



HEAL

Human & Environment
Alliance League

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The month at a glance

Securing the Future of South West Bengal's Elephants

Baseline Data Collection on Human-Snake Conflict in Sundarbans

Outreach for Dispelling Misconceptions About Wildlife

Field updates - Documenting the Hazards of China Duari

Wildlife Rescues

Other Events

Securing the Future of South West Bengal's Elephants

- South West Bengal (SWB) is one of India's major hotspots for human-elephant conflict, characterized by a distressing number of both human and elephant deaths, despite the region having only 180-200 elephants.
- This is primarily attributed to SWB's dry landscape, which lacks dense natural forests. In order to survive, elephants seek refuge within resource-poor teak plantations during the day and resort to raiding paddy fields or even plundering houses for food at night.
- The resulting financial hardships, stemming from crop damage and the loss of life and property, intensify antagonism among the local populace towards elephants.
- This heightened hostility leads to the participation of village youth in state-sanctioned *Hulla* drives, designed to drive elephants away from crop fields at the expense of their health and well-being.



A mob throwing fire torches at a herd of elephants during a *Hulla* drive in South West Bengal's Jhargram district.

- To mitigate human-elephant conflict and promote elephant conservation in SWB, HEAL has initiated a project, within Jamboni block of Jhargram district, with support from Coforge Ltd.
- The project aims to address three key factors that contribute to negative interactions between humans and elephants, namely: a) the lack of fodder trees and nutrition sources for elephants, b) threat to human-owned property and life, and c) inadequate compensation for crop loss.
- In this context, the project will undertake the following activities: a) reduce elephant incursion into villages through the installation of solar fences, b) ensure food security for elephants by planting fodder trees and dedicating areas for exclusive paddy cultivation for elephants, and c) build capacity for tolerance through awareness, education, and the implementation of a fair compensation scheme.
- This month, significant progress was made towards achieving all three objectives. Through consultation with the local community, an appropriate stretch of land was selected and leased, and paddy seeds were sown.
- Additionally, a nursery was established where saplings for elephant fodder plants and trees are being grown. Once mature, they will be planted in and around forests frequented by elephants.
- Lastly, an initial reconnaissance survey was conducted in three villages to select sites for installing solar fences.



Team HEAL conducting a meeting with local stakeholders to solicit their support in the activities of the project



Sowing of seeds in progress on a patch of land leased by HEAL



Recce survey in progress for selecting sites for solar fencing

Baseline Data Collection on Human-Snake Conflict in Sundarbans

- The 'Zero Deaths from Snakebites' is a coexistence initiative started by HEAL in Gosaba block of Sundarbans, aiming to alleviate fear of snakes and foster tolerance within local communities.
- This objective will be accomplished through close engagement with two key stakeholders: villagers of Gosaba and faith healers and local doctors. The primary means of engagement will be through educational awareness programs and workshops.
- These interactions will specifically target the eradication of misinformation, promote the use of correct first aid methods, and advocate for appropriate treatments for both venomous and non-venomous snakebites to prevent fatalities and aid recovery of victims.
- In November 2023, three preliminary awareness programs were organized in Bali II and Kumirmari Gram Panchayats. Locals suggested holding awareness programs during the months when snakes are most active, to enhance information retention. Taking into consideration this input from primary stakeholders, HEAL is likely to commence the main intervention initiatives from April 2024 onwards.



An awareness program conducted on 17 November 2023 in Bali island



Local residents of Kumirmari island reading an educational flex poster about snakes during an awareness program held in the island on 26 November 2023

- In the months leading up to the awareness programs, a social survey is being carried out across Gosaba block to gather baseline information on various aspects related to snakebite prevention and its treatment.
- These aspects include the knowledge of local communities about snakes and their general ecology, perceptions about snakes, knowledge of first aid methods for snakebites, preferred treatment for venomous snakebites, and knowledge about practices to prevent snakebite incidents.
- This data will serve as a baseline against which the impact of this project's activities will be measured.



Field assistant Debobroto Mondal interviewing a local from Bali island as part of the pre-intervention survey

Outreach for Dispelling Misconceptions About Wildlife

- This month, HEAL members conducted several outreach initiatives across various districts of West Bengal with the goal of dispelling misconceptions and promoting awareness regarding wildlife.
- On three separate occasions, awareness programs focusing on snakes and snakebite management were organized. The first event took place on 01 January 2024 at Lepchaka village in Buxa Tiger Reserve, Cooch Behar district, and was facilitated by Ardhendu Banik, Zonal Coordinator for Cooch Behar.
- Subsequently, two more programs were conducted, one in Malda on 19 January and another in South 24 Parganas on 27 January, led by Zonal Coordinator Jayanta Chakrabarty and Field Coordinator Santanu Das, respectively.



