

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

The Human & Environment
Alliance League

SEPTEMBER 2023



The month at a glance

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Ritual Hunting Contempt Proceedings: an Update



A hunting party returning from the forest with their booty of poached wildlife during the Gopegarh hunt fest in West Medinipur on 04 April 2023

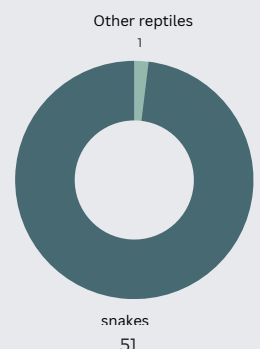
- Pursuant to the direction of the Calcutta High Court, rejoinders to the Action Taken Reports (ATRs) submitted by the Superintendents of Police (SPs) of Jhargram and West Medinipur districts were prepared and filed by HEAL.
 - This exercise is part of the ongoing contempt proceedings initiated by HEAL in response to the State authorities' failure to comply with the Calcutta High Court's orders dated 18 April 2019 and 20 February 2023.
 - These orders had directed the Forest Department, Railways and the Police to collaborate and take proactive on-ground measures to stop ritualistic hunting festivals in Southern West Bengal and conserve wildlife.
- In the aforementioned response, HEAL submitted the following:
 1. Denied and disputed the claims made by the SPs in the ATRs that the district police of Jhargram and West Medinipur undertook every possible measure to mitigate hunting festivals during April-May 2023 or that they were successful in preventing killing of wildlife during the same.
 2. Contrary to the averments made in the ATRs, the SPs of the two districts failed to comply with the High Court's April 2019 and February 2023 order. No concrete steps were taken by the district police in Jhargram and West Medinipur to stop hunting festivals or avert the indiscriminate slaughter of wildlife.
 3. The ATRs do not disclose any effective on-ground measure which the SPs took to curtail the movement of armed hunters into forests, seize their weapons or initiate disciplinary action against hunters found with poached wildlife. A number of other unverifiable and falsified claims, that make up the bulk of the ATR filed by the SPs, were also highlighted.
 - HEAL's rejoinder is likely to be taken up for arguments before the Court on the next date of hearing.

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month HEAL's rescue teams carried out 52 rescues in 06 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Jayanta Chakraborty, Milan Das and Bapi Das in Malda, Ardhendu Banik, Samabesh Biswas and Rahul Dutta in Cooch Behar, Jaydip Sen in Bankura, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur and Santanu Das in South 24 Parganas

52
RESCUES

06
DISTRICTS



Field Updates: Tackling Wildlife Crime & Fostering Coexistence

- 'China duari' or 'China Jal' is a destructive fishing gear that originated in Bangladesh and has the ability to wipe a water body clean of any fish, immature fingerlings and even fish eggs. While it is banned in Bangladesh, the use of this net has been gaining popularity in West Bengal.
- HEAL's vigilant field teams, which comprise local fishermen from Murshidabad district, discovered these nets being used to poach native turtle species found in wetlands. They rescued 11 turtles from Sahapur wetland in Bharatpur-I block during September, that had been trapped using these nets



(Left) A typical China Duari net, (Right) Two flapshell turtles trapped inside a China Duari net in Sahapur wetland

Watch a video of flapshell turtles being rescued, here: https://youtu.be/xf_kKIYLBBE?si=rcQelkZ3Pm9FVhCS



(Top) Carcass of a Red Munia found entangled in a bird trapping net, (Bottom) Awareness drive that was conducted in collaboration with the local Forest Department

- In a different locality in Murshidabad, known as Shaktipur, Field Officer Aditya Pardhan along with his teammates, detected bird poaching nets, laid across dry river beds with reeds and tall grass vegetation. The nets were intended to capture song birds like the Baya Weaver, Scaly Breasted Munia and Red Munia.
- Fourteen birds were found entangled in these nets, of which only one managed to survive and was rescued. To prevent more birds from getting killed, the nets were removed and destroyed.
- Soon after, an awareness drive was organized by HEAL's field team on 26 September in Nabagram block, close to Shaktipur. Its purpose was to dissuade locals from engaging in such hunting, which is not only ecologically destructive but also a crime, under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

- Further down south, in the district of Jhargram, elephants regularly face aggression, and harassment, in response to their raiding of paddy fields, perceived 'trespassing' into human habitations or simply for fun and adrenaline rush.
- Field Officer Rabin Mahato is determined to prevent such interactions in his locality, as they can quickly escalate and result in fatal consequences for both sides involved.
- With this aim, Rabin and his volunteer team organised an awareness drive across Jhargram's Jamboni block to raise awareness on responsible behaviour around elephants and promote tolerance for a harmonious coexistence with the gentle giants. The event had active participation of local children.



