanctuary, which housed the majority of this number for the longest time. The presentation of a statistic, which possesses almost no correlation to reality was held up as yet another instance of the paper tiger that is the Indian state (Mathur 2015b). Within such an uncaring state made of a substance as dry and flimsy as paper, what chance, asked district residents, do animals like musk deer or tigers have of surviving? Directly related to the uncaring Indian state was the second factor of poaching and the illegal trafficking of animals across the Indian border to China. The smuggling takes place through Nepal or Tibet (or both) and is known to be a highly lucrative trade, one that is often aided and abetted by state

4. <http://hillpost.in/2012/10/10/musk-deer-facing-food-threat-in-uttarakhand/52469/latest-news/bhatt>. This article is an instance of the claim of musk deer being threatened by human consumption and depletion of the natural environment.

functionaries, particularly forest and police officers who are in charge of conserving and policing this highly endangered animal. Both these causes—an uncaring state that is consumed by its own paper-based activities as well as a rampant trade of musk pods—were quite at odds with the climate change narratives that officials were eager to pronounce as the root cause underlying the disappearance of musk deer from its own sanctuary and the breeding center. Officials would shrug off the uncaring state label by saying that the *paharis* are fond of complaining about the state irrespective of reality. On the poaching and smuggling of the musk pods across the international border with state abetment there was intense discomfort within the state. They could not deny that this is a common practice in the district for there is ample evidence—visual, documentary, and oral—to support this. However, they staunchly denied that their own functionaries like the forest guards or the workers at the breeding center or policemen had anything to do with this unsavory and illegal activity; this was nothing but the product of the paranoid imagination of the locals, it was a conspiracy theory against the state.

The inexplicably aggressive Himalayan black bear

The final case study is that of the Himalayan black bear. In the district archives, I was surprised to find a large number of petitions from victims of attacks by bears. A large number of cases of random assaults by bears on humans and even more frequently ones of wanton destruction of crops and fruit orchards were filed away. Petitions described these attacks on humans as tragically senseless for they were unprovoked and did not really result in any obvious benefit to the bear, quite unlike with the leopards that were seeking nourishment. Again, it is hard to find precise statistics on the number of attacks but it was evident from just the sheer number of petitions that the demands for compensation, if not attacks themselves, were on the upswing. One estimate shows that from just one reported bear attack in 1989–90, the number shot up to sixteen in 1992–93.⁵ While attacks by big cats are a problem in other regions of India as well, and is better documented and discussed, given the small territorial area of the Asiatic black bear there is less awareness of this issue and, concomitantly, lower state funding to manage it. The district did not possess a large enough budget to meet all the demands for attacks by bears. This lack of financial resources to combat the human-bear conflict in the district was becoming problematic. The district officials, especially the foresters, were forwarding on details of these cases to their superiors in the capital but to no avail.

Given the increasing volume of complaints of attacks on humans by bears it was decided by district officials that they would have to take the problem seriously. A meeting was called of district officials and a letter penned to the state capital putting forth the rise in attacks on humans and the destruction of their property by wild bears. This upswing in attacks by wild bears on humans was adjudged to be arising from “climate change.” The rationale, basically, went that it has now become so hot even up in the Upper Himalaya that the bears have been “driven mad” (*pagal*

5. <http://www.carnivoreconservation.org/files/actionplans/bears.pdf>. Pg. 206. Accessed January 3, 2014.

ho gaye hai) by the heat and are, therefore, indulging in random and inexplicable acts of violence such as mauling humans. Climate change with its central facet of global warming, again, marked an entry in this case in order to find a “rational,” “scientific” reason for this increasingly bizarre behavior by the bears, and, simultaneously, to devise a means whereby they could convince their superiors of the gravity of the problem so that funds could be released for this cause. While I remain unsure about whether this petitioning for greater funds to deal with the bears has yet reaped any benefits for the district, what was noteworthy here was how climate change allowed the officials to make a legitimate claim from the higher echelons of the state. Officials told me how they have been wrestling with this bear problem for the longest time and had been unable to arrive at any conceivable reason for the increase in attacks. Given the lack of a rational narrative on these incidents they had been unable to do anything. But now, as they had adduced and agreed that “climate change” could explain the otherwise inexplicable behavior of the bears, they could actually do something.