Ardhendu Banik setting up the venue for the awareness session in Lepchaka village



Jayanta Chakroorty interacting with the audience at the awareness session in Malda



Santanu Das speaking about the various non-venomous snakes found in South 24 Parganas



Outreach program to eradicate fear and misconceptions around the jungle cat in Kalitola Diar Math in Malda

- These programs were organised to eliminate fear towards snakes by equipping people with the knowledge to properly manage venomous and non-venomous snakebites.
- The sessions involved educating the audience about snake species commonly encountered in their area, various types of snakebites, appropriate first aid methods for each type of snakebite, and ways to prevent such incidents.
- In addition, a local outreach initiative was undertaken by Jayanta and member Bapi Das to alleviate fear among villagers residing near Kalitola Diar Math in Kaliachak III block, Malda, following false reports of a tiger's presence circulated by a local social media news handle.
- Informal discussions were held with the villagers, providing them with explanations about the various wild cats found in West Bengal, including details about their appearance, distribution, and preferred habitats.
- Emphasis was placed on the ecological importance of these cats and the benefits they bring to humans, in order to dispel misconceptions and foster appreciation for them.
- Such efforts will help prevent incidences of fear-motivated killing of small wild felids like jungle cats and fishing cats, which commonly occur in rural West Bengal.

Field updates - Documenting the Hazards of China Duari

- HEAL's proactive monitoring of wildlife habitats outside protected area networks have proved valuable in identifying several threats concerning the conservation of biodiversity residing in human-use areas such as agricultural lands and wetlands.
- This month, surveillance efforts were initiated around fallow croplands in Birbhum and Murshidabad districts to gather intelligence on lark poachers, anticipating the imminent start of the migratory lark poaching season. As of this month, no suspicious activity was detected in the areas surveyed.
- Patrols carried out in Bilkurul Beel, a wetland in Murshidabad's Bharatpur I block, revealed the damage inflicted by China Duari's continued deployment in the wetland. The fishing gear, owing to its design and the incorporation of fine-meshed synthetic nets, captures and kills various wetland fauna.
- On numerous occasions, submerged carcasses of birds such as little grebes, egrets, and cormorants, and snakes such as checkered keelback were found inside China Duari nets.
- All these incidents were meticulously documented and incorporated in an official communication to the Divisional Forest Officer, Nadia-Murshidabad, urgently requesting intervention. The issue is also being raised with the District Magistrate of Murshidabad to advocate for a ban on the use of these nets to prevent further damage to wetland wildlife.



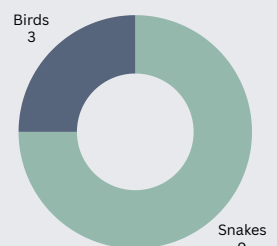
(Top) Local team member Kankan Barman, holding a carcass of a little greb, a migratory waterbird, extricated from a China Duari net in Bilkurul Beel. (Bottom) Dead egrets and a checkered keelback within a submerged China Duari net

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 12 rescues in 06 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Jayanta Chakraborty, in Malda, Ardhendu Banik in Cooch Behar, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur, Santanu Das in South 24 Parganas and Kolkata and Surajit Dhara in Howrah.

12
RESCUES

06
DISTRICTS



Screening of Conservation Docu-film Catapults to Cameras

- HEAL proudly co-hosted the first screening of 'Catapults to Cameras' on 07 January 2024, at Saturday Club Kolkata, in collaboration with the film's award-winning director, Ashwika Kapur.
- Produced by RoundGlass Sustain, the film chronicles the transformative journey of five children from South Bengal's hunting communities. As they exchange their slingshots or 'catapults' for cameras, the film showcases how their perspective on nature evolves.
- Highlighting the potential for turning children from hunter communities into wildlife stewards, the film emphasizes on how collaborating with children could help HEAL in instilling conservation values within the community and eradicate hunting festivals which threaten South Bengal's wildlife.
- The screening was followed by a lively discussion where the excited audience got to ask their questions regarding the film and its underlying conservation message to Ashwika and team HEAL.



(Top) Ashwika Kapur and team HEAL engaging with the audience during the post-screening interaction session. (Bottom) An audience member sharing her experience of watching the film

HEAL's 7th Foundation Day Anniversary Celebration

- This year marks the completion of seven years for HEAL as a conservation organization. To commemorate the seventh Foundation Day Anniversary, an informal get-together was organized on 13 January 2024, inviting all HEAL members.
- The purpose of the gathering was to reflect on the accomplishments of the past year, acknowledge the valuable lessons learned, and set goals for the upcoming year.
- Additionally, some of HEAL's field team members were honored for their outstanding contributions to on-ground conservation.
- To conclude the celebration, a special screening of "Catapults to Camera," a film by Ashwika Kapur, who is also a HEAL member, was organized for everyone in attendance.

