

Feature

Environment

Plastic Wastes Exported to Third World

by Ann Leonard

JAKARTA, Indonesia: In the 90 degree heat, women stand over huge piles of plastic garbage. It is too hot to wear a protective smock...

that land filling plastic preserves it for ever and burning it releases some of the most toxic substances known to science...

Even though the women are working in a crowded slum outside Indonesia's largest city, much of the writing on the plastic garbage is in English. The women sort through liquid soap bottles, food wrappers, disposable diaper packages and huge bags with familiar logos...

The women sorting the bags cannot read English, so they do not know that the white powder is titanium dioxide, which causes respiratory damage. They do know, however, that when the Indonesian plastics recycling companies they work for began importing plastic waste from the United States, they developed skin rashes they never had when they only processed locally produced plastic waste.

The health risks faced by the Indonesian women—and thousands like them throughout Asia and elsewhere in the Third World—are a direct result of the upsurge in plastic use in the US—and of industry efforts to quell public concern in the US about the environmental effects of increased plastics use.

Plastic's New Image — Biodegradable and Recyclable

In 1989, US corporations used more than 12 billion pounds of plastic for packaging designed to be thrown away as soon as the package is opened. In the 1990s, this figure is expected to double.

It was not until recently, when people began to realise

A confidential 22 December 1989 letter from Larry Thomas, president of The Society of the Plastics Industry, invited plastics manufacturers to help develop a \$150 million public relations campaign. The image of plastics among consumers is deteriorating at an alarmingly fast pace. Opinion research experts tell us that it has plummeted so far and so fast, in fact, that we are approaching a point of no return...

"Public opinion polls during the 1980s show that an increasing percentage of the general public believes plastics are harmful to health and the environment. That percentage rose sharply from 56% in 1988 to 72% in 1989. At this point we will soon reach a point from which it will be impossible to recover our credibility. (Witness what has happened to the nuclear energy industry)."

The plastics industry developed a two-point plan to restore its image. First, by mixing small amounts of corn starch into plastic products, the industry claimed its plastic packaging garbage bags and diapers were 'biodegradable.' It did not take long for the US public to figure out that although corn biodegrades, plastic does not.

Next the industry jumped aboard the recycling bandwagon. Instead of 'biodegradable,' nearly every plastic package on the supermarket shelf is now stamped 'recyclable.'

"If we can get our act together and show the world just how recyclable these valuable polymers are and that the industry stands behind the commitment to prove it, then

US companies are exporting over 200 million pounds of toxic plastic wastes annually to Third World countries, especially in Asia. The wastes are recycled or discarded, posing safety risks for workers, the public and the environment.

the mathematics will change," explained Marty Forman, chair of the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries' plastic committee last June. "It won't be a 60-billion pound market, shrinking to 45 because 15 billion pounds were recycled, it will be an 80 or 90 or 100-billion-pound market which has expanded because those plastics are recycled."

Unfortunately, the plastics companies' claims that their plastics is 'recyclable' are badly misleading. Plastic waste is seldom if ever recycled into the same product, so recycling used plastic does not make a dent in the amount of plastic needed to make the original products.

Additionally, each time plastic is heated, its chemical composition changes and its quality decreases, so the number of times it can be recycled is very limited. The most dishonest aspect of plastic recycling claims, however, may be that many of the plastic bags and bottles dropped off at local recycling centres in the US are shipped to Indonesia and other Third World countries, where much of it is not recycled at all.

Plastic Waste Exports

The plastics industry is now adopting the tried-and-true practices of international waste traders world-wide. By exporting their wastes to less industrialised countries, US plastics corporations have learned, they can avoid domestic regulations and community opposition to waste-handling facilities, and pay their workers wages far below US levels.

It is increasingly likely that the plastic bags and bottles dropped off at a local recycling centre in the US will end up in

the countryside in China or in an illegal waste importer's shop in Manila.

Last year alone, over 200 million pounds of plastic waste were exported from the US, according to data from Port Import/Export Research Service. This waste was sent to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, the Dominican Republic, Ghana, Ecuador, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Israel, Jamaica, South Korea, Malaysia, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago.

The primary target of US plastic waste exporters is Asia. In 1991, more than 15 million pounds of plastic wastes were shipped to the Philippines, 35 million pounds to Indonesia and over 75 million pounds to Hong Kong (much of which was sent on the China). Industry recycling coalitions tout exports for diverting waste from diminishing US landfill capacity while providing much needed employment in less industrialised countries. In a September 1991 issue of Plastics News, Gretchen Brewer, a consultant with Earth Circle in La Jolla, California, justified plastic waste exports to Asia because 'they have an urgent need to employ a lot of people, and it also helps them get more raw materials.'

