



HEAL

The Human & Environment Alliance League

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(C) Santanu Das



The month at a glance

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Mitigating Bird Poaching in Central Bengal

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Article Publications, RTI Applications, Seminars and more

Investigating Bottom Trawling in Bengal's Waters

What is Bottom Trawling?

- Bottom trawling is an ecologically destructive fishing method which involves sweeping the seafloor using nets attached to fishing vessels (trawlers) to collect commercial fish species found close to the sea bed.
- Bottom trawling generates enormous amounts of by-catch and is particularly harmful for bottom-dwelling species, many of which are globally threatened. This practice is banned in Sri Lanka, Madagascar and certain international Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).
- However, bottom trawling continues to be practised in India, most notably in the east coast.



A freshly caught 'Phal' or Guitar fish - a highly threatened bottom-dwelling shark species - at a landing centre in Digha



(Top) Thousands of bottom trawled sharks in Digha, ready to be sold commercially; (Bottom) Guitar fishes being prepared for auction in Shankarpur

HEAL's Surveys:

- HEAL has extensively documented the by-catch generated by bottom trawling, along the coastline of Digha, West Bengal. It mostly consists of bottom-dwelling species like guitar fishes, rays and various species of sharks (many of which are critically endangered).
- Particularly concerning is the scale of such catch - thousands of individuals are caught, auctioned at the fish landing centres and exported, almost every day.
- In January 2023, an investigative team comprising HEAL members Suvrajyoti Chatterjee, Ashutosh Upadhyay, Ritesh Das, Ardhendu Banik and Ripan Biswas surveyed fish landing and auction centres in Digha and Shankarpur to understand the extent of trade of these by-catch species.
- Information gathered from such field surveys will be utilised to strategize a conservation action plan to curb bottom trawling and mitigate its adverse impact on bottom-dwelling marine life.



A Pond Heron stuck in a bird trapping net set up by poachers at Patan Beel - a wetland in Murshidabad

Mitigating Bird Poaching in Central Bengal

- Resident and migratory birds are captured in large numbers throughout winter and illegally sold for local consumption in Central West Bengal, notably in the district of Murshidabad.
- To stop this indiscriminate mass killing of wild birds, HEAL and the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), initiated a Rapid Action Project in December 2022.
- The project aims to a) create regional patrolling teams, b) liaise with the Forest Department for enforcement actions, and c) educate the local community, to counteract bird poaching through coordinated action among diverse stakeholders.



Awareness sign boards being installed near a wetland in Murshidabad



Local volunteers destroying nets removed from a wetland



Zonal Coordinator Jayanta Chakraborty conducting an awareness program in Malda

- The number of wetlands under the continual watch of local patrolling teams have increased from merely 06 in December 2022 to 17 as of January 2023. These teams were deployed by HEAL in six blocks of Murshidabad and three blocks of Malda district, to search for and take down bird trapping nets.
- Over the past two months, approximately 30 kilometres of bird trapping nets have been removed which have successfully thwarted countless poaching attempts.
- The arrest of a bird poacher in December 2022, which was carried out with HEAL's support and planning, served as another deterrent (details in the December 2022 monthly report).
- Lastly, permanent metal signboards were installed this month at ten sites in Murshidabad to educate and create awareness about wildlife laws. Meanwhile in Malda, two anti-hunting awareness programs were conducted to increase public awareness.

Study on the Socio-Economic Drivers of Ritualistic Hunting

- The number of wild animals hunted during South Bengal's yearly ritualistic hunting festivals has significantly reduced owing to HEAL's efforts over the past six years. However, the practice continues to persist in certain districts, necessitating strategies which can complement law enforcement in progressively weaning communities away from hunting.
- With this objective, HEAL, through the support of a UK-based non-profit World Animal Protection (WAP) initiated a collaborative research project in November 2022 to understand the socio-economic drivers of ritualistic hunting in South Bengal (details in the November 2022 monthly report). For two months, hunting communities in several villages of Jhargram and West Medinipur districts were interviewed by HEAL's field team.
- Data collection concluded in the first week of January 2023 and a preliminary report was generated, elucidating the major findings of the socio-economic surveys. WAP is in the process of conducting further in-depth analysis of the aforesaid data.
- Basis the findings of this project, future interventions to change the cultural attitudes of hunting communities in this region will be designed and implemented.



