On 31 October 2011 Dr Pralad Yonzon was returning home from his office at Resources Himalaya in Sanepa; as he pedaled along the Ring Road near Balkhu, his bicycle was rammed by a heavy truck, and he was killed almost instantly. With the tragic demise of Dr Pralad Yonzon, Nepal has lost a top-class scientist, a true patriot and a wonderful human being. The Himalayan region has lost a dedicated conservationist who believed that it is the continued practice of “good” science based on rigorous evidence that can secure the Himalayan environment for future generations. Pralad was by far one of the finest field biologists in this part of the world.

I first met Pralad about 38 years ago at the TU campus in Kirtipur. I had just started my teaching career at the Department of Geography and Pralad was doing his Masters in zoology. He was doing some research and wanted advice on mapping. Even at that time I was struck by his single-mindedness and his seriousness in research. After completing his Masters with a gold medal Pralad began his career as a field biologist with the Smithsonian Institute’s Nepal Tiger Ecology Project. He was with the project for nearly four years. Later he taught at Tri-Chandra College, and was also associated with the Natural History Museum. This experience led him to found Resources Nepal, an independent research and training institute in 1986. In 2004 Resources Nepal was transformed into Resources Himalaya Foundation (RHF), a non-profit organization dedicated to environmental research and mentorship of a new generation of scientists. Linking new knowledge in conservation biology and social sciences to triangulate issues related to environmental conservation and livelihoods is the stock-in-trade of Resources Himalaya.

In 2005 impressed by Pralad’s vision and pragmatism, I agreed to join the Governing Board of Resources Himalaya. Under Pralad’s dynamic and innovative leadership Resources Himalaya has completed nearly 200 small and large research projects in Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. Studies on the status of Nepal’s Red Panda, the ACAP management plan, the first ever Rhino count in Nepal, the Nepal Biodiversity Action Plan, the Snow Leopard and Elephant Conservation Action Plans, a ten volume study on the ecology and conservation plans for the Churia ranges, a GIS data base for Nepal’s Conservation areas, studies and Management Plans for the conservation areas and national parks of Bhutan, biodiversity studies in Sikkim – Resources Himalaya has produced major milestones in the field of Himalayan conservation.

Pralad’s doctoral work on the habitat and status of the Red Panda in Nepal, based on an intensive two-year program of field work, is a landmark for its academic rigor and innovative use of GIS. His work in Bhutan, which spanned nearly a decade, was remarkable not only for the discovery of the Bengal Tiger at altitudes above 3000m, but also for the framework that he helped create for the management of newly created conservation areas and national parks. He also worked for some time in Vietnam and Indonesia, sharing his vast experience in the field of conservation biology.

In 1989 Pralad earned a PhD in wildlife biology from the University of Maine in the United States. Pralad chose to devote all his time in research, teaching and mentoring the new generation of conservationists. Creating science based new knowledge and using it for environmental conservation was his predominant motivation. Personal gain never figured in his approach to conservation; in fact, he often subsidized the activities of Resources Himalaya through his remunerations. For his work on conservation he was awarded the Order of the Golden Arc by the Government of the Netherlands in 2002. His alma mater, the University of Maine, honored him with the Distinguished Alumnus Award in 2007 and the Professional Excellence Award in 2008. He was the President of the Asia Section of the International Society of Conservation Biology for 2002–2006, a rare honour for a Nepali scientist. Resources Himalaya was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Award in 2007, largely for work that Pralad carried out through the institution. Pralad used the award money to build the Conservation Chautari, which today houses the Resources Himalaya Foundation.

Pralad’s experience with Nepal’s officialdom, the University and a variety of non-governmental organizations in the field of conservation taught him a simple but
unpalatable truth: that conservation was being used as a bait for attracting resources, while the real backbone of sustainable conservation – mentoring a competent, dedicated and conscientious younger generation – was being neglected. Through Resources Himalaya Pralad almost single-handedly guided the programme to mentor a generation of conservationists imbued with a scientific temperament, and dedicated to the cause of environmental conservation. He guided the Environmental Graduates in Himalaya (EGH), a network of environmental graduates that stands as a sister organization of the RHF in training and mentoring the younger generation. Today, well over 200 graduates have been mentored by Pralad, and nearly 20 are pursuing their doctoral studies in various Universities of the world. EGH members edit and publish a weekly environmental e-newsletter, Headlines Himalaya, which informs readers of new developments in environmental conservation in the Himalayan countries. It has nearly 3000 readers in over 70 countries around the world. Habitat Himalaya, another flagship publication of the RHF reports on contemporary conservation research, primarily by young scientists.