Contrastingly, the explanatory version that was stemming from district residents did not allow for similar, prompt, doable state action. According to residents, the bears were “going mad” too but not because of global warming. Their madness was stemming from the general exploitation and neglect of their habitat by humans and the neglectful Indian state. This narrative mimicked and reproduced precisely the same trope of exploitation of the Himalayas that was present in the statehood movement of the 1990s. However, given the fact that the state had been ceded in 2000 and the residents of the upper Himalaya continued to feel deprived and exploited in the new, putatively “mountain state,” talks of conspiracy had begun to percolate the public sphere. They came out most strongly in the intense suspicion with which the residents of the district observed the new state—Uttarakhand—handing over natural resources to corporate groups. To give an example, I was one evening returning from a trip to a village along the border with Tibet and stopped for tea at a roadside tea stall (*dhaba*). I was in what is called a “shared Sumo” or a large Sumo jeep that is shared between—in this case—twelve people. We were all squeezing ourselves back into the taxi to head back to Gopeshwar when a large black bear lumbered onto the road. Terrified, we all tumbled in and the driver locked the doors and turned off the headlights. We sat in silence watching the bear slowly amble down the road and then start climbing up the mountain again. At this point we heaved a collective sigh of relief and the driver started the car and we began speeding home. All the way back to Gopeshwar, I was told stories about the madness (*pagalpan*) of bears and how much more *pagal* they have become in recent times. When I asked what has contributed to the increased madness of bears I was regaled with stories that had to do not so much with the bears but more with the destruction of this region through state and corporate policies. A very specific example was provided to me as we sped along in the darkness of a large hydroelectric project owned by Jaypee Industries that has led to a 14-km dam on the river Alaknanda. We were driving adjacent to the dammed portion of the river so occupants of the taxi were expressively gesticulating and beseeching me to just observe how their beautiful river has been dammed up in grey concrete ugliness. They compared the previously free-flowing nature of the river (and the fact that in Hindu mythology this is a sacred space due to its association with the god Vishnu)

with the signs of corporate invasion (for there was Jaypee painted on blocks and the roads all around us). Using the dam as an example of the barefaced exploitation of the natural resources by the state and corporations working in tandem, the taxi occupants went on to speak of how there is increasing poverty and unemployment all around. They gave names of people they knew, family or friends, who had—just like the bears—gone mad (*pagal ho gaye hai*) with their sorry plights. The bears are like humans in the sense that they don't like seeing their natural environment being destroyed by things like ugly dams or mining or commercial deforestation. But, sadly, they take it out on innocent humans by mauling them or destroying their farms and property. Instead of pointing to an abstracted category of “climate change,” which is hard to locate in specific institutions or persons, what the co-occupants of my taxi were narrating that evening were accounts of bears who had gone mad because of particular practices, which are rooted in a long history of exploitation of the Himalayas but are currently being exacerbated under the state-corporation nexus. This corporatization of the resources of the district was seen as an active conspiracy by the state to destroy the natural environment. The maddening of the bears was discussed as a response to this conspiracy but, of course, when I mentioned this theory to the foresters and senior district bureaucrats it was laughed off as yet another “conspiracy theory.”

What changes with climate change?

The category of “climate change” was officially brought into circulation in Chamoli district through a series of deductive exercises undertaken by senior state functionaries. Specific incidences of human-animal conflict and the disappearance of an endangered species were interpreted as related to climate change understood in its broadest sense as changes in climate conditions. At a very microlevel then, we can see how official knowledge about effects of changes in the climate are produced at specific conjunctures and subsequently relayed through the bureaucratic state hierarchy. The process described above supports Ulrich Beck's argument (2010) that the discourse on climate politics remains so far an expert and elitist one. A robust body of anthropological work has demonstrated the results of seemingly progressive elite environmental policies/politics to be counterproductive or harmful (Baviskar, Sinha, and Philip 2006; Shah 2010) and, even, outrightly coercive (Peluso 1993). They have convincingly shown how a systemic misrepresentation of the environmental conditions of specific places has taken place as well as the extremely detrimental effects policies based on these distorted understandings have had (Fairhead and Leach 1996; Humphrey and Sneath 1999). Similarly, the exclusionary and antihumanist effects of the seemingly benign project of wildlife conservationism have been powerfully demonstrated, especially in the Indian case (Guha 2005; Saberwal and Rangarajan 2005). This article is in conversation with these works to the extent that it is outlining the hegemonic power acquired by “climate change” to be pulled in as a neat and ready explanation by local elites. When it comes to studying the effects of the discourse of climate change, however, the ethnographic evidence presented here pushes it in a different direction. Building

on the ethnography, I locate the difference within certain characteristics of climate change as a concept, discourse, and call to act upon the world.

