Changemakers for the Future

The IKEA Foundation has supported many organisations over the years to accelerate their work on protecting our planet from climate change. Facts and figures speak for themselves – but who exactly are the people that are doing this extraordinary work?

In this storytelling series we highlight some brave individuals that shift mountains in climate action work. They all work with one vision in mind: to save our beautiful planet.

‘The greatest tool against climate change is a tree’

Raveej Goyal

I grew up in Long Island, New York. In sixth grade, school took us to the Frost Valley mountains upstate New York. In just two days we were in deep nature. It was so transformative... this has been a turning point for me. It's the source of why I care about wild nature.

I first went to Nepal in 2001 as a Peace Corps volunteer. I went to this little village called Namjay in the eastern hills. There I was a teacher in the course of my peace corps service. Nature at that time was seen as holding people back from ‘development’. The focus was about how to build roads, how to pave over landscapes, how to bring electricity. It's kind of a very simplified two dimensional thought about what development was.

I worked in Nepal for about a decade, most on community development projects: building water projects, schools, libraries, kind of the more traditional things. After ten years of seeing all the biocultural fabric eroding, I went to Cornel University to study plant science. Throughout my master, and based on my experience as peace corps teacher in Nepal, I started to think of the power of the education system. I looked at the question: what is the role of governmental schools and teachers and children in protecting the biodiversity? Because I think in most of the places around the world education is really not working. It's just a generic system. Especially in the tropics we need to tie education to biodiversity a lot more. As I started to think about that I thought: what if you had these learning grounds and you connected them? We completely re-thought education. The first idea of ‘verticality’ was born.
Farmers are the professors
We created The Vertical University Project as a kind of experiment back in 2014. The core concept of the project is that the farmers are the professors. We are not consulting enough to people who live in the landscape who produce food, whether they're fishermen or yak herders, farmers, foragers. These people often know every kind of corner of their landscape and they've been adapting to change for millennia. But their knowledge isn't really being harnessed in terms of how we can save biodiversity, how we can think about more holistic living.

The term ‘Vertical’ is related to the heterogeneous rise of the Himalayas, with all it's different habitats that have given rise to so many different life forms in just 120 mile vertical corridor. Everything was so divergent; in the plains you could have very different kinds of education about elephants and about tropical birds whereas in the highlands you could have education about red panda and blue sheep and snow leopard, and in the middle hills you could have education about rhododendron forests.

Learning Grounds
There are 20,000 schools in Nepal and 7-million young people living there. Everywhere you see forest being fractured. Roads coming in, even in places where there's no business building a road, largely driven by greed as people want hydropower or they want to extract something. They view nature through this incredibly commodified lens, you know, in terms of materials. All of these things that we see as geology they see as building materials or as energy that can be harnessed, and it's often driven by immense amounts of greed of individuals.

The simple idea that we came up with is the Learning Grounds. Basically, it's identifying these last kind of little jewels of biodiversity that are nestled in the mountain landscape, even if they're small, even if they're a half an acre, an acre, - and just turn them into a public Learning Ground so that they cannot be overrun with a road.

We were trying to find ‘beyuls’, as called in Tibetan language: hidden gems or villages. hidden by God, in the Tibetan meta-belief system. We wanted to create them as Learning Grounds, and then connect them to one another across a vertical radian. In this way you create these sort of living classrooms, where young people can learn the knowledge of the elders and where this corridor can connect, which is very positive for biodiversity which needs connectivity.

We obtained some shipping containers, which had been discarded and we created this kind of green classroom which Priyanka Bista, co-founder and architect, designed. We created green roofs and vertical gardens. It was just a tiny little piece of land, but it showed an alternative future. Then we started to bring 6th to 8th graders in every Friday and Sunday for a few hours. We invited them to come into this container space, watch documentaries and learn about forest interrelationships. When I saw how design can be, can attract young people to look through a lens of nature and really
inspire young kids, that was really the powerful thing. How you saw them get so passionate about pangolins or about monitor lizards or going home and telling their parents about why they shouldn't hunt pangolin.