Mentoring was Pralad’s passion. As a teacher and researcher he was a role model for his students. He kept abreast of contemporary knowledge in conservation and wildlife biology and passed on the latest developments in the field to his students. He had the courage and the integrity to ask questions that were uncomfortable to many but were prompted by “good” science and by his vast experience in the field. In the realm of environmental and wildlife conservation Pralad truly was a “conscience keeper”, the rarest of breeds among Nepali conservation biologists.

Pralad was the resource par excellence of the Resources Himalaya Foundation. With his passing he leaves behind an institution and the legacy of dedicated hard work and mentoring of the younger generation of conservationists. We at Resources Himalaya are devoted to the cause that Pralad championed, and firmly believe that the life and work of Dr. Pralad Yonzon will inspire others to carry on the work of protecting our environment for all time.

Pramshu Sharma is the Chair of the Governing Board of the Resources Himalaya Foundation. He can be reached at prshiresh@gmail.org.

Bijaya Kattel

For many, Pralad Yonzon was a music lover who played guitar at Amrit Science College Hostel. For others, Pralad Yonzon was a straight shooter in environmental matters from developing conservation strategies to simply how to balance nature conservation with human development. For me, he was my best friend, whether we were counting deer or watching monkeys in the Gokarna Forest in the 1970s or conducting our dissertation research on endangered species in the Himalayas in the 1980s. He and I worked together in different capacities for the betterment of wildlife conservation in Nepal. I worked for the Government of Nepal and Pralad worked mostly as an independent conservationist. He established Resources Nepal, developed it into Habitat Himalaya, and ultimately Resources Himalaya. Resources Himalaya has become the leading conservation think tank for Nepal and many other countries. He has helped many conservation enthusiasts to grow and achieve their goals in life.

Dr Yonzon wrote a comprehensive first draft of the Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Planning for Nepal. Philippine Tortell and I finalized that document as the Conservation Strategy of Nepal by separating Strategy and Planning as separate components. Pralad and I worked together on several fronts of biodiversity conservation in Nepal. He realized how important GIS would become in the field of nature conservation, and he developed a GIS database for Protected Areas in Nepal in the early stage of GIS development. He was a relentless learner. He hungered not only to know the subject matter, but also to share that knowledge with others. He was an exceptional teacher.

Dr Yonzon was a giving person. I know that because of my association with him as a co-worker in the field of conservation and research in Nepal, as a roommate when we both started in a Colorado State University graduate program, and as a co-participant in many conservation forums. He was always thinking about how conservation of nature could improve livelihoods in remote areas. As a result of his tireless efforts in balancing conservation and poverty reduction, he was recognized with many prestigious awards.

Pralad’s untimely demise has left a great hole not only in the lives of his family and friends but also in the nature conservation sector. Let this sad event serve as a challenge to the next generation to continue his legacy of learning, giving and improving the lives of those who share our global ecosystem.

Kattel was Deputy Director General of Nepal’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (1995–1997). Currently, he is at South Florida Water Management District, Florida, USA.

A tribute to Pralad B Yonzon

Malcolm L Hunter, a professor at Department of Wildlife Ecology, University of Maine was Yonzon’s PhD adviser at the University of Maine.

