Carbon in the Clouds: Bhojpatra Forest as High- Altitude Climate Heroes

Lakshay Mokta[1]* and Muskan Sharma[2]*

[1]*Forest Research Institute deemed to be University, PO New Forest, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, PIN-248006, India*
[2]*Dr. Yashwant Singh Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, Nauni, Solan, HP, PIN-173230*

Corresponding Author
Lakshay Mokta and Muskan Sharma
Email: mokta6945@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Climate change mitigation finds a powerful ally in forest ecosystems, which serve as nature's lungs, sequestering atmospheric carbon and anchoring ecological stability. Among the towering peaks and remote valleys of the Western Himalayas, *Betula utilis*—the Himalayan birch—stands as a silent sentinel of both climate resilience and cultural heritage. This paper explores the extraordinary carbon sequestration potential of B. utilis, shedding light on biomass accumulation, soil organic carbon storage, ecological vulnerabilities, and urgent conservation strategies. Drawing from detailed field research and ecological evaluations, we unveil the role of *B. utilis* forests as formidable carbon sinks and call for focused conservation programs, sustainable utilization, and robust long-term monitoring to ensure their continued legacy in battling climate change.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of accelerating climate change, terrestrial vegetation has become a central pillar in global strategies to reduce carbon emissions. Forests—majestic, living systems—function as powerful carbon sinks, drawing in carbon dioxide (CO_2) through photosynthesis and storing it in their vast network of biomass and soils. Yet, within these natural marvels, high-altitude forests of the Himalayas often remain overlooked in the global carbon dialogue.

These elevated ecosystems, tucked within the rugged arms of the Western Himalayas, are more than just striking landscapes—they are sanctuaries of ancient biodiversity, home to species uniquely adapted to the extremes of altitude, temperature, and terrain. Towering above sea level in stoic silence, these forests are among the planet's most resilient carbon reservoirs, where every tree stands as a testament to nature's capacity for adaptation and endurance. Their role, however, has long been obscured by the veil of inaccessibility and scientific underrepresentation.

Enter *Betula utilis*, locally revered as Bhojpatra—a resilient, deciduous tree that dominates the alpine and subalpine zones between 2,700 and 4,500 meters. Perched on steep and rocky slopes, this species has long served humanity through its bark, once used as sacred writing parchment and medicine. Today, however, Bhojpatra faces increasing threats from human and climate-induced pressures.

This paper dives deep into the carbon sequestration prowess of B. utilis, offering a comprehensive view of its above-ground and below-ground contributions, while addressing the pressing ecological threats and the strategic management actions needed to preserve its invaluable legacy.

By shedding light on Bhojpatra's ecological importance, this study aims not only to elevate the species within scientific discourse but to inspire conservation efforts rooted in both traditional reverence and modern sustainability. As the climate crisis intensifies, safeguarding high-altitude species like *B. utilis* becomes not just an environmental imperative, but a moral one—ensuring that the Himalayan skies continue to cradle these carbon-storing giants for generations to come.

1. Botanical and Ecological Characteristics of Betula utilis

Betula utilis belongs to the family Betulaceae and is renowned for its white, papery bark and remarkable adaptability to cold environments. As a fast-growing pioneer species, it frequently dominates disturbed alpine ecosystems.

Morphology: This species can grow up to 20 meters tall, with thin, spreading branches. Its ovate, serrated leaves and bark that peels off in horizontal strips are characteristic features.

Adaptations: Exceptionally tolerant to frost, strong winds, and nutrient-poor soils, *B. utilis* often forms pure stands or grows alongside species such as Abies spectabilis and Rhododendron campanulatum.

Reproductive Ecology: While reproduction is primarily seed-based, natural regeneration is often limited due to harsh soil conditions, overgrazing, and unpredictable climate variability.

Ecologically, *B. utilis* plays a critical role in maintaining soil integrity, regulating local hydrological systems, and supporting diverse microhabitats essential for high-altitude flora and fauna.

2. Carbon Sequestration Potential

2.1 Above-ground and Below-ground Biomass: Research conducted in Larot (Himachal Pradesh) within mixed *Betula utilis* forests reveals significant carbon sequestration:

Above-ground biomass carbon: ~75.32 tC/ha

Below-ground biomass carbon: ~18.83 tC/ha

Understory vegetation carbon: ~11.38 tC/ha

Litter carbon: ~1.57 tC/ha

These figures highlight that *B. utilis* forests not only store substantial carbon in their woody biomass but also contribute meaningfully through litterfall and understory vegetation.

