

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

The Human & Environment
Alliance League

OCTOBER 2023

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The month at a glance

- Ritual Hunting Contempt Proceedings
- Strengthening Protection for Turtles in Murshidabad
- Protecting Dankuni Wetlands
- Wildlife Rescues
- Talks, Events and More

Rescued turtles about to be released by HEAL's local team in Murshidabad

Ritual Hunting Contempt Proceedings: An Update

- HEAL's rejoinder to the Action Taken Reports (ATRs), submitted by the Superintendents of Police (SPs) of Jhargram and West Medinipur districts, was taken up for arguments at the Calcutta High Court this month (further details in the September 2023 monthly report).
- During the hearing, HEAL submitted a request for the formation of Humane Committees in Birbhum and East Burdwan districts, similar to the ones established by the High Court in five other districts of West Bengal through its February 2023 order (further details in the February 2023 monthly report).
- The request was made after Forest Department officials in Murshidabad pointed out to HEAL during a meeting of the Humane Committee that most hunters apprehended by them in the district came from Birbhum and East Burdwan. On-ground surveys conducted by HEAL also support these observations..
- The absence of similar directives for these two districts hindered cooperation in curtailing the inter-district movement of hunters.



Jhargram Humane Committee in session

- Taking note of HEAL's submissions, the Hon'ble Bench directed the formation of Humane Committees for East Burdwan and Birbhum districts in order to strengthen inter-district cooperation in mitigating ritual hunting and other wildlife crimes.
 - Furthermore, the Bench instructed the Bankura Humane Committee to submit a report detailing its action taken and progress made in preventing wildlife killing during this year's hunt season in April and May. The report was promptly filed.
- The High Court also explicitly mandated all Humane Committees across seven districts to conduct mass awareness programs and implement various measures throughout the year to sensitize local communities against indiscriminate hunting of protected wildlife.
 - HEAL intends to persistently follow up with the Humane Committees in Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, West Medinipur, Murshidabad, Birbhum, and East Burdwan to ensure the Court's orders are effectively implemented on the ground and hunting is actively curtailed in these districts.



Birbhum is one of the hotspots of commercial lark poaching. The Court directives will empower HEAL to combat such wildlife crime through increased inter-agency cooperation in the district

Strengthening Protection for Turtles in Murshidabad



Two Indian flapshell turtles trapped inside a *China Duari* net deployed in Sahapur wetland. The turtles were rescued and released back into the wild

- In Murshidabad, HEAL's local volunteer teams have intensified surveillance over wetlands and are actively gathering intelligence on individuals involved in turtle hunting and trade.
- The use of a new, more lethal fishing gear called *China Duari* by poachers poses a severe threat to the long-term survival of freshwater turtles in the region.
- *China Duari* comprises multiple cubicle units made by wrapping fishing nets around iron frames. Each unit has a funnel-like opening that indiscriminately engulfs every aquatic organism in a wetland including young fingerlings and fish fries, endangering wetland biodiversity and depleting fish populations in the long-term.

- Since September, HEAL's local volunteers have successfully rescued and released over 25 turtles that were trapped using *China Duari* in the Sahapur wetland of Bharatpur-I block. They have also collaborated with local police and the forest department to apprehend a key turtle trader.
- To raise awareness and combat the trading of turtle meat and live individuals, sensitization drives have been conducted at prominent fish markets.
- The objective is not only to increase awareness of the legal repercussions of hunting protected wildlife such as freshwater turtles, but also to encourage the reporting of individuals engaging in such activities.



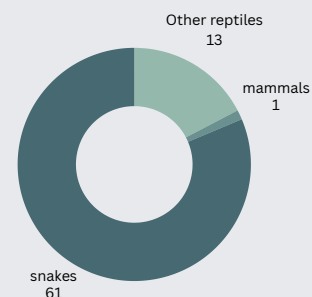
HEAL conducting a sensitisation drive at a fish market in Bharatpur-I block in collaboration with the local police and the forest department

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 75 rescues in 6 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Jayanta Chakraborty and Bapi Das in Malda, Ardhendu Banik and Rahul Dutta in Cooch Behar, Jaydip Sen in Bankura, Kankan Barman and Mintu Das in Murshidabad and Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur.

75
RESCUES

6
DISTRICTS



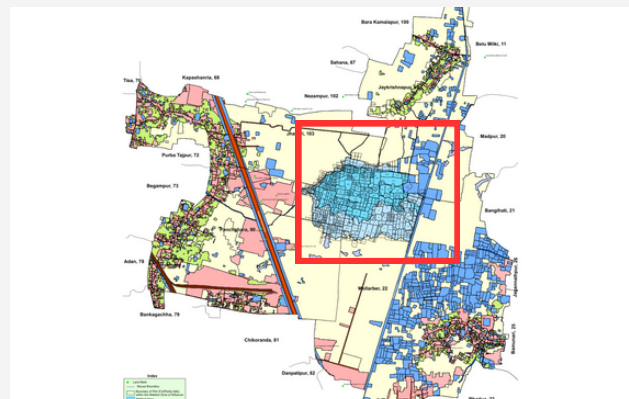
Protecting Dankuni Wetlands

- The National Green Tribunal (NGT) in a landmark judgment issued in May 2022, ordered the state of West Bengal to identify, demarcate, and prepare an inventory of all wetlands in the state exceeding an area of 2.25 hectares and grant them protection under Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017.
- This pivotal judgment stems from a series of Public Interest Litigations filed by members of HEAL and another Kolkata-based non-profit organization, PUBLIC. These litigations, initiated in 2013, aimed to safeguard 1000 hectares of the Dankuni Wetland Complex in the Hooghly district from illegal encroachment and unregulated urbanization.
- On 14 August 2023, the Department of Environment, West Bengal published a draft notification of Dankuni Wetlands, inviting comments and suggestions from the public before official notification in the Gazette.