Young campaigners spreading the message of human-elephant coexistence in a village in Jamboni block, Jhargram

Collection of Intelligence on Ritualistic Hunting in Bankura



Project Coordinator Aditya Banerjee interviewing a local from Metyala village, Bankura

- Last month, HEAL initiated a Rapid Action Project with support from Wildlife Trust of India to gather intelligence on the dates and locations of hunting festivals in Purulia, Bankura and Birbhum districts.
- In September, team members Santanu Das, Sushanta Basani and Aditya Banerjee conducted interviews in 51 tribal-dominated villages across 11 blocks of Bankura district.
- According to the information gathered, there are five major dates and 35 different locations in Bankura where locals participate in hunting festivals, resulting in the decimation of protected wildlife.

- Some of these events draw turnouts of nearly 10,000 hunters and villagers from neighboring states like Jharkhand, also participate.
- The insights gained from these interviews have significantly enhanced HEAL's understanding of the number and scale of ritual hunting festivals organized in Bankura. This will play a crucial role in informing HEAL's strategy to prevent these festivals during the next hunting season.

Video Feature by Better India

- The Better India is a well-known and highly impactful digital media platform that specializes in positive journalism and shares inspiring stories of individuals and institutions.
- Its regional offshoot, The Better India - Bangla, reached out to HEAL with an interest in featuring HEAL's work in one of its monthly video reels. The central focus of this coverage was HEAL's wild animal rescue operations across West Bengal.
- The video reel featured segments where Meghna Banerjee, Executive Director and CEO, HEAL, highlighted the work of dedicated and skilled wildlife rescuers present in HEAL's field team.
- These individuals possess several years of experience in handling not only snakes but also various other forms of wildlife with the utmost care and ethical standards.
- Together, they empower HEAL to make the impactful contributions it is known for and drive it closer to achieving the vision of a future where the natural world thrives alongside an eco-conscious society.



A screen grab from the video feature on the social media platform Facebook

Watch the video here: <https://www.facebook.com/thebetterindia.bangla/videos/331938169304729/>

Creating a Conservation Network in Tripura

- While Tripura shares the ecological richness of India's northeast, the state has unfortunately not received the same level of conservation attention as its counterparts in the region. The biodiversity within the state is left vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation and encroachment.
- Recognizing this critical situation, HEAL embarked on a reconnaissance (recce) visit to multiple districts in Tripura, with the primary goal of mobilizing local teams.
- HEAL has facilitated the creation of several such groups in the past, guiding them to take the lead in implementing interventions on the ground.



A patch of forest land in Ambassa hills cleared for shifting (jhum) cultivation, the primary driver of deforestation in the region



An awareness program organised by HEAL in collaboration with its newly joined members from Tripura, for the locals at Kumarghat in Unakoti district



Body parts of poached wild mammals and birds preserved and displayed as trophies inside a shed located in a remote village in Jampui hills

- The villages of Dhalai and Unakoti districts as well as the forests of Jampui Hills were explored to gain a comprehensive understanding of the localized threats to wildlife. To initiate interaction with the local communities, a short session on snake bite prevention and management was organized.
- Through these engagements, valuable information was gathered regarding issues such as illegal wildlife trafficking, trophy hunting and deforestation from members of tribal & non-tribal communities.
- Going forward, HEAL intends to collaborate with its local conservation partners in Tripura to develop landscape-appropriate strategies for preserving its biological heritage.

Raising Awareness on Snake Bite Prevention

- Zonal Coordinator Jayanta Chakraborty and teammate Bapi Das and others' persistent campaigning in Malda district to educate the community on snake bite prevention and its treatment, has caused HEAL to become well-recognised among the district administration.
- As a consequence, the Office of Block Development Officer in Gazole block invited HEAL to conduct awareness programs on 09 September and 13 September in Sahajadpur and Majhra Gram Panchayats, respectively.
- During the programs, Jayanta and Bapi gave their insights on essential topics including snake identification, snakebite prevention measures, and medically accurate first-aid techniques, needed to aid snakebite victims in achieving a full recovery.
- Later, on 19 September, they conducted a similar program for students at Masaldighi High School, Gazole block, to commemorate International Snakebite Awareness Day.



Zonal Coordinator Jayanta Chakraborty interacting with the participants at the awareness camp on 09 September



Awareness program in session on 13 September



Students of Masaldighi High School listening to the presentation with rapt attention



Jayanta sharing his insights on ways to prevent snake bites and the appropriate protocol to manage it