

## SUCCESS STORY: HOW FAITH-LED COMMUNITY ACTION IN 14 GALIYAT VILLAGES HELPED SAVE THE HIMALAYAN YEW

High in the moist temperate forests of Galiyat, the ancient Himalayan yew (*Taxus wallichiana*) – locally known as Barmi – was once on the brink of disappearing. This slow growing, medicinally valuable tree had been heavily cut for decades, not only for fuel and small timber but particularly for a deeply rooted local practice: using thick wooden planks made from yew to line graves.

A single burial required multiple planks, and each plank required mature yew trees that take more than a century to grow. As the population expanded and burial rates increased, the practice began quietly stripping the forests of one of their rarest species.

When WWF-Pakistan initiated the Coca-Cola funded Integrated Watershed Management Project in 2010, community dialogues across the Galiyat Range revealed that grave-related wood use was one of the primary drivers of local yew depletion.

Addressing this issue required a solution that was practical, affordable, respectful of tradition, and aligned with Islamic burial guidelines.



A mature Himalayan yew tree in the moist temperate forests of Nathiagali – once heavily targeted for grave planks

### A Culturally Rooted Solution: RCC Slabs

WWF introduced an innovation that was simple yet transformational: Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) slabs as substitutes for wooden planks. These slabs are durable, dignified, religiously acceptable, and require no forest cutting. To make the transition possible for all households, WWF provided seed money to 14 villages in Galiyat through their mosque committees. This funding was used to initiate local production of RCC slabs, managed by the mosques as transparent, community-owned systems.

The slabs were quickly accepted, villagers appreciated their durability, cost-effectiveness, and the fact that families no longer needed to procure timber during moments of grief. Soon, each of the 14 mosque committees established a graveyard management process and began maintaining a stock of RCC slabs for community use.

## Faith Leaders Inspire Change

The turning point came when imams and Khateebs began addressing the issue directly in Friday sermons. They reminded communities that cutting endangered trees is harmful and unnecessary, that Islam encourages the protection of creation, and that sparing a tree for future generations is an act of Sadaqah-e-Jariyah. These messages deeply resonated with local values and strengthened community resolve.

## Collective Action: A Community Ban on Cutting Yew

As the RCC system proved successful, the participating villages made a historic collective decision: they formally banned the cutting of *Taxus wallichiana* in their respective areas.

Village elders, mosque committees, and local forest users agreed that the traditional grave planks were no longer needed and that the yew trees – some centuries old – must be protected. The ban was fully community-enforced, requiring no external policing. Social pressure and religious commitment became powerful guardians of the forest.



Community meeting in a village of the Galiyat area discussing unsustainable harvesting of Himalayan yew

## Visible Ecological Recovery

Within a few years, tangible changes emerged:

- Cutting of *Taxus wallichiana* for graves dropped to zero in 14 villages.
- Households shifted permanently to RCC slabs without financial burden.
- Faith-based conservation norms became embedded in community behaviour.

Villagers began expressing pride in protecting the Himalayan yew as the old trees, reinforcing a sense of stewardship rooted in religious identity.

## A Model Worth Replicating

The Galiyat RCC slab initiative stands as one of WWF-Pakistan's most impactful examples of faith-led conservation. It shows how solutions that honour cultural norms, strengthen community institutions, and integrate Islamic teachings can succeed where conventional enforcement alone may fail.

By aligning faith, tradition, science, and community governance, the people of 14 Galiyat villages not only protected the Himalayan yew – they created a model that can now be scaled across the moist temperate forests of Hazara and beyond.



A piece of Himalayan yew wood traditionally used for lining graves – now fully replaced by RCC slabs in 14 villages.



RCC slabs prepared by local communities to replace the Himalayan yew wood.

More information: [www.wwfpak.org](http://www.wwfpak.org)