Over the last six years we purchased land parcels as Learning Grounds. This hasn't been easy. We assembled a 900 acre of pangolin sanctuary, piece by piece, fighting a lot of battles. At one point it seemed like even the community was not understanding why we were doing this. But once it was created and you had a look at the landscape, which was fully intact... Being able to actually save the land from being overrun, even if it's small even, that was a really powerful feeling.

**Challenges**

I'm a pretty resilient person but, sometimes I think: “Oh gosh, why did I take this on?” We were in the middle of a very complex country and political moment. Trying to bring this very idealistic project alive has not always been very easy. Such as what happened in Papung, which is at the top of the Vertical University - situated between the third and fifth tallest peaks in the world. It's a place with several hundred beautiful high altitude lakes and with a lot of important wildlife inhabits as it migrates between the national parks. Including the very iconic snow leopard. It is as of yet road less, but there was about nine hydropower projects being planned to. Because of water richness, there were a lot of companies trying to get in there, build roads and then build these hydropower projects. We developed really creative ideas, use the Learning Ground ideas, to try to stop that, and this invited the anger of a lot of very powerful people in the country. Suddenly, we were a real threat. A lot of these extractors and hydropower companies buy out people in the village. This was all new for me. They will come after you in the media or do anything that they can to crush your soul because there is so much money's at stake. Those battles really frightened me. It's really scary, because you have a team and as a co-founder, you're trying to guard the reputation of the organization. I think a lot of that doesn't get seen or noticed.

**Greta Thunberg**

Around the time we were trying to protect the Papung landscape, the community leaders were also not sure that they wanted to protect these snow leopard lakes. Maybe it was better to build the hydropower, they thought, so there would be development in their communities. Around that time, Greta Thunberg was all over the news. We showed those videos and these Nepalese men and women in the room, and they started weeping, saying 'it's our turn to do something'. That's when they started to cooperate.

I am very proud of the fact that we protected highlands that are now forever roadless. We provided an alternative which could compete with those really high stakes economic, extractive alternatives. The argument we made was, that every inch of the landscape gets infiltrated with roads, those areas that don't have roads will become
valuable, there will innate value in that. So why don't we try to brand the last roadless parts of the Himalayas as kind of high value, low footprint? Like a ‘glamping’ model, where not many people get to go there, a deep, wild nature experience, and you charge more for it. We came up with this idea of building a roadless ecotourism network in Papung working with the local leaders of the land. We created a model which the community likes because they're going to get a lot of benefit out of it. An average tourist might pay 15 or 20 dollars a day for trekking, but here you will have to pay several hundred dollars a day to go there, as a kind of bio cultural tax. We did it through leveraging a kind of new powers that are embedded within the new federal governments. So it's actually a local declaration that was done by the local municipality.

These kinds of legislative creativity makes me really proud. In the west there are communities that have contacted us where there's roadless landscapes. They said ‘hey, we heard about this and we also want to declare even bigger landscapes’. So we sent a team out to investigate there and provide some research support.

**Future**
The Vertical University has many challenges ahead, but if in 20 years from now, there are even several hundred children who are coming into the Learning Grounds at different elevations and once a week taking a class that brings them into nature, takes them out of the classroom, having them touching the soil and smelling the leaves and learn about biodiversity across these different stages, that makes me feel really hopeful. But I've never been involved in something so difficult, I must say.

**10 Minutes at COP26**
If I'd had 10 minutes to speak to all the world leaders at COP 26, I would say that the greatest tool against climate change is a tree. Nature is very powerful and if we just give it the space and we leave it alone and respect it like as our ancestors did, it'll solve climate change for us.

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**ABOUT RAJEEV AND THE VERTICAL UNIVERSITY**
Rajeev Goyal, co-founder and -director of the Vertical University in Nepal. His organisation KTK-BELT is one of the Climate Action Challenge winners of What Design Can Do in 2017

The Vertical University Project tries to create a continuous biocultural heritage corridor in Nepal, from Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve in the plains all the way to Kanchenjunga at 8,586 meters, the third tallest peak in the world. The objective is to present an arc of life, of culture, biodiversity and to address all of the land use change and the issues of deforestation that the country is facing. [https://www.theverticaluniversity.org/](https://www.theverticaluniversity.org/)