In the first place there is, as Mike Hulme puts it, a real “plasticity” to climate change. Climate change has, to quote him, “become a resourceful idea and a versatile explanation which can be moulded and mobilised to fulfil a bewildering array of political, social and psychological functions” (2010: 267). In the instances described above, climate change was fulfilling precisely a variety of different functions for the local state. In the case of the man-eating big cats, it became a mode whereby they could distance themselves from many citizen grievances such as the long period of waiting before the man-eater was killed, paucity of trained hunters, absence of basic equipment such as tranquilizers, guns, cages or traps, and a seemingly uncaring approach to the loss of human life (Mathur 2014). In the case of the musk deer, according to local residents, climate change became a convenient cover for poaching, something that cannot, and indeed does not, take place without state complicity. Thus climate change was covering up different sorts of misdoings of the local state—perceived inefficiencies/apathy in the first case and illegal flows in the second. With the case of attacks by bears, however, there was something quite different in play. Climate change was used as a ploy to attract attention to what has been a long-standing but unrecognized problem as it plagues only the very marginal and limited areas of the upper Himalaya. Agents of the state were actively trying to harness the persuasive power of climate change to produce a language that would be understood and accepted by their superiors sitting in the distant state capital. The objective here was to win some recognition and compensation for the people affected by wild bears through the crafting of a well-understood narrative. An elite and expert discourse it may very well be but in this very limited case climate change was being utilized to win rights for a subaltern grouping. There is something peculiarly persuasive about climate change, especially when solemnly pronounced by formalized institutions such as states or international bodies. This faculty of persuasiveness is intrinsically linked to the authority and aura of science. Even Naomi Klein appears to be in thrall of climate science when she writes in her hugely feted book:

We can debate the legacy of colonialism, and we can argue about how much slavery shapes modern underdevelopment. But the science of climate change doesn’t leave much room for that kind of disagreement. Carbon leaves an unmistakable trail, the evidence etched in coral and ice cores. We can accurately measure how much carbon we can collectively emit into the atmosphere and who has taken up what share of that budget over the past two hundred years or so. (2014: 415)

Let us put aside the extremely disturbing statement on colonialism and slavery, the legacies of which have been painstakingly etched out in multiple arenas of life and for all corners of the world in a vast corpus of writing and research. What this statement, and in fact much of *This changes everything*, implies is that somehow the “science” of climate change has, as the activist slogans go, ended the debate. But in fact climate change continues to invite skepticism, doubt, denial, and conspiracy theorizing (Moore 2014; Oreskes and Conway 2010; Runciman 2014). However, when invoked by modernizing state officials who pride themselves on their scientific

rationality, climate change acquires an unassailable potency. The very same individuals would publically and officially invoke climate change as an explanation would also—in private, off-the-record conversations or throwaway words—indicate their confusion, skepticism, and even outright dismissal of actually existing or soon-to-be-arriving climate change. Muck like Klein, the state functionaries I worked with would openly dispute the pernicious effects of colonial or postcolonial rule for the Himalaya, but they never, publically and on record, proclaimed their lack of belief in climate change.

To add to the authoritativeness of scientific discourse of climate change is the space of the Himalaya, which has for long been steeped in a crisis narrative. As Jack Ives (2004) shows in his brilliant *Himalayan perceptions*, from the 1970s onward there was what he aptly terms a “myth of Himalayan environmental degradation” that took root. Regardless of the nation-state, a pan-Himalayan perception took hold of the mountain range teetering on the brink of an environmental disaster. Ives notes that there was little real scientific research that supported this disaster/degradation narrative and, furthermore, this myth led to a neglect of other human-induced policies and practices that were in fact seen to be more harmful for the mountains. The climate change narrative I describe for this little bit of the Indian Himalaya bears striking similarity to and draws ideological support from precisely this perception of the Himalaya as forever on the brink of environmental disaster. The mortifying Himalayagate blunder by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) can be read as yet another manifestation of this now-longstanding narrative of imminent crisis.⁶ State officials and developmental professionals aside, even academic writing of the highest order is not immune to unthinkingly ascribing a range of phenomena to climate change. Sample this throwaway sentence by Dipesh Chakrabarty:

There is the widely accepted point that humans have been putting pressure on other species for quite some time now; I do not need to belabor it. Indeed, the war among animals such as rhinoceroses, elephants, monkeys, and big cats may be seen everyday in many Indian cities and villages. (2014: 13)

This sentence, nestled within an otherwise elegant and thoughtful essay on the conjoined histories of capital and climate, conjures up a rather bizarre image of suitably exotic animals engaged daily in an apocalyptic Disneyfied Jungle Book war all over India. Imagery aside, its link to climate change and human population pressure—the reasons cited by Chakrabarty—are debatable. As a rich wildlife and environmental history of South Asia has shown human-animal conflict, animal “wars,” as well as species extinction can be traced far back in time and are driven by a range of factors of which human population pressure is not necessarily an important one (see, for example, Rangarajan and Sivaramkrishnan 2011). To reiterate,

6. In 2007 a report by the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC) claimed that all Himalayan glaciers might melt by 2035. The government of India rubbished the report as alarmist and unscientific. Subsequent to further investigation into this claim, the IPCC had to retract it and admit to mistakes in the quotation and research process that had resulted in this projection. See: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8387737.stm>.



the point is not that different species are not already coping with damaging consequences of climate change.⁷ Rather, I am arguing for a situated specificity to such claims, which do not rely solely on easily available narratives of crisis or extinction, particularly for regions such as the Indian Himalaya that already carry a historic burden of such depictions (Ives and Messerli 1989; Ives 2004).

Climate change becomes authoritative, it has been argued, when uttered and dexterously utilized by the state. Interestingly, however, it continues to lack, at this particular moment in time at least, the capacity to directly and immediately intervene in the everyday lives of Himalayan residents in the manner that environmental or conservationist policies and programs possess. This trait of lack of immediate actionability around climate change will probably not remain on for much longer.⁸ It therefore becomes even more important to record what happens when climate change first makes its debut as a recognizable and state-endorsed category. In all the three cases discussed above, climate change did different sorts of work, so to say, after its introduction. While the turn to climate change might have allowed the state in certain cases to escape direct culpability, it has not, at least thus far, made for noticeable interventions in the lives of the residents of this region. To say that big cats are eating humans because of climate change did allow the state to produce a seemingly rational reason for an otherwise still-puzzling phenomenon, but that was all. Thus, it did not lead to state officials doing nothing to protect humans or kill the big cat for they did, indeed, follow a particular procedure to handle the man-eater and this procedure has been in place since the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 (Mathur 2014). Furthermore, it remains unclear what the state—or any other agency/person—can really do to prevent man-eating big cats given their historical existence in India and the ambiguity over the reasons that makes them turn on humans.⁹ The climate change explanation then remained just that, an official explanation that could be either accepted or, as was the case, rejected by citizens but neither had any practical implications. The case of the musk deer is more pernicious for if the counternarrative is to be believed and there is strong

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7. See, for instance, a recent study (Adve 2014) that demonstrates an ongoing and startling change in species ranges as they move their spaces of habitation in order to adapt to global warming. Nagraj Adve makes the important point that most discussions on climate change or global warming are almost entirely anthropocentric and neglect to mention impact on varied species as manifest in this startling phenomenon of species “moving home.”
 8. This is partly due to the briskly expanding levels of awareness and activism around climate change in India. Additionally, India’s participation in international climate regime and the commitments it has grudgingly signed up to require even greater intervention in order to “mitigate,” “adapt,” and other such verb-forms arising from a new climate change lingo. Perhaps in anticipation of this new form of climate action, India’s nodal Ministry of Environment and Forests in New Delhi, which is a direct postcolonial successor to the Imperial Forest Department set up in the latter half of the nineteenth century by the British colonial state, has just recently been tellingly renamed the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change.
 9. For an evocative description of different steps undertaken in the Sundarbans by the forest department in order to combat man-eating tigers see Ghosh (2004: 240–42).

evidence supporting this claim, then the attribution of climate change allowed for a cover-up to take place. However, this cover-up of poaching and smuggling across the border while not being desirable, does not really affect the locals in any manner other than indirectly through the depletion of biodiversity. Furthermore, the fact of poaching and trafficking of animals and their body parts and state complicity in the process is a “public secret” in Uttarakhand. Everyone knows it happens but nobody knows quite how to fully put a stop to it. With the bear attacks, climate change might actually end up benefiting the local residents if the district is able to win compensatory funding for victims of attacks.