The US Chamber of Commerce also denies that there are any problems with plastic waste exports. Hearvey Alter, Manager of the Chambers Resources Policy Department, testified last fall in a congressional hearing on the subject. 'There is no basis,' he assured lawmakers 'for accusations that the United States is "dumping" hazardous (or other waste) on unsuspecting developing countries. Materials for recycling, virtually by definition, are sold to enterprises in countries with sophisticated manufacturing facilities.'

Since there are no federal oversight mechanisms or standards for plastic waste exports, no one really knows what happens to the millions of pounds exports annually. Harrie Cohen, chief executive officer of Ontario Plastics Recycling in California, admits that he sends all of the plastic collected by his firm to China. 'I don't know exactly what they're doing with it,' he told a plastics news reporter last year. Apparently, the US 'cradle to grave' approach to waste management which requires tracking and monitoring at all stages from waste production to transport to disposal, does not apply if the grave is in another country.

A Greenpeace investigation of 'recycling' facilities in Asia reveals that plastic waste is being shipped to countries which ban waste imports, that recycling facilities are endangering workers and the surrounding environment and that much of the plastic sent to be recycled is simply dumped in landfills or in random locations.

Indonesia

US plastics 'recyclers' sent over 35 million pounds of plastic waste to Indonesia last year. The majority of the waste was sent to two cities on the island of Java—Jakarta and Surabaya.

Once the waste arrives in Indonesia, it undergoes labour-intensive sorting by hand. First, workers separate for disposal the non-plastic



Imported plastic waste recycling company, Indonesia — Photo: Ann Leonard

wastes—newspapers, clothing scraps, metal scraps and miscellaneous other trash—that are imported along with the plastic cargo. Plastics that are either too contaminated or of such poor quality that recycling is not feasible are added to the discard pile. The owner of one Indonesian plastics recycling company estimates that up to 40% of the imported waste is directly landfilled at a local dump.

The plastic processing all happens indoors, in hot, crowded rooms with no ventilation systems. Recycling facilities in the US, in contrast, are equipped with vacuum vents over the plastic melting machines to immediately remove fumes from the workers' environment.

Hong Kong and China

Hong Kong is the largest single importer of US plastic waste. In 1991, it received more than half of all US plastics waste exports.

The recycling facilities in Hong Kong look much the same as those in Indonesia. The same plastic grinding, melting and re-shaping machines are in use, releasing the same strong noxious fumes. As in Indonesia, the untreated rinse water is discharged down drains or out the win-

dow. A number of plastic waste importers in Hong Kong simply warehouse waste en route to China. A visit to a plastics recycling company in China revealed more of the same basic processes, but a different setting. Instead of the crowded slums of Jakarta or the industrial skyscrapers of Hong Kong, the facility was located on a dirt road in the countryside in Guangzhou.

A massive pile of discarded-unrecyclable plastics clothing, scraps and other garbage occupy the centre of the courtyard. The facility manager explains that there is no central dump in which this material can be disposed, so it is dumped in random locations in the countryside.

Last August, six containers exported from New York

Harbour and supposedly carrying plastic waste arrived in Shanghai, China. When the Chinese plastic waste importers, opened the container, they discovered a grisly concoction of US waste. Eight months later, the Shanghai City Environmental Protection Bureau shambled the containers and reported: '55% are... mostly household garbage, blood transfusion bags, and tubes. In order to prevent pollution, you must immediately request a professional unit to thoroughly sterilise the waste plastic and household garbage.'

The Philippines

Although the Philippines has a strict law banning waste imports, US corporations and waste brokers shipped over 15 million pounds of plastic waste to the country in 1991. As is the case in many waste-importing countries, underfunded customs and environmental agencies are unable to detect and intercept incoming waste shipments. And since the shipments are arranged covertly, the locations of the importing companies are unknown.—Third World Network Features

About the writer, Ann Leonard is a waste trade campaigner with Greenpeace.

Allegations of Rhino Trade Shock Nepal

by Jan Sharma

The Himalayan kingdom, which has little resources other than scenic beauty and perennial water resources, is using rhinos to win friends and influence major donors

THERE have been allegations of trade in endangered rhinos by Nepal's agency created to protect and preserve the kingdom's wildlife.

Nepal's vernacular tabloids have alleged that the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC), headed by Prince Gyanendra, King Birendra's younger brother, has been setting 'prices' and receiving 'donations' for the rhinos given away to friendly nations as 'gifts'.

