



HEAL
The Human & Environment
Alliance League

NOVEMBER 2022

Ripan Biswas ©

Our Approach To Conservation

At **HEAL**, we believe in adopting a multi-pronged strategy to solve conservation problems, working together with multiple stakeholders and creating local conservation groups that can fight conservation battles in their own areas.

The three core aspects of our work are **protecting species** which exist alongside humans outside protected areas, **conserving habitats** that are vulnerable to encroachment and **mitigating human-wildlife conflict** to promote peaceful coexistence between humans and wildlife amidst shrinking natural habitats. Here is a summary of our activities in November 2022.

The month at a glance

Ritual Hunting PIL - Contempt Petition

Collaboration with World Animal Protection

Critically Endangered Turtles in Dire Straits

Counteracting Bird Poaching

Wildlife Rescues

Documentation of Encroachments near Rajarhat Wetlands

Ritual Hunting PIL - Contempt Petition: An update

- In November, HEAL prepared and filed its rejoinder to the Action Taken Report [ATR] filed by the Chief Wildlife Warden [CWLW], West Bengal. The CWLW, pursuant to the Hon'ble High Court's order dated 29 June 2022, had filed the ATR in September 2022 on the measures taken by the administration to counteract ritualistic hunting.
- To recap, in May of this year, HEAL had initiated contempt proceedings against state authorities for violating the Calcutta High Court judgment and order dated 18 April 2019 which prohibited ritualistic hunting of wildlife. HEAL alleged that the state had failed to take effective measures to stop the killing of protected wildlife during the hunting festivals of 2021 and 2022.
- As a result, the Court ordered the CWLW to furnish an ATR detailing the steps taken by the state authorities to prevent hunting of protected fauna in the districts of Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram and West Medinipur.
- The final hearing in the contempt proceeding is likely to happen by the end of this year.

Collaboration with World Animal Protection



Field personnel Sangita Giri conducting interviews with locals

- The mass killing of protected wildlife, including globally endangered species, during the annual ritualistic hunting festivals of South Bengal is a major crime under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 which went unaddressed until HEAL intervened in 2016.
- HEAL's efforts to eradicate this detrimental practice relied on strict enforcement of wildlife protection laws. However, catalyzing long-term change warrants complementing these conservation interventions with appropriate on-ground strategies that involve local stakeholders.
- With this objective, HEAL and World Animal Protection [WAP] have initiated a collaborative research project to determine the underlying socio-economic drivers of ritualistic hunting in South Bengal.

- WAP is an international organization with its Indian headquarters in New Delhi. It has done trailblazing work across the globe to end animal suffering through research, policy change, community campaigning and liaising with local partners.
- The project, which is supported by WAP, commenced on 01 November. As part of it, HEAL is conducting interview surveys of hunter communities in multiple villages of West Medinipur and Jhargram districts to gain insights on social attitudes, cultural ties and economic drivers of hunting.
- This knowledge will prove immensely useful to set up intervention measures to wean communities away from this practice and enable wildlife populations to persist.



Critically Endangered Turtles in Dire Straits



A Black Softshell Turtle found floating dead on the surface of Shib Dighi on 15 November



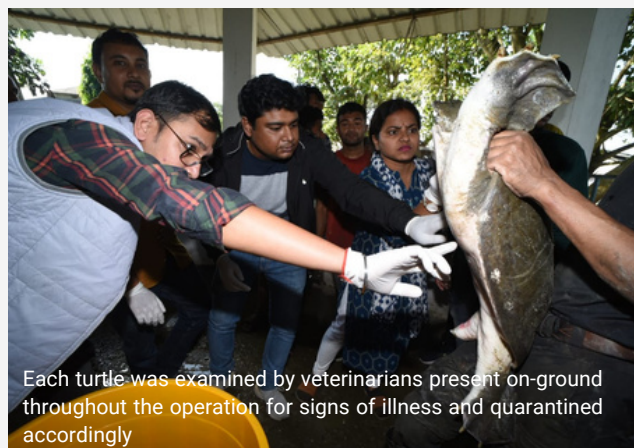
Draining of the water from Shib Dighi in progress

- In a worrying trend, five Black Softshell Turtles, including the three rescued by team HEAL [details in the October 2022 report] have died in a span of just three weeks, i.e., between 27 October and 15 November, in Baneshwar, Cooch Behar.
- Soil and water testing of Shib Dighi, the temple pond inhabited by these turtles, was underway when HEAL sensed a larger underlying threat and decided to assist the forest department in depositing an intact turtle carcass at the Institute of Animal Health and Veterinary Biologicals [R&T] in Belgachia, for post mortem examination.
- Results of the toxicological examination received on 07 November, ruled out the pond's environmental parameters as the probable cause of the turtle deaths.
- Later on, applications were filed under the RTI Act, 2006 with the Cooch Behar district administration and the office of the CWLW to obtain post mortem reports.
- The death of the fifth turtle on 15 November prompted HEAL to approach the Head of Forest Force, West Bengal and the Additional District Magistrate, Cooch Behar at once, to seek immediate isolation of the sick turtles.
- This initiated a round of several urgent meetings which culminated in the district authorities commencing dewatering of the temple pond the very next day.