Perhaps the most detrimental effect that the marshaling of climate change by the district bureaucracy had was a partial suppression of the counternarratives through their colloquial categorization and, hence, quick dismissal as “conspiracy theories.” The suppression was only partial because accounts of poaching and cross-border smuggling of animals and herbs with state abetment is ever-present in the popular media, NGO reports, activist lobbying, as well as among the higher echelons of the state itself. Similarly, the account of a systematized form of neglect coupled with strategic exploitation of the Himalayas is one that has a very long history in this region. The ongoing disappointment with the still-new mountain state of Uttarakhand is also being expressed at a variety of forums such as public hearings, petitions, vernacular newspapers, and activist reporting. What was being really lost, in my opinion, was the sheer poignancy of this discontent, the expressivity of the angry helplessness that the counternarratives tragically express. Anthropologists have mined what are termed conspiracy theories not for their truth-value but as instances of subaltern speech. Didier Fassin, for instance, sees conspiracy theories as a means to “express social imaginaries and political anxieties that remain unspeakable or unheard” (2011: 41). Discontentment with plainspeople, state representatives, and corporate extraction is self-evident in the counternarratives proposed in the cases of the big cats, musk deer, and bears respectively. My interest here lies in pointing out a key tactic of power: the act of labeling and terming narratives as “conspiracy theories” (see Briggs 2004: 181). By pressing in the scientific and rationalized authority emanating from “climate change” and opposing it to the paranoia and absurdity associated with “conspiracy theories,” practices of state categorization allowed for the narratives emanating from anxiety, anger, and very real material deprivations to remain unheard and for the state to remain unaccountable.¹⁰

A paper on new categories, concepts, and climate change cannot end without discussing the rapidly popularizing concept of the Anthropocene. Much contemporary writing is arguing that the Anthropocene has the capacity to reinvigorate the discipline of anthropology for a range of reasons that have been nicely pulled together by Bruno Latour (2014). The Anthropocene enables certain attractive and important discussions: questions of anthropological engagement (e.g., Stoller 2014); capacity to make us rethink capitalism and the writing of history (Chakrabarty 2009, 2014); and its reexamination of disciplinary boundaries/

10. For an argument along similar lines see Shalini Randeira (2003) who describes the Indian state as “cunning” for the manner in which it renders itself unaccountable through a self-description as weak even as it outsources environmental governance measures to other bodies.



production of anthropological knowledge (Latour 2014). The Anthropocene allows for the creation of what Chakrabarty (2009: 222) has described as “an us” or a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe. This “us,” however, is notably absent in the narratives and processes I describe in this article. On the contrary, the so-called conspiracy theory narratives all point to very real inequalities and distinctions between humans—state and citizen; plains and mountains; those centrally enfolded into capital and illegal flows and those on the margins; and so on—that underpin the three case studies involving humans and animals. The most troubling aspect of the concept of the Anthropocene is that it can potentially blind us or limit our attention to a cruelly obvious point viz. not only have the *paharis* with their almost nonexistent carbon footprint contributed the least to anthropic climate change, but they will still be the ones to most intensely suffer the consequences sans the privileges that might allow for coping with its effects. In a marvelous piece, Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg (2014) have demonstrated how the concept of the Anthropocene is ultimately dominated by the natural sciences and the dangers it holds of underplaying the deep divisions *between* the human species in time and space as well as making issues of culture and power secondary. It is precisely these unequal relations of power and privilege that have been central not just to what international environmental law and climate change negotiations describe as “common but differentiated responsibilities” (CBDR), but they will also continue to play out in the highly unequal impact of climate change and of subsequent coping capacities. In contrast to many others who are proclaiming the capacity of the Anthropocene to make us engage with the political moment of the day, Malm and Hornborg convincingly argue that Anthropocene narrative is not just “analytically defective” but also “inimical to action” (2014: 67). In keeping with this line of thought, my concern is that a concentration of attention on the Anthropocene might have the unintended effect of deflecting attention away from the study of climate change—as a concept and powerful mobilizer—intrinsically linked though the two might analytically be. If nothing else, this article serves to caution us against assuming a commonly shared understanding of climate change and its effects. Not only is there no singularity to the apprehension of what climate change is and how it impacts humans and nonhumans alike, but also, I have argued, the sort of political work it can do remains context-specific and differential. It is to this differentiated nature of climate change that an anthropology of climate change must remain keenly—ethnographically—alive.

