WORLD HABITAT DAY

Habitats not just for humanity, but for life



Abida Rahman Chowdhury

Early Spring Sonadia Island

Through the choppy waters of the Bay of Bengal, our speedboat twisted and turned trying to

reach Sonadia Island. The boat, fitted with a Yamaha engine, sprayed us all with seawater and by the time we reached our destination, my spectacle eyed self was hard-pressed to focus on anything. Though it was early spring, the sun was raging and the landscape looked barren beneath it. Yes, it is a pretty island, but what more could it have, I kept wondering.

The people with me, ornithologists by profession, did not entertain my doubts. They jumped off from the boat into the knee-deep water and walked towards the shore. I followed suit but kept wondering, how did life thrive here? In this apparently barren mudflat.

An ornithologist and wildlife conservationist based in Bangladesh explained it best in an article he penned on the significance of mudflats. It is interesting what people from different backgrounds see when they look at a landscape, the contrast between seen and unseen beauty and value, the urge for preservation versus the greed for alteration. What most people do not see in these coastal mudflats are the hidden treasures of our biological diversity. Every year, more than one hundred thousand birds visit our mudflats to feed on the invisible life that flourishes on mud, silt and clay found in intertidal areas. These areas generally support a range of invertebrates, which are extremely productive biologically. These include benthic organisms, molluscs, crustaceans and marine worms.

Life happens in each layer of this habitat. Up above in the skies, thousands of northern pintails come flapping their wings... a tad below is the halfsandy, half-muddy plain where scores of shorebirds forage busily for molluscs, worms, little tiny marine organisms brought in by the tidal action that the

island is subjected to twice a day.

A layer below the mudflat is the Bay of Bengal. Here is home of the Olive Ridley Turtles, Green turtles, Irawaddy Dolphins and much, much more. The shallow zones support important fish species that contribute to the food security and economy of the nation.

This ecologically important habitat is under a multitude of threats—from development pressures to sand lifting to large-scale tourism plans—and the wildlife that depend and thrive on this land too are left in the lurch.

Winter of 2013, Brahmaputra river in Kurigram

On a biting cold winter morning, three of us boarded a small wooden boat, fitted with an engine, to tour through the chars of Brahmaputra river in Kurigram. We were looking for River Lapwings and Black-bellied Terns, among other birds. This time, I was stumped. For how could life exist in this seeming nothingness, where there

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If we do not ensure safe homes for all creatures that occupy this planet, then we genuinely risk losing our only home: Planet Earth. PHOTO: SAYAM U CHOWDHURY

was no large looming tree, where only sand banks and grasslands made up the landscape? But train your eye a little, let it adjust to the stillness of the river, and life happens. A River Lapwing couple flies around, toot-toots at each other ringing alarm bells at our presence. For a while, the duo flies around us, zooming past the binocular window in swift motions, then they settle on char—a piece of land that shows up during the dry season.

Photos are taken, the moment written down in notebooks for future

research, and we cruise on.

During the rains in Sundarbans It does not take long for the sky to turn menacingly black from azure blue inside the forest. Again, I find myself on a boat, rowing on with an old weatherbeaten man, a woman who has made it her life's mission to visit the forest every year, and a few others. The rain is like a curtain in the mangrove forest. It comes down in sleets and visibility is poor. So, to see wildlife, you have to tune in even more. You tune in your ears and get to listen to the thud of a monitor lizard. Row on ahead and a threateningly lowhanging branch reveals that it is in fact

harbouring a white-lipped pit viper.

When the rain stops and you get a moment of respite and watch the forest in the calm of the setting sun, you will be slightly "shook" as a pod of Gangetic River dolphins suddenly come

Days and nights in a restored habitat in Savar

I chanced upon this place by a stroke of luck. This is a vast swathe of land bought some time in the 90s and is now privately owned. Here, mostly native trees, ferns, and plants were sown, some ponds were dug, and a lot was left up to nature. Although used as a residence by the people who own the place, the land is left mostly untouched. Coconut trees, large banyan trees, banana plants, kaminis, hibiscus grow here and there. Here just in the span of a single day, we saw monitor lizards, jackals and scores of birds. Two frogs also made themselves cosy in the house that we spent the night at.

A quiet, very green street in Dhaka

I had to wait for a while a few days back in an alley that was, to my surprise, full of lush trees. With the wise words of a podcast in my mind—ten minutes of

nature a day, makes you sharper and wiser (something along those lines, I promise)—I stared at the trees. And lo and behold, soon a woodpecker came and settled on one of the branches. For a while, I marvelled at the sight, then a commotion on the street caught my eye. So, for a while I watched the foodpanda delivery man and the chronicle of a hard-to-locate address. In another little while, I chanced upon little frogs jumping right past apartment buildings. No sooner was I done staring at the tiny frogs, which I swear will fit on my fingertip, than I noticed a movement on the hanging wires. And guess what, a squirrel quickly ambled on it and made it to a tree and was gone from my sight.

What ties all of these places and things together?

It turns out, the first Monday of each October is observed as World Habitat Day. Now when I first sat down to write this piece, I did not have in mind a theme, but a simple search on the internet revealed that this day was in fact meant to ensure safe homes and habitat for humans. It is hard to explain the shock and surprise I felt. While there is no denying the need for safe urban spaces and shelter for humans, especially in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, it feels strange to see World Habitat Day concerning itself only about humans.

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I come with an alternate plan to observe this day. Perhaps we should ensure habitat for all forms of life, not just humanity?