- On 18 November, a massive operation was conducted wherein team HEAL, comprising members Ardhendu Banik, Samabesh Biswas, Rupjyoti Kar and Ripan Biswas facilitated the administration in extracting and quarantining several turtles from Shib Dighi. The sick turtles were taken to Patla Khawa Range Office for further treatment.
- HEAL advised and facilitated the district administration to get in touch with renowned biologist Dr. Shailendra Singh from Turtle Survival Alliance. He sent a team to Baneshwar to devise a rehabilitation strategy for the turtles.
- Presently, the turtles are being treated under the supervision of the specialist team and their progress is being constantly monitored. A final assessment report will be shared by Turtle Survival Alliance towards the end of December.



Team HEAL taking the turtles out of the pond



Each turtle was examined by veterinarians present on-ground throughout the operation for signs of illness and quarantined accordingly

Counteracting bird poaching

- Bird poaching, a serious threat to the avifauna of West Bengal, benefits from the lack of constant vigilance on huge swathes of wetlands that exist outside the Protected Area network. HEAL's extensive volunteer network regularly surveils such wetlands to keep poachers at bay.
- Last month, Soumyadip Mondal, HEAL's zonal coordinator in Murshidabad district, along with a volunteer team led by Kankan Burman had facilitated the arrest of a bird poacher at Bilkurul Beel in Bharatpur I block. This month, due to their active efforts, a second arrest was made from the same wetland.
- Two bird poachers, Naushad Ali and Asadul Ali, were caught by the forest officials on 06 November. They recovered four 70-80 feet nets and around 23 birds from the culprits.



A dead spotted owlet found entangled in a net



Soumyadip Mondal burning the nets to prevent them from being reused

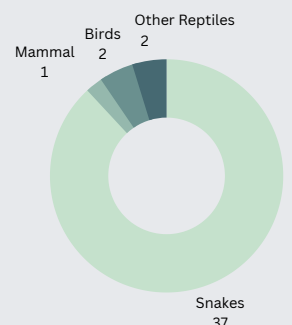
- Unfortunately, when they were produced before the court, the poachers were granted bail with a nominal fine of 1200 rupees. While this was disheartening, the prompt action taken by the Murshidabad Forest Department based on HEAL's intel was commendable.
- A week later, during a routine monitoring of Rampara Beel in Beldanga II block in Murshidabad, Soumyadip along with a local volunteer Subho Mondal, discovered a 200 metre long bird trapping net with carcasses of 6 different birds stuck in them. The net was removed and burnt to prevent it from being reused by poachers.

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month HEAL's rescue teams carried out 42 rescues in 11 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Biswapathi Deb in Purulia, Arka Sarkar in Kolkata, Jayanta Chakraborty in Malda, Ardhendu Banik, Rahul Dutta and Prakriti Dey in Cooch Behar, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur, Santanu Das in Murshidabad, South 24, Parganas and North 24 Parganas, Arabinda Pal in East Medinipur and Joydeb Majumdar in Nadia.

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RESCUES

11
DISTRICTS



Documenting encroachments near Rajarhat Wetlands

- In its May 2022 judgment, the National Green Tribunal extended de facto protection to all wetlands of West Bengal sizing over 2.25 ha and appointed a committee headed by the Chief Secretary of the state to identify and demarcate such wetlands.
- Despite having an obligation to safeguard wetlands, the committee is yet to take any concrete steps in this direction, emboldening developers who eye these vulnerable habitats.
- An example of this is the ongoing encroachment of a pristine 200 ha patch close to Rajarhat Wetlands by Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation [HIDCO].
- Debris and waste is being dumped daily into the wetland and its adjoining canal to construct a road and transform the area into a landfill.
- HEAL members documented this encroachment and formally intimated the committee seeking their urgent intervention in this matter.
- In case the committee continues to disregard this issue and other encroachments [details in monthly report of September 2022] HEAL will be compelled to take judicial recourse.



[Top] Spatial extent of the wetlands being encroached; they lie close to Rajarhat Wetlands. [Bottom] A pathway, made of dumped debris and rubble, cutting across the canal to facilitate the encroachment of the wetlands present on the other side.