2.2 Soil Organic Carbon (SOC): The soils beneath *B. utilis*_forests exhibit high organic matter accumulation, largely due to cold temperatures and slow decomposition rates. SOC values by soil depth are:

0–15 cm: 19.54 tC/ha

15–30 cm: 15.02 tC/ha

30–45 cm: 11.88 tC/ha

Soil Organic Carbon is vital for long-term carbon storage, with deeper soil layers being more stable and resistant to degradation (Gupta et al., 2025).

3. Environmental Threats and Challenges

3.1 Regeneration Constraints: *Grazing Pressure*: Studies indicate that grazing significantly impedes Bhojpatra forest regeneration, with success rates ranging from 3.38% to 11.53% across various forest divisions.

Low Seed Viability: The extreme climate and brief growing seasons at high altitudes result in poor seed viability and weak seedling establishment.

Soil Compaction: Human activities like grazing and tourism compact the soil, restrict root development, and further limit regeneration.

Invasive Weeds: Species such as Rumex and Urtica outcompete native Bhojpatra seedlings, decreasing biodiversity and undermining forest health.

3.2 Anthropogenic Pressure: *Bark Harvesting*: Unsustainable harvesting for medicinal and cultural purposes leads to tree mortality and disrupts forest structure.

Fuelwood Collection: Dependence on Bhojpatra wood for fuel reduces mature tree populations, diminishing the forest's carbon storage capacity.

Habitat Fragmentation: Infrastructure development and agricultural expansion fragment habitats, isolating tree populations and reducing genetic diversity.

3.3 Climate Change: *Treeline Shift*: Rising temperatures are pushing the treeline upward, potentially shrinking suitable habitats at lower elevations. **(Cudlin *et al.*, 2017)**.

Erratic Snowfall: Changing snowfall patterns impact water availability, hindering seedling growth and forest regeneration.

Pest Outbreaks: Warmer temperatures support pest and disease proliferation, threatening the overall health of *Betula utilis*.

4. Management Strategies for Conservation and Climate Mitigation

4.1 In-situ Conservation: *Establishment of Protected Areas*: Designating Bhojpatra forests within national parks and sanctuaries can shield them from anthropogenic threats.

Grazing Management: Enforcing rotational grazing and regulating livestock numbers can alleviate seedling pressure.

Assisted Regeneration: Employing fencing and direct seed sowing techniques can support natural regeneration in degraded zones.

4.2 Ex-situ Propagation: *Nursery Development*: Establish nurseries using locally sourced seeds to produce Bhojpatra saplings for afforestation.

Tissue Culture Techniques : Apply tissue culture methods to propagate elite genotypes with superior traits.

Seed Bank Maintenance: Maintain seed banks to safeguard genetic diversity and ensure future restoration capacity.

4.3 Community Involvement: *Ecotourism Promotion*: Develop ecotourism to offer economic benefits to local communities while encouraging forest conservation.

Capacity Building: Train community members in nursery operations, forest monitoring, and sustainable harvesting.

Integration of Traditional Knowledge: Embed indigenous practices into conservation efforts to enhance effectiveness and cultural relevance.

4.4 Policy Integration: *Inclusion in Carbon Programs*: Incorporate Bhojpatra forests into national carbon accounting and REDD+ schemes to secure conservation funding (Aggarwal & Ashish, 2020).

1. *Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES)*: Develop PES models to reward communities for protecting Bhojpatra forests.
2. *Promotion of Clean Energy*: Provide incentives for adopting clean cooking solutions to reduce reliance on Bhojpatra wood.

CONCLUSION

Betula utilis stands as a silent sentinel of the Western Himalayas—its slender form defying harsh winds, its roots anchoring fragile slopes, and its presence weaving ecological harmony into high-altitude landscapes. More than just a tree, it is a powerful natural ally in our global fight against climate change, sequestering carbon in its biomass and deep soils while nurturing biodiversity in some of the world's most vulnerable ecosystems.

Yet, this quiet guardian now faces growing threats. To safeguard its future—and our planet's—we must rise to the challenge. Strategic conservation, robust regeneration efforts, and thoughtful policy integration are not just options, but necessities. The story of B. utilis is a call to action: to honor indigenous wisdom, empower local communities, and harness science in the service of sustainability.

Let this remarkable species inspire a new chapter in climate resilience. Through continued research, site-specific management, and unwavering commitment, we can ensure that *Betula utilis* not only survives but thrives, standing tall as a symbol of hope in a warming world.

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