

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

The Human & Environment
Alliance League

JULY 2023

Ardhendu Banik ©



The month at a glance

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Battling Plastic Menace in Sundarbans



Two young girls from a village in Bali Island handing their lot of plastic waste to a forest official from STR

- On 26 July 2023, HEAL celebrated the International Day for the Conservation of Mangrove Ecosystems, by organising a crowd-funded plastic cleanup drive on Bali Island within the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR).
- The cleanup was carried out as part of an ongoing Participatory Conservation Program in STR. The program's aim is to mitigate plastic pollution in the Sundarbans and protect the well-being of its mangrove ecosystem (further details in the June 2023 monthly report).
- Since its launch in June 2023, the collaborative program has ignited enthusiasm towards ecologically conscious waste disposal practices among the local residents of Bali island.

- On their second visit to the Island, team HEAL observed that instead of discarding unwanted plastic into the sea or landfills, the villagers had opted to gather the plastic waste and hand it over to HEAL.
- As a token of appreciation for their active participation in this initiative, the residents of Bali Island were given steel utensils, a sustainable and durable alternative to plastic items.
- Nearly 220 kilos of plastic waste (double the quantity collected previously) was gathered during this drive. The waste was handed over for recycling to the tech innovation company Paving+ for manufacturing bricks, paver tiles and other construction materials.
- HEAL extends its heartfelt gratitude to its members, the Earth Brigade Foundation and others who generously contributed to this cause.



A young boy accepting steel utensils from team HEAL on behalf of his family.

Preserving Bengal's Wetland Wealth

- HEAL's litigation to prevent encroachment of the Dankuni Wetlands led to a groundbreaking judgment in May 2022 by the National Green Tribunal (NGT). This judgment grants protection to all wetlands in the state measuring over 2.25 hectares and requires the state to identify and demarcate such wetlands based on the National Wetland Inventory and Assessment (NWIA). Despite forming a Committee to address these matters, the state has, till date, not released a list of all identified wetlands under its jurisdiction.
- Between December 2022 and April 2023, HEAL worked in the wetlands of Murshidabad and Malda districts, combating rampant poaching of migratory waterbirds and larks. (further details in the monthly report of December 2022).
- Subsequently, a geotagged inventory of wetlands where these efforts were taken was made by HEAL. Many of the wetlands in this ground-truthed inventory are not present in the NWIA. This highlights the importance of the NGT's directive to the state to demarcate and notify all wetlands in West Bengal.
- HEAL has started filing RTI applications seeking information regarding the status of these undesignated wetlands, particularly in respect of the State-level Committee's efforts to implement the aforesaid judgment of the NGT. Basis this information HEAL plans to undertake further litigation proceedings alleging state inaction.

Conserving Bengal's Elusive Carnivores

- Fear-motivated attacks are a significant threat to the continued survival of elusive and nocturnal carnivores like striped hyenas and fishing cats in West Bengal. To conserve these lesser-known species, HEAL undertakes awareness campaigns to mitigate fear and advocates for enforcement action against individuals who unlawfully persecute them. Two incidents in July which illustrate HEAL's efforts in this regard are detailed below.
- On 01 July 2023, a striped hyena was beaten to death by villagers of Sijua, West Medinipur, for reportedly straying into the village during the afternoon.

- A distressing video capturing the hyena being pursued and pelted with stones and images depicting the dead hyena along with the individuals who killed it, were widely circulated online.
- Urging the arrest of those responsible, HEAL lodged a complaint with the Chief Wildlife Warden (CWLW) and the West Medinipur Humane Committee. This committee has been created in five districts as per Calcutta High Court's February 2023 order, to prevent ritual hunting and exploitative poaching of wildlife.
- Subsequently, an investigation was launched, resulting in the arrest of four youths from Sijua on 20 July 2023. The perpetrators, identified as Biswajit Majhi, Bikash Majhi, Sonu Rana, and Sanjib Majhi, were remanded to seven days of judicial custody.



The image that was used to push for enforcement action against the villagers who killed the striped hyena on 01 July in Sijua



HEAL's field team conducting a poster campaign at a village in Kotulpur block, Bankura

- In another incident on 10 July 2023, HEAL received reports of an alleged fishing cat sighting in Kotulpur block, Bankura district. The event sparked significant panic among villagers as they mistook the feline for a leopard.
- Field Officers Sushanta Basani and Aditya Pardhan were sent to Kotulpur on 11 July to alleviate undue fear and verify the sighting reports, which were unprecedented for the district.
- Interviews were conducted with the fear stricken villagers who shared videos of a dead fishing cat purportedly killed on 09 July 2023. However, neither the origin of the video nor the location of the supposed fishing cat sighting could be substantiated.

- Meanwhile, HEAL informed the court appointed Bankura Humane Committee about the incident which prompted the Panchet Forest Division to initiate an awareness campaign on 12 July. The Forest Department also deployed camera traps to confirm the presence of the fishing cat in the region.
- On the same day, HEAL's Field Officers launched a poster campaign aimed at dispelling misconceptions about fishing cats and fostering appreciation for the feline by emphasizing their role in controlling rodent populations that damage crops and spread diseases.

Protecting Threatened Freshwater Turtles



An adult Black Softshell turtle crushed by a motor vehicle on 15 July 2023, in Baneshwar, Cooch Behar

- Baneshwar, in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, is home to two species of threatened freshwater turtles - Black Softshell Turtle and Peacock Softshell Turtle. Over the past one year, there has been an alarming increase in the number of turtles, especially hatchlings, being found as roadkills.
- To avert an irreversible decline in their population, HEAL plans to set up interventions to mitigate the threat of road-induced mortality.
- Team HEAL has approached the District Administration to explore potential measures for reducing turtle fatalities resulting from vehicular collisions.