The controversy surfaced after a letter written by Dr Ong Swee Law, chairman of the Singapore Zoological Garden, and addressed to the Nepali government, was obtained and published by the vernacular weeklies.

The KMTNC claims that 'no trade or exchange of such a resource is possible without the prior consent and permission of the government.'

A spokesman for the agency said: 'The Trust, a non-governmental organisation, selling rhinos to any other country simply does not arise.'

In the letter, Dr Ong had requested for an 'additional pair' of the rhinos under the 'same terms and conditions.'

But an official of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks of the Ministry of Forest and Environment insists that the matter is not as innocent as that because of the allegations of 'underhanded exchanges' of bribe.

'We are grateful that your government released a young pair in April 1990. We reciprocated with a donation of US\$150,000 for the female and US\$100,000 for the male. We are, therefore, turning to you to consider releasing another female on the same terms and conditions as the previous pair,' Dr Ong wrote in the letter dated July 18, 1991.

The previous deal was struck immediately following the success of the movement for democracy that toppled King Birendra's autocratic one-party regime and gave way to a multi-party parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy in April 1990.

The forestry minister, who is in charge of the autonomous, non-profit KMTNC, was Jhal Nath Khanal whose United Marxist Leninist (UML) faction of the Communist Party of Nepal, some Kathmandu newspapers allege, has the backing of Prince Gyanendra.

UML was the junior partner in the interim coalition government headed by (former) Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, president of the ruling Nepali Congress Party. His job was to draft a democratic constitution and have free elections conducted to

elect a government. Mr Bhattarai lost the general elections, the first free polls in 32 years, held in May 1991. However, he continues to be the president of the ruling party.

Mr Khanal won the elections but was dismissed as the UML official spokesman following the publication of the letter. 'I really do not know what happened then,' said Mr Khanal, pleading innocence.

Rhinos in Nepal, now estimated at 360, are largely concentrated in the tropical Chitwan Valley, south of Kathmandu. Only 1,500 one-horned rhinos are believed to be alive worldwide.

A United Nations study in 1967 found only 90 rhinos in Nepal's forest.

The animals have suffered from wanton hunting and poaching for the horn which easily fetches 500,000 rupees a pound in the world market. They are greatly in demand in Asia as traditional medicines and the Middle East where they are carved into dagger handles.

Thanks to the conservation efforts launched with the technical assistance of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Nepal's rhino population has increased remarkably in recent years. The Washington-based Smithsonian Institute has been helping Nepal undertake research on the animal's habitat and ecology.

Rhino hunting has been illegal since 1847 but poaching continued due to lack of enforcement of the decree. But not now.

Wildlife officials are now translocating the rhinos to the swampy Bardia Valley in west Nepal in order to promote the scientific management of the animal's habitat. About 40 rhinos have been translocated thus far.

One reason for such translocation was to ease the 'overcrowded' rhino population concentrated in Chitwan, KMTNC officials said.

The Himalayan kingdom, which has little resources other than scenic beauty and perennial water resources, is using rhinos to win friends and influence major donors. It has provided India four breeding adult female rhinos in exchange for 16 elephants. A similar gift was sent to Germany, the United States and Singapore.

Both Nepal and Singapore are among the 118 countries which are signatories to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) which lists endangered and rare species of plants and animals, including the one-horned rhinos.

Forestry Still Myanmar's Top Dollar Earner

by Minn Thu

MYANMAR is spending a lot of money to make more money from its chief foreign exchange earner—forests.

The former Burma will invest US \$20.33 million on forestry for the fiscal year 1992-93. In turn, it hopes to earn up to US \$164.83 million. Critics are quick to point out that it will mean more destruction of Myanmar's tropical forests, including the world's biggest teak forest.

Forestry officials insist Myanmar still retains 50 per cent of its original forest cover (critics have a much lower figure). And as a concession to environment groups, the government has created a national commission for environmental affairs.

Myanmar has also been criticised for granting logging rights to Thai firms along the Thai-Burma border. The government now has decided not to renew nor extend the contract for Thai firms.

The government also reported that the area of reserved forests has increased by 479 square miles—from 34,725 sq m in 1961-62 to 39,639 sq m today.

Afforestation work is going on with new teak and hardwood being planted in areas where extraction has occurred. In 1991, some 22,261 million teak trees were planted on 496,918 acres and 26.1 million hardwood trees on 580,039 acres.

Still, Myanmar is determined to earn more from forestry, its number one foreign exchange earner. In fiscal year 1991-92 which ended March 31, forestry accounted for US \$202.8 million worth of exports which included

36,000 cubic tons of sawn teak and 160,000 cubic tons of teak logs, 500 cubic tons of sawn hardwood and 454,945 tons of hardwood logs. Forest products represented 37.89 per cent of total exports last year.

