

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

Human & Environment
Alliance League

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The month at a glance

Monitoring and Documentation of Hunt Season 2024

New Partnership for Protecting Fishing Cats of Chilika, Odisha

Fostering Human-Elephant Coexistence in Jhargram

Wildlife Rescues

Talks, Movie Screenings and More

Monitoring and Documentation of Hunt Season 2024

- June marked the final month of the hunting season in South Bengal, with two hunts monitored by HEAL that represented opposite extremes in wildlife hunting activity and involvement of government offices in mitigating them.

Faloharini Kali Pujo Hunting Festival

- One event was the Faloharini Kali Pujo hunting festival in the districts of East Medinipur and Howrah. Before HEAL's intervention in 2016-2017, this festival led to the mass slaughter of over 5,000 wild animals annually.
- This year, for the third consecutive year, the festival was completely bloodless. From thousands of hunters in 2016 to just 3-4 groups in 2023, and none in 2024, the decline of the Faloharini Kali Pujo hunting festival is a rare conservation success story.
- This ongoing success was achieved through meticulous planning and coordination. The Howrah Forest Department convened a meeting with representatives from the Railway Protection Force, District Administration, Police, and local NGOs, including HEAL.
- Together with their counterparts in East Medinipur district, all stakeholders maintained round-the-clock vigilance at railway stations, roads, and river crossings from 04 June to 06 June to intercept any hunters that would have arrived for the festival.



(Top) A multi-stakeholder meet organised by Howrah Forest Department to discuss a plan of action for monitoring the Faloharini Kali Pujo Hunt Fest. (Bottom) Team HEAL in action.



The first group of hunters that was intercepted (top) along with the wildlife hunted by them, including three mongooses (bottom)

Ambubachi Hunting Festival

- On the other hand, approximately 130 poached wild animals were recovered from two hunting parties of 38 armed hunters during a hunting festival in Ketugram I block of East Bardhaman district on 22 June 2024.
- HEAL monitored this hunt for the first time. This hunt fest is one among many that were discovered through a systematic hunt date survey carried out in Purulia, Birbhum, and Bankura districts with support from Wildlife Trust of India.
- The wildlife toll mostly comprised birds but also included 03 grey mongooses, 01 jungle cat, and 02 Indian monitor lizards were. 03 Indian monitor lizards and 01 yellow monitor lizard were found in injured state. All these wild animals are protected under Schedule I of Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

- Despite resisting initially, officials from the Katwa Forest Range and Ketugram Police Station arrived at the scene to arrest the hunters, after HEAL repeatedly cited the existing court orders that mandate prevention of hunting festivals. A total of 34 hunters were arrested that day.
- Notably, the Katwa Forest Department and district police are stakeholders in the East Bardhaman Humane Committee, which has neither been established nor held any meetings, defying the Calcutta High Court's October 2023 order.
- Wilfull negligence of court directives by the East Bardhaman district authorities and their disregard for tip-offs provided by HEAL, which led to the loss of precious wildlife, will be reported to the court to ensure greater vigilance next year.



The second group of hunters intercepted by HEAL (top) along with all the poached wildlife, including a jungle cat (bottom)

HEAL at Indian Wildlife Ecology Conference

- Team HEAL attended the inaugural Indian Wildlife Ecology Conference (IWEC) held from 14 to 16 June 2024 at National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore. It is India's first conference dedicated to the discipline of ecology.
- HEAL's Project Coordinator, Aditya Banerjee, presented ongoing work related to fishing cats at the Small Cats Special Interest Group meeting.
- The meeting was co-convened by Tiasa Adhya HEAL's Joint Secretary and Director of the Conservation & Ecology Program, and Dr. Somita Mukherjee, Senior Principle Scientist at SACON-WII.
- The meeting was an opportunity for researchers to come together and discuss research work on small cats, an often overlooked yet extremely significant taxon experiencing a range of threats in India.
- Aditya's presentation delved into estimation of global population size of fishing cats from updated range-wide species distribution. This effort is being undertaken by HEAL's partner The Fishing Cat Project and the Fishing Cat Conservation Alliance.
- Their aim is to develop a protocol to better monitor the status of the fishing cat taking into consideration the progressive decline in the health and extent of wetlands, which are primary habitats of the fishing cat.