In the final analysis, it is important to point out that climate change with its basis in international organizations, scientific bodies, the English language, graphs, studies, expert reports, international treaties, and the manner in which it has been marshaled by the Indian state, possesses a double-edged quality. The enmeshment of climate change in the authoritative universalism of science might be problematic as Jasanoff (2010) has noted but even as climate change, as demonstrated above, erases local specificities it can simultaneously usher in a new sort of political speech and action. This new type of political talk draws sustenance from the shift of scale to the global.¹¹ Climate change can release what Beck (2010) has described

11. It is this scale-shifting nature of climate change as well as the sense of urgency associated with it that leads Susan Crate (2011) to make a case for “climate ethnography.”

as a “cosmopolitan momentum” or the revelation of the interconnectedness of the present day world. As Beck writes, “geographically remote spaces become literally perceptible, ‘knowable’ places of possible concern and action” (2010: 261). The Himalayas primarily figure in mainstream accounts in India as the distant and supposedly natural frontier of the nation. A perennial grouse of this Himalayan region has been, as mentioned more than once above, that it remains simultaneously neglected and exploited within the bounds of the postcolonial Indian state. Climate change narratives, particularly those related to the dangers of the melting of the Himalayan glaciers has brought a new, gentler form of attention to this space. This attention might be stemming from the manner in which, as David Lipset (2014) has argued, place in the Anthropocene becomes a dark site of impending tragedy. Yet it does allow for the Himalayas to become a common, pan-Indian and, indeed, a global cause of concern. “Global Risks,” of which the retreat of Himalayan glaciers is a significant one, are gaining increasing attention and causing more concern.

In my research on human-big cat conflict in India, I have found it noteworthy that the “problem” receives a surprisingly large amount of media and public attention when it is refracted through the lens of climate change.¹² As Rebecca Cassidy has pointed out, “changes in human relationships with animals has been one of the key drivers for the increased attention paid to climate change in many regions” (2012: 22). She points to the Arctic and island and coasting fishing communities, but there is a similar rising interest in both the Himalayas and charismatic megafauna, especially big cats. The large number of articles in the international media on human-animal conflict are evidence of the latent potential of the discourse of climate change to make issues of human-animal relations in hitherto marginalized areas more widely accessible and, crucially, of concern to everyone not just those who are being targeted by these animals.¹³ Furthermore, while the disappearance of a species has been considered problematic ever since the rise of conservationism, with the relatively recent linking up to climate change, this too has become an issue of global concern. There is a consensus within climate science that while risks, vulnerability, adaptive capacities, and level of impact do vary across regions, what is really critical is the fact of the interconnectedness of the world. How the inherently global concept of climate change is ultimately “channeled” (Broad and Orlove 2007) remains to be seen. The potential remains for this newly emergent category in the Indian Himalaya with its focus on the global and the interlinking of spaces and actions to acquire more of a, to use a context-appropriate metaphor, bite.

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12. For example, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/jan/29/sunderbans-disappearing-mangrove-india-bangladesh>.

13. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-21069750>.



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“C’est une théorie du complot et le changement climatique”: A propos de rencontres bestiales et de disparitions cervines dans l’Himalaya Indien

Résumé : Cet article retrace l’introduction de la catégorie “changement climatique” dans l’Himalaya Indien. Le changement climatique fit son apparition comme explication dans le contexte d’incidences récurrentes de conflits opposant les humains aux animaux et dans le cadre de la disparition d’espèces protégées, grâce au travaux de la bureaucratie étatique locale. Alors que les récits impliquant le changement climatique étaient bénéficiaient de l’expertise d’une autorité étatique, des contre-récits au sujet des mêmes phénomènes émis par des résidents de longue date de la région furent sommairement évacués par l’état et traités comme des théories du complot. Cet article tente de donner autant d’espace à ces deux types de récits et présente les effets de la force explicative du changement climatique dans les Himalayas. Fondé sur une étude ethnographique au sujet d’humains, de grands félins, d’ours et de moscidés, l’article est partisan d’une attention ethnographique accrue au travail politique fait au nom du changement climatique. Cet article interroge également la portée analytique du concept d’Anthropocène et conclut en soulignant les principales caractéristiques du changement climatique en tant que concept et en tant qu’appel à l’action.



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