Pralad Yonzon, colleague, friend, conservationist, student of Red Panda

Malcolm L Hunter

Pralad Yonzon is widely recognized as one of the leading conservation biologists in Asia, particularly as a mentor to students throughout the Himalayan region, but my relationship with him goes back to a period in the 1980s, when he was still a student himself. I first met Pralad in 1984 when he was working on a Master’s degree at Colorado State University, supported by a Fulbright scholarship, an honor that recognized several years of research on tigers in Chitwan National Park and on Himalayan pheasants. As his MS work was drawing to a close he started to explore opportunities for continuing for a PhD, and he wrote to me because I had done some work in the Indian Himalayas. He wrote with a compelling idea for a project on the red panda. Pralad knew that the red panda had received almost no attention from field researchers and might be in jeopardy because of habitat degradation. It was also a charismatic creature, arguably more adorable than the better known giant panda. More importantly, he saw that the red panda had the potential to become a flagship or umbrella species for high-altitude ecosystems throughout the Himalayas, perhaps filling the role of snow leopards in the alpine zone, and tigers and rhinos in the lowlands. I recognized that this was an unusually worthwhile idea for which we should be able to find sponsorship, and on that basis I convinced my colleagues to offer Pralad a teaching assistantship that would allow him to come to the University of Maine for a year to do his initial course work and pursue funding for his research.

We came to know each other quite well right from the beginning because Pralad, his wife Binita, and daughter Patanjali stayed with me in my small log cabin for a couple of weeks after arriving in Maine. A few months later Pralad and I made a trip to Washington, DC, to seek funding. Traveling on a shoestring budget, we ended up sharing a bed one night at the apartment of some friends who worked for the World Wildlife Fund. Thankfully he was not a snorer! The funding expedition was successful and a year later I was able to visit Pralad in Nepal, joining him for one of his first reconnaissance trips to Langtang National Park. It always made me smile when he introduced me to local people as his “papa,” for which in Nepal the word simply means “teacher,” in English the word connotes some kind of exotic spiritual guide. Wherever we were, it was always a pleasure to spend time with Pralad. He was a wonderful story teller with quite a repertory of tales from his adventures in the field; often they were misadventures, but he did not mind laughing at himself.

Imagine trying to conduct research from a tent in a Himalayan winter with heavy snows threatening to bury you, your crew, and equipment. To make a long story short, Pralad managed to undertake the first thorough field study of red pandas. And that was essentially the theme of his PhD work, which he completed in 1986 after working mostly in the Government of Nepal and Pralad worked mostly as an independent conservationist. He established Resources Nepal, developed it into Habitat Himalaya, and ultimately Resources Himalaya. Resources Himalaya has become the leading conservation think tank for Nepal and many other countries. He has helped many conservation enthusiasts to grow and achieve their goals in life.

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Conservation biologist Pralad Yonzon had an unusual ability to devise and adapt new methodologies aptly suitable for field work in the steep and rugged mountain terrain of the Himalaya. His career as a wildlife biologist would eventually lead him to be editor. Ultimately we then, the government has periodically conducted several annual rhino surveys, following the protocol developed by Pralad Yonzon.

In 1999 Resources Himalaya undertook to compile an ecological study of the elusive red panda (Ailurus fulgens). In revealing the ecology of this keystone species, Yonzon undertook groundbreaking research on the understudied Langtang Himal. This was his first ecological research as an independent researcher, and it earned him a PhD from the University of Maine (USA) in 1989 and shaped his professional career as a wildlife biologist. Long before that, however, he had already earned a reputation for careful observation as a field biologist for the Nepal Tiger Ecology project of the Smithsonian Institution, a position he assumed soon after graduating from Tribhuvan University in 1974.

In 1972 Nepal had established its first protected area, Chitwan National Park to provide sanctuary for the critically endangered Greater One-horned Rhinoceros (Rhinoceros unicornis), whose population had declined to below 100 due to poaching and habitat encroachment. Scientists and planners in Nepal and around the world were eager to know if the national park was contributing to the recovery of the rhinoceros. A study of rhinos dispersed in the flood-plain and foothills of a national park with an area of 932 km² was a formidable task. By 1990 there had been at least nine attempts to estimate the population of the rhino (Martin and Vigne 1986; some of these relied on estimation (e.g., Spillett and Tamang 1966, Laurie 1978), helicopter census (Caughley 1969, Pelinck and Caughley 1978), or other effective communications devices.

Dr Pralad Yonzon: Guru of field methodology

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I first met Pralad Yonzon in 1985, when he was a lecturer in Zoology and I was a Peace Corps Volunteer and lecturer at the Institute of Forestry. We quickly became friends, and I found his lifelong interest in conservation and rhinoceros research to be complimentary.

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