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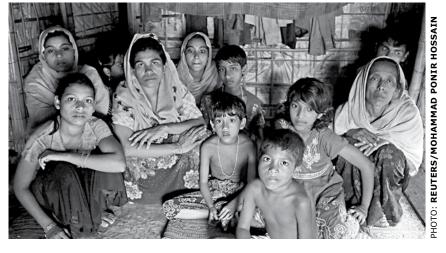
How radio is playing a vital role for Rohingya women

DILSHAD HOSSAIN DODUL and MD ASHRAFUL GONI

N this era of digital media, radio has become akin to a novelty considered a "cool" medium of entertainment that inspires nostalgia, but not so effective in terms of circulating information. Other media such as online portais offer information faster and in far more intriguing formats. The radio, however, still functions as a vital tool for humanitarian communication.

In December last year, we, the writers of this article, conducted research on the effectiveness of radio as a communication tool in Rohingya refugee camps, and found that radio has a unique ability to serve the refugees with information—83 percent of our respondents said they prioritise radio for information over entertainment. Radio is the most accessible and therefore most important medium of information dissemination for almost 100 percent of the women we interviewed. It provides both life-saving information as well as content which helps create awareness among the people in one of the most vulnerable communities of the world.

On August 25 this year, Bangladesh observed the third anniversary of providing shelter to more than 800,000 Rohingya refugees. Providing electricity and mobile network in the densely crowded refugee camps is not a viable option for the Bangladesh government given that the entire area is hilly, remote, and subject to



Ninety-eight percent of Rohingya female respondents say they entirely trust the authenticity of information offered by radio, according to a survey.

considerations of national security. So access to television is limited, and mobile SIM cards and internet are banned. Radio, therefore, is one of the most effective communication tools for them, especially for women who have restrictions placed on their movement and have very low literacy rates. Radio allows these women to listen to vital information in a safe and friendly space. They're also able to access invaluable content relating to maternal and child care.

Ongoing wars, conflicts and tensions around the world are causing women and children to become particularly vulnerable demographics. Through a survey of 50 families in the Rohingya

camps, we found that radio contents about maternal and child health care are listened to by most female respondents—a large portion of the population inside camps are either children or women who are pregnant. A 45-year-old mother-in-law of a young woman shared that most of the newly married women are too young to know about maternal health care, and "listener clubs" aired by radio stations serve the same role as schools for them. Another mother-of-two emphasised the importance of docu-dramas on radio, sharing that these encourage their children to adopt healthy habits such as washing hands. Meanwhile, most of the male respondents prefer listening to news on the medium.

A good number of the women stressed that radio informs them about the legal support offered by camp authorities against domestic violence. The audio-dramas about child and women's safety encourage them to approach local authorities if and when they face such kind of violence. "In our community, our husbands are free to get married more than once and leave us with the children. Camp-in-charge (CIC) officers informed us through radio-transmitted news that we can now complain to the CIC office if such things happen to us. In fact, we are obligated by Bangladeshi law to do so,' listener club respondents shared.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents said they believe entirely the information they hear on the radio, while 18 percent said they believe the information partially. Among them, 98 percent of female respondents entirely trust the authenticity of information offered by radio—this number is lower among male respondents, which appeared to have some negative effects. In 2019, for instance, a malicious rumour had spread about Rohingya children being stolen and killed in the name of God to make the largest bridge in Bangladesh. This rumour was spread through Facebook, and Rohingya men were found to have had access to and faith in social media—more than in radio—at the time. Government officials failed to combat the rumour because Rohingya men simply did not believe that the radio content was more authentic than the content circulating through social media.

Despite the influence of radio among women in refugee camps, a focus group

discussion with influential people from the camps revealed that some of them do not approve of women having access to information through radio. Some believe that since women are not allowed to join in or share their opinion in the public sphere or even make family decisions in most cases, it is pointless for them to have access to information. Accepting the fact that radio stations provide health-related information to women who most need it, the FGD respondents argued that women are unable to understand the value of other important news related to local and world politics, therefore more men should be provided with radio devices so they can properly utilise its power as a communication tool. Yet we didn't find such a tendency to want to control the media among the women we surveyed.

Technology remains a domain of the man in these areas; women have to struggle for access and use. However, it is still good to see that despite all these restrictive attitudes, community radio stations as well as humanitarian agencies are trying their best to ensure women's access to information through radio.

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QUOTABLE Quote



ABRAHAM LINCOLN (1809-1865)16th president of the United States who brought about the emancipation of the slaves.

Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

1 Steamed 5 Account contents 10 Streetcars 12 Some messages 13 Accept without question 14 Too trusting 15 Court worker: 16 Mag. workers 18 Tell tales 19 Crumble to dust 21 Mint product

order

32 Nest find

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42 D.C. team **DOWN** 1 Iron output 22 Not built to 3 Crib toy 4 Outback bird 24 Turns suddenly 6 Thurman of film 25 Miking pro 29 Tough spot 7 Executed 30 Spring holiday perfectly

33 Food additive 9 Cold weather 34 Hoopla 11 Highway 35 Old market scofflaw 37 Prepare for a 17 Sign of the body-building unmoved contest 20 Michelangelo 39 Showed over work 40 Kept in reserve 21 Hacienda houses 41 Hang loosely 23 Near-sighted

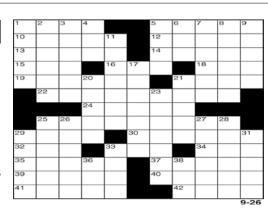
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31 Boxing ring 33 Lion's pride 36 Grammys category 38 Roadhouse

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8 Angelic



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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