This fiscal year's investment on forestry is actually lower than the previous year's US \$29.5 million. But its share of the total public sector expenditure is higher.

Critics are worried over the destruction of Myanmar's forests, including the world's biggest teak forest. Before controls were made, teak production in 1990-91 was a record 440,000 tons

Last year, Myanmar hoped to earn US \$175.5 million from forestry but was able to earn only US \$163.33 million—still a substantial 5.1 per cent growth over the previous year's.

Myanmar has adopted a selective felling system with a 30-year cycle. The system has set an annual allowable cut limit of 350,000 tons of teak and two million tons of hardwood.

Before controls were imposed and with logging along the country's borders allowed, teak production in 1990-91 registered a record 440,000 tons, including 140,000 tons from the border areas.

were getting farther and farther away and machinery and equipment were unavailable. Hardwood extraction rose from 1.54 million tons to 1.89 million tons, which included 860,000 tons from border areas.

This year, Myanmar is aiming for a teak production target of 350,000 tons including 90,000 tons from border areas. Production target for hardwood is 1.917 million, including 304,000 tons from the border.

Myanmar is promoting 'participatory forestry' to help farmers increase their incomes from forestry and to improve land-use practices. Conservation measures and agroforestry are being promoted. Indeed, a successful watershed management pilot project at the Kanda Dam is being extended to two critical watersheds in the Puyi and Inke Lake areas.

Under the project, financed by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and supported by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), farmers will have access to credit and storage facilities. They will be assisted in marketing their crops.

Puyi is a major source of water supply for the Yangon area and the townships of Hmawbi and Taiky. Primary forests in Puyi have been destroyed for fuelwood and timber. Inke Lake, a prime highland tourist attraction, is facing serious environmental degradation due to declining fauna and increasing population pressure.

—Depthnews Asia

Project Tiger Claims its Tiger Widows

by Atiya Singh from Calcutta

In 1973, when a project to preserve the tigers of India started there were 1,800 tigers in the country. Today, Sunderbans, one of 17 reserves, alone has 300 tigers. But there is a dark side. Tigers have killed thousands of people living near the sanctuaries. The problem, reports Gemini News Service, is how to reconcile the rights of the humans with that of the animals.

shrank to 1,800. Alarmed at this, India launched a conservation programme the following year.

Sunderbans then had only 120 tigers. Today it has 300 tigers and 50 cubs, the highest concentration of tigers in a sanctuary in the world.

The reserve, one of 17 such sanctuaries in the country, has a harsh and inhospitable ecosystem. Mangrove swamps thrive across the delta of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers, between India and Bangladesh. The delta has split the land mass into 11 major islands, each divided into myriad little islands.

During high tide twice a day, the forest is inundated by the sea, making it slushy and muddy. The drinking water is saline. In a 1,330 sq km area of the tiger reserve—designated as the core area—the hundreds of channels and maritime backwaters are full of fish.

Through entry into the core area is illegal, farmers living on the outskirts of the reserve enter it to fish, collect honey and cut wood. For many it is their only source of livelihood since they own little or no land.

Prithviraj Sengupta, field director of Project Tiger, says the Royal Bengal Tiger subsists on deer and pigs. Its diet also includes monitor lizards, monkeys, crabs, fish and birds—not considered normal tiger fare.

Living in difficult conditions in Sunderbans has required the tiger to adapt, but it is not intrinsically a man-eater, says Sengupta.