(Top) Aditya giving his presentation during the Special Interest Group meeting. (Bottom) Dr. Somita Mukherjee (left) and Tiasa Adhya, co-conveners of the meeting

New Partnership for Protecting Fishing Cats of Chilika, Odisha



- HEAL has partnered with The Habitats Trust to conserve the fishing cat and its threatened marshland habitat in Chilika, India's first Ramsar site, located in Odisha. This partnership marks HEAL's first official conservation footprint outside West Bengal.
- The initiatives, planned as part of this collaboration, are being jointly implemented with The Fishing Cat Project (TFCP), headed by Tiasa Adhya.
- HEAL and TFPC plan to execute interventions that integrate local livelihoods with fishing cat conservation and wetland preservation.
- This involves:
 - Strengthening fishing cat monitoring protocols and habitat management by synchronizing the roles of various stakeholders governing and using this landscape.
 - Linking local livelihoods to wetland-friendly 'wise-use' practices, such as promoting and marketing Chilika Red Rice—a flood-tolerant wetland rice variety that provides seasonal habitat to fishing cats (further details in the February 2023 Monthly Report).
 - Nurturing stewardship and inspiring advocacy for marshland ecosystems and fishing cats through innovative education programs for local school students.

(Top) Camera trap installation in progress. (Middle) TFPC holding a discussion with traditional red rice cultivators of Chilika. (Bottom) 'Mo Chilika Mo Gorbo' - My Chilika My Pride, a wetland education and advocacy program for local school students in Chilika by TFPC

Catapults to Camera at Mumbai International Film Festival



Team member Vasudha Mishra from HEAL (middle) accepting the felicitation on behalf of the film's director Ashwika Kapur

- HEAL attended the prestigious Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) to jointly represent the conservation docu-film Catapults to Cameras alongside the film's Executive Producers RoundGlass Sustain.
- The film is directed by award-winning wildlife filmmaker and a HEAL member, Ashwika Kapur. In addition to Mumbai, the film was screened across four other cities as part of MIFF.
- Held by the National Film Development Corporation of India, MIFF is one of India's biggest festivals for documentary films. Catapults to Cameras was nominated as one of the 30 films selected for the National Competition at the 18th MIFF.
- The film chronicles the transformative journey of five children from South Bengal's hunting communities as they exchange their slingshots for cameras, showcasing how their perspective on nature evolves as they start seeing animals and plants through the lens of their camera.

Fostering Human-Elephant Coexistence in Jhargram



- This month HEAL's Human-Elephant Coexistence Program in Jhargram district (further details in the January 2024 Monthly Report) progressed steadily.
- Solar fence installation was completed in Teldangri and Choto Kuraria, securing a total of six villages in Jhargram district's Jamboni block from elephant intrusion.
- Two additional compensation drives were organized, following the one conducted last month (further details in the May 2024 Monthly Report). HEAL provided in-kind compensation to beneficiaries who collectively suffered crop damages across more than 50 bighas of land due to elephants.
- As a direct short-term outcome of this project, instances of elephant harassment have markedly reduced in these villages. Residents report an increased sense of safety and reduced anxiety due to the solar fences.
- Regular sensitisation and awareness programs were held throughout the month, by team members Sangita Giri, Rohan Ghosh, and Rabin Mahato.
- These interactions were aimed at educating the community on elephant ecology, appropriate behaviour around elephants, and general practices to facilitate coexistence with these gentle giants.

(Top) One of the several satisfied beneficiaries
(Bottom) In-kind compensation drive in progress



An awareness program organised by the project team

Students intently imbibing the information being imparted to them

An elephant sensitisation program with local women in progress

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 57 rescues in 05 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Ardhendu Banik in Cooch Behar, Santanu Das in South 24 Parganas, Gautum Mallick in Tripura, Bishwapati Kuiry in Purulia and Jayanta Chakraborty and Bapi Das in Malda.