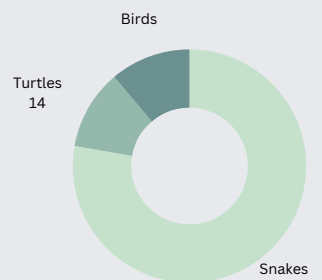
Members from hunting communities being interviewed by HEAL's field team

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 18 rescues in 5 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Jayanta Chakraborty, Bapi Das and Milan Das in Malda, Ardhendu Banik, Anirban Das and Rahul Dutta in Cooch Behar, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur, Santanu Das in South 24 Parganas and Soumyadip Mondal in Murshidabad

18
RESCUES

5
DISTRICTS



Ensuring Protection of Wild Canids

- In early December 2022, the Forest Department rescued a striped hyena from a foot trap near Churulia Tara Mines in Asansol, West Bardhaman. It received initial care at the Forest Range Office before being transferred to Burdwan Zoo, where it is now being kept.
- After the striped hyena was kept in confinement for more than three weeks, HEAL sent a detailed official communication to the Chief Wildlife Warden on 04 January 2023, seeking the release of the animal. This was done with a view to put some pressure on the authorities as the Forest Department had, in an earlier instance, declined to return a striped hyena to the wild.
- The striped hyena population, which is already small in West Bengal and is seemingly on the decline, suffers when healthy individuals are removed from the wild.
- Unfortunately, till date, the aforesaid striped hyena remains in captivity. Its release is mired by new complications as coal mines in its habitat in Churulia have recently resumed operations on a full scale. Such intense mining activity, right in its habitat, may create conflict situations and threaten the survival of the individual in the wild, if it is released in the same area.



Screenshot from a widely circulated video of the striped hyena trapped in a foot snare taken by locals which tipped off the Forest Department.



The striped hyena after being rescued by the Forest Department.

- A few days later, on January 07, an intact carcass of an Indian grey wolf was discovered in a field near Balijuri village in the Faridpur-Durgapur area of West Bardhaman. The locals indicated that the individual may have been poisoned.
- HEAL filed an RTI application with the Forest Department asking for the post-mortem report of the animal. The response from the department is awaited.
- It is crucial to understand the reason for the death of even a single healthy individual as wolves are seriously threatened by habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict, with only 2000–3000 remaining in the wild.



The dead Indian grey wolf which was discovered in Balijuri village

Reptile Conservation: Seminars and Enforcement Action

- Two seminars on snake awareness and snakebite mitigation were conducted by HEAL in January. Zonal coordinator Jayanta Chakraborty and Bapi Das led one session in Gazole Block, Malda District, and Field Officer Santanu Das, Joydeb Majumdar and Arka Sarkar, President, HEAL led the other at Sanjeeva Gardens, a residential complex in Rajarhat, North 24 Parganas.
- A number of these initiatives are a part of HEAL's ongoing "Zero Deaths from Snakebites" campaign, which aims to eradicate fear of snakes by educating the general public on behaviour of reptiles, their ecology, methods to avoid snakebites and treat snakebite victims.
- In addition, on 01 January in Gazole block, Malda district, HEAL members helped the Forest Department apprehend a snake charmer. The forest officials seized two spectacled cobras and a monocled cobra from his possession. The culprit was remanded to 20 days in judicial custody.



Awareness seminar being conducted at Sanjeeva Gardens, Rajarhat (Top) and the arrested snake charmer (bottom)

"The Ramsar Pledge": Covered by The Telegraph



(C) Dhritiman Mukherjee

Dankuni Wetlands - the subject of a decade-long court battle against the state and industries that had illegally encroached on these wetlands.

- Joint Secretary, Tiasa Adhya, raises these points in the article:
- Within Asia, India has the most Ramsar sites and its legal infrastructure to protect wetlands is one of the strongest in this region.
- Ill-awareness about wetland ecology, particularly the ability to identify wetland plants, prevents proper implementation of wetland protection laws
- Eradicating this gap is essential if India is to protect its wetland and sustain its population in the long run.

Read the article here: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/the-ramsar-pledge-special-emphasis-on-protecting-small-wetlands/cid/1910327>