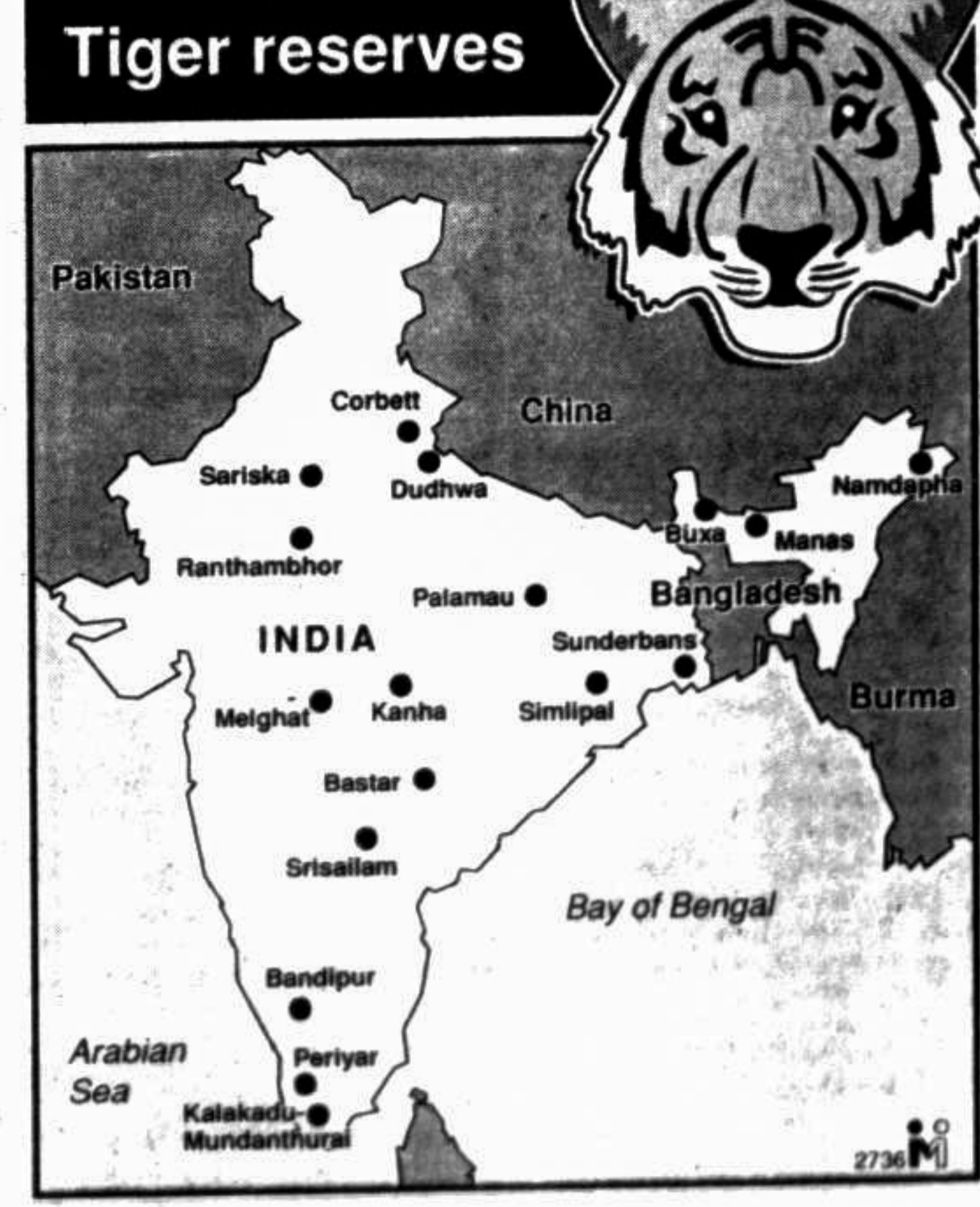
Ninety per cent of victims are fishermen. Many reasons are cited for the tigers turning into man-eaters. Some say drinking saline water raises their blood pressure and makes them aggressive.

In 1981, the reserve authorities put clay dummies of fishermen in an area where the tigers are active. They

were wired to give a 300-volt shock to a tiger pouncing on them.

'Though never seriously hurt,' says naturalist Zafar Jordon, 'Tigers receiving a jolt have been heard calling in pain two days later.'

Other methods devised by Project Tiger include: Solar lights, masks and electrified



fencing. All have proved ineffective. Sengupta says that only in rare cases do tigers stray into human settlements and kill people. According to him, the solution to the problem lies in abolishing the buffer zone of the reserve.

People are officially allowed into this area twice a year for honey-collecting and woodcutting. Fishing permits are issued all the year round.

Sengupta says no one should be allowed into the sanctuary. He adds: 'Why should we go on stealing honey and fish, both of which the tiger relishes, from his own home, right under his nose?'

He believes people who go into the sanctuary for their livelihoods should be taught alternative skills by the government. If tigers are eliminated from Sunderbans, the people would soon wipe out the forest. And once that happened the denuded Sunderbans would pose a climatic hazard to coastal West Bengal.

Besides checking erosion, the mangrove forests act as a shield protecting the mainland against cyclones. Ecologists cite the once-forested areas of Khulna and Chittagong in Bangladesh where the trees were indiscriminately cut for human habitation.

Today, these coastal areas and their environs are regularly devastated by cyclones. Experts say the authorities should periodically cull confirmed man-eaters and old tigers unable to hunt their natural prey. This would reduce the number of tigers' victims without interrupting the economic activity of the people.

—Gemini News About the Author: ATIYA SINGH is a freelance journalist and lecturer born in Hyderabad. She was awarded a PhD in English Literature in 1989.