Aerial view of the Dankuni Wetlands

Dhritiman Mukherjee ©



Land use map depicting the land parcels (area marked in red) out of the total area under Dankuni wetland complex which the West Bengal State Wetland Authority plans to notify and protect

- The notification was based on an erroneous understanding of the definition of a 'wetland' under the Ramsar Convention and Wetland (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017. Majority of the Dankuni Wetland Complex has been excluded from the ambit of legal protection as it comprises 'marshlands' which are only inundated during the wet season.
- The draft notification designates just 118 ha of wetland area, out of a total of 1000 ha, as worthy of receiving protection under the Wetland (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017 as it holds water year round.
- HEAL, highlighting these and other problematic aspects of the draft notification, submitted its comments on the draft notification to the State Wetland Authority in October. In the event that HEAL's concerns remain unaddressed, and the state decides to protect only the area specified in the draft notification, HEAL will pursue legal recourse.

District Administration Honours Soumyadip Mondal

- HEAL's Zonal Coordinator in Murshidabad district, Soumyadip Mondal, was honored with the 'Biodiversity Conservation Award 2023' by the Office of District Magistrate and Collector, Murshidabad. He received the award at the 'District-level Awareness Program-cum-Workshop on Biodiversity' on 13 October 2023.
- This recognition acknowledges his significant contributions to on-ground conservation efforts in the district, particularly in building liaisons for conservation.
- Leveraging vigilant oversight, an extensive informant network, and effective coordination with the Forest Department and local Police, Soumyadip played a pivotal role in detecting wildlife crimes and facilitating enforcement actions against perpetrators.
- Additionally, due to his advocacy, a river island in the Ganga within Beldanga-II block's Manganpara area was declared a 'Forest and Wildlife Conservation Zone' by the West Bengal Biodiversity Board earlier this year.



Soumyadip accepting the award from the Additional District Magistrate, Murshidabad

The New Indian Express Felicitates Tiasa Adhya



Tiasa receiving the Devi Award

- In its 24th chapter this year, the Devi Award by the New Indian Express Group honored 12 women from Kolkata for making path-breaking contributions to their field and positively impacting society.
- Among the recipients was HEAL's Joint Secretary and Director of Ecology and Conservation Program, Tiasa Adhya.
- The event, held on 05 October 2023, honoured Tiasa's extensive contribution to wildlife conservation and environmental activism.
- Tiasa co-founded The Fishing Cat Project, the longest running research project on this globally endangered small carnivore and West Bengal's State Animal, and has worked tirelessly to mitigate threats to its long-term survival in the floodplains of Howrah district in West Bengal and Chilika lake in Odisha.
- Tiasa is also a fierce advocate for wetlands, the habitat of the fishing cats. Her research provided a scientific basis to HEAL's arguments in its legal battles to conserve the Dankuni Wetlands which culminated in the aforementioned NGT order.

HEAL at the Student Conference on Conservation Science 2023

- The Student Conference on Conservation Science, Bengaluru (SCCS-BNG), is part of a global series organized by the student community across the United Kingdom, Australia, China, the USA, and Hungary, in collaboration with research and conservation organizations.
- During this year's conference, which was held from 09-12 October 2023 at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, HEAL's Communication and Outreach Officer, Vasudha Mishra, delivered an insightful talk based on the research she conducted as part of HEAL's Striped Hyena Project.



Vasudha giving an introduction to her study which explored the relationship shared by the local communities of Purulia with the striped hyena

- Vasudha's talk addressed key questions, including whether people can identify striped hyenas and understand their ecology, how the species and its ecological role are perceived in the cultural landscape, whether there are misperceptions that need debunking, and if conflict is present, what the nature of the conflict is. The findings will be key in designing interventions to conserve the hyena in Purulia district
- The presentation concluded with an emphasis on the significance of outreach efforts in raising awareness to dispel fear and enhance appreciation of the striped hyena's role as a scavenger.

Donor Support for Snake Bite Mitigation in Sundarbans



Dolphin Tank is an initiative by the India Welfare Trust, a platform that strives to support non-profit organisations in the country

- Living My Promise, a platform enabling Indians to pledge 50% of their wealth to philanthropic causes, organized an event called Dolphin Tank in October.
 - In the online event, NGOs are required to make short 3-minute pitches to a panel of promisors, who may decide to support projects based on compelling causes.
 - HEAL was shortlisted as one of the participants and made a pitch about a multipronged mitigation project to address human-snake conflict in forest fringe villages of Sundarbans.
- Of the three promisors who pledged to support HEAL for this cause, two have already provided funds to kickstart the project. The funds will be utilised towards a concerted effort to bring down the number of deaths attributed to snake bites through community education, capacity building of first responders and creation of quick response teams that prevent negative interactions between people and snakes.
 - These activities are expected to reduce fear of snakes and foster tolerance for them in the community, leading to a decrease in their persecution in the region.