- Following an initial meeting with the Additional District Magistrate, a formal proposal detailing various potential conservation interventions was submitted to the Office of the District Magistrate (DM). Pursuant to the meeting with the DM has been scheduled for August to discuss the suggested interventions.
- Additionally, a proposal has been submitted to the Public Works Department (PWD) seeking approval for installing awareness sign boards along State Highway 12, a location where a significant number of turtles die due to collision with motor vehicles. An approval remains pending from the PWD.

Talk on Litigation as a Conservation Tool

- HEAL was invited to the Green Hub Central India Festival held at Bhopal on 15 and 16 July 2023. The event was a delightful confluence of music, art and culture where aspiring filmmakers from Green Hub's Central India fellowship program brought attention to a range of social and environmental issues through their poignant documentaries.
- Interposed between these films were captivating talks by various speakers. Among them, team member Vasudha Mishra delivered an impactful presentation on HEAL's experience of using litigation as a conservation tool to end the senseless practice of ritual hunting in West Bengal.
- She discussed the significance of the Calcutta High Court appointed Humane Committees (formed as a result of HEAL's legal intervention) in averting the yearly slaughter of protected wildlife and, in the long-run, bringing about policy changes that will positively impact wildlife conservation in West Bengal.



Member Vasudha Mishra delivering her talk at the Green Hub Central India Festival 2023

Fostering Human-Snake Coexistence

- Many snakebite cases in West Bengal result in fatalities due to limited awareness of the appropriate treatment and inability to obtain them in time. This instills a fear of snakes that compels communities to persecute them.
- HEAL runs the campaign 'Zero Death From Snakebites' with the goal of conserving snakes. The campaign's objective is to replace fear with knowledge and foster tolerance towards snakes within communities.
- To this end, HEAL organises awareness camps and informative workshops to educate communities about snakes, their behaviour and methods to reduce the occurrences of snakebites.



Team HEAL interacting with local communities during the awareness program on World Snake Day



Member Ripan Biswas interacting with the audience at Buxa Tiger Reserve during the awareness workshop



Jayanta Chakraborty, Zonal Coordinator in Malda, conducting a Snake Awareness Program on 20 July

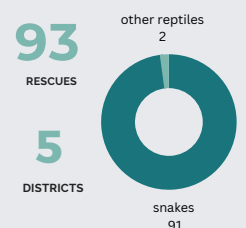


Suvrajyoti Chatterjee, Secretary, HEAL, conducting a Snake Awareness Program at Sanjeeva Gardens

- On 16 July 2023, workshops on Snake Awareness and Snakebite Mitigation were organised in two locations - Pampu Basti village in Buxa Tiger Reserve, Alipurduar and Looksan Primary Healthcare Centre, Jalpaiguri - to observe World Snake Day.
- Participants gained knowledge about various venomous and non-venomous snakes found in the area, their ecology and the suitable practices to support the recovery of snakebite victims.
- Similar programs were conducted by Zonal Coordinator Jayanta Chakraborty and team in four schools within Malda's Gazole block from 14 July to 16 July 2023 and also on 20 July 2023. Besides snakes, the programs also familiarised the students with other forms of wildlife and their ecological significance.
- The final awareness program took place on 30 July 2023, at Sanjeeva Gardens, Newtown, following two snakebite fatalities in Kolkata's Newtown Action Area-III in early July. The program helped defuse the prevalent panic around snakes and provided residents with the knowledge to prevent similar casualties in the future.

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 93 rescues in 5 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Ardhendu Banik, Anirban Das and Rahul Dutta in Cooch Behar, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur, Jayanta Chakraborty and Bapi Das in Malda, Joydeb Mazumdar in Nadia and Jaydip Sen in Bankura



Felicitation on the Occasion of Global Tiger Day

- From providing immediate relief and creating alternate livelihood opportunities in the aftermath of Yaas and Amphan cyclones, to mitigating plastic pollution and promoting mangrove health, HEAL has tirelessly worked to make a positive impact on the lives of Sundarban's people and its mangrove forests.
- The West Bengal Forest Department felicitated HEAL for its work in the Sundarbans at Sajnekhali in Sundarban Tiger Reserve on the occasion of Global Tiger Day, 29 July 2023.
- Grateful and humbled, HEAL dedicates this recognition to its members, volunteers and supporters who have steadfastly contributed their time and effort to advancing HEAL's cause of wildlife conservation in West Bengal.



Suvrajyoti Chatterjee, accepting the certificate of appreciation from Deputy Director, Sundarban Tiger Reserve Jones Justin (IFS)

Celebration of Ban Mahotsav



HEAL members at the Ban Mahotsav in Cooch Behar (top) and in Malda (bottom)

- In the 'Ban Mahotsav' week, observed from 14 - 20 July 2023, across the state of West Bengal, a 'Mass Plantation Drive' was organised by the Forest Department on 18 July.
- The Divisional Forest Departments of three districts extended invitations to HEAL to participate in the plantation drive.
- On behalf of HEAL, Field Coordinator Santanu Das attended the plantation drive in South 24 Parganas, while Zonal Coordinators Jayanta Chakraborty and Ardhendu Banik represented HEAL at the plantation drives held in the districts of Malda and Cooch Behar, respectively. Members Rahul Dutta and Prakriti Dey were also present at the event in Cooch Behar.
- During the event, the Forest Department, along with other dignitaries and numerous school students, planted several saplings as a symbolic gesture of their dedicated endeavours to preserve the forests and improve the environment.