



SAVING PYTHONS

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She is a real naughty girl.

Her beauty, her sinewy build and innocent eyes belie the impishness she nurtures. She would go where she is not to. She would do what is forbidden for her.

But she is bad at everything. Every time she performs some misdeeds, she gets caught red handed. In the middle of the night she would be discovered in a village kitchen or in a poultry pen stealing food. Ducks and everything. Or trying to get into somebody's pond.

Her long, lazy appearance also belies the strength packed within her or the speed at which she can move. To be exact, she is 15 feet long, from head to tail. This is Chaity, a 15 kg beautiful female Burmese Python.

We had been trying to track her for quite some time. She has been telemetered after she was caught from a

when the ticks would suck enough blood and bloat would the bites start itching like hell.

We stood among the bush and again checked on the receiver. This time a faint tweet came.

"Got it," Caesar was excited. He was slowly sweeping the antenna to pinpoint the location. "Well, it seems to be over that hill."

We came down the same thorny path and climbed the other hill steeper than the previous one. Once on top, Caesar checked on the signal.

"Strange," he muttered. "It is now blipping from another direction."

"We were misguided by deflection," said SMA Rashid. His organisation CARINAM manages this python project.

Going down was even tougher this time. We had to grab the thorny branches to keep us from falling over. We walked along the outskirts of a tea garden. It was a strangely hot day for

hiding ground.

As we finally found Chaity a week later in a bush, I was really felling weird because on many days have I crossed such places and might have been close to stomping on a python.

So when the villagers called to tell the presence of Chaity, the python team was elated. Finally they had found it.

Another surprise awaited them when they found the snake in the pond. It was just keeping its nose above the surface.

"Our knowledge was that pythons spend the winter in holes in the ground," Rashid said. "But now we came to know that they may also spend almost the whole winter in water. Water remains warmer in winter. Only when the winter becomes too harsh and water turns cold they slip inside holes."

"And actually they live in ponds for common use," said Caesar. "We have seen people bathing or washing clothes within a few feet of pythons and yet

nails. There was this huge python called Boro Bonnie who had preyed on ducks five times before being hacked to death.

These incidents indicate how grave is the python-human conflict in and around Lawachhera.

They mostly prey on ducks. They lay in wait near water bodies or in the marsh land and as ducks go there they ambush on them.

"The conflict is a big problem," Caesar said. "We try to dissuade the villagers from rearing ducks. But the villagers must understand that even if they kill one duck or two in a while -- and remember pythons don't need to feed often, they can go without food even for a year -- they are more beneficial for the farmers. They kill rodents which destroy crops in big way."

The Python Project's work is paying off slowly. Kanai is often getting calls once villagers sight a python or any other snake. Before that they would just beat the snakes dead.

We talked to a villager who had once alerted Kanai. We asked him why he did it.

"Well, these people say pythons are good for farmers," the stocky old man said. "They don't harm humans."

"But we have to find a way of compensating the villagers. Once we complete our study of the pythons we will put forward our recommendations to the government," Rashid said.

NEAR EXTINCT

Caesar and his team are trying to find answers to many more questions. They want to know how many pythons are

pythons released in the forest had gone back to their original home ground.

SMILE IN HER FACE?

Two weeks later, we were in Lawachhera again.

Days had become shorter and the air cooler. You could get that wintery fragrance from the forest, a smell of dried leaves and dying moss. All the leeches had gone underground to hibernate the winter. Those greedy ones who waited to suck some more blood would die because the ground would harden and the leeches would not be able to bore through.

We swept the antenna and checked on the receiver. This time the signal was very strong.

We left the metalled road and stepped into the forest. We walked for not more than 15 minutes before Kanai stopped in front of a bush.

"It's here," he announced definitely. "I can see it."

I crouched and came closer to the undergrowth. First there was nothing. Just the leafy twigs and shadows.

And then I saw it. A thick brownish coil. Then it started moving fast. A beautiful sight as the python's printed slithery body worked in an effortless manner. As if by some magic it was gaining momentum.

But Kanai was swift. He lurched forward and grabbed Chaity. The long python was twisting in his hands, unable to do anything as its head was under firm grip.

We checked on the location; it was close to Radhanagar, the village from



Sharif Caesar, left, and SMA Rashid, right, trying to track Chaity with telemeter

After tracking down, it's time to catch her

Yes, finally we found her...

village pond last year. A small radio device was surgically inserted inside her skin near her tail. And now we try to pick her signal.

Sharif Caesar Rahman was holding an antenna -- like the ones we used to find on top of every house back when we only had the terrestrial channel BTV -- and sweeping it slowly in the air. A small pack housing the receiver was hanging from his neck.

Caesar has initiated this python project in Bangladesh in association with Centre for Advanced Research in Natural Resources & Management (CARINAM) -- a not-for-profit NGO dedicated for wildlife conservation -- to conserve this magnificent serpent. He checked on the receiver, tweaking with the knobs. A cackling noise came. He trained his ears to hear signals from the transmitter. But none came. Only a couple of laughing thrush and flower peckers chirped.

"Kanai, let's move on. It's not here," he said.

"But it was around here last time. It should be here," the lanky man replied. It is hard to believe the amount of courage and dedication this half-educated man carries for python tracking.

We moved on. We were in the middle of the Lawachhera forest. For the last two hours we had been walking through impossible terrains.

Kanai was making us climb small hillocks full of thorny bushes. Even in my wildest dreams I would not have thought of doing this madness. Sharp thorns stung on my exposed parts. My palms were by now all perforated and bleeding. Leeches were creeping inside the shoes and merrily sucking on. And I still did not know how many ticks were drilling into my skin. Only days after

mid-November.

Another hour's walk brought us to the other side of the forest. Here the signal was coming from yet another direction completely inaccessible.

We were all confused. Should it be another wild goose chase? We were all spent up in the midday heat.

We gave up the idea of finding out Chaity.

THE ART OF HIDING

Chaity is shedding a new light on the behavior of pythons.

Caesar has charted his positions and it shows the snake is moving in the direction of the village she was captured from. As the winter is approaching, she has picked up speed. She is clearly in a hurry.

A year ago, Chaity was caught from a pond in Radhanagar village close to the newly-built palatial hotel Grand Sultan. Villagers found him a nuisance gobbling up ducks and chickens.

Luckily for her, CARINAM had launched the python project by then. Caesar had trained a few people in handling pythons. Kanai was going around the villages asking people to inform him if they spotted a python.

Until then Caesar's search for pythons was quite frustrating. He had been exploring around but it seemed pythons did not exist in Lawachhera.

Where were all these snakes that the forest department and the wildlife poacher and pseudo environmentalist Sishes released?

Slowly the team found out the mystery. Although huge in size, pythons are master in the art of hiding. They may lay there still in the grass and yet you won't notice it from five feet away. They can simply mesh with the environment. And Lawachhera is no grassland, it is full of bush and undergrowth, the perfect

they do not realise there is a big snake beside them."

The python project has actually telemetered three more pythons -- Aasha, Bonnie and Dean. There are many more interesting aspects that are now gleaming from their tracking.

It is now clear that pythons are deeply territorial. They have a high sense of geo positions. All these telemetered snakes were released deep in the forest. But they eventually would go back to their original habitat and often endanger themselves.

Chaity had twice gone back to the village from where she was caught. And as its current records show, it is once again going back to its home, every day slithering slowly towards Radhanagar village.

Once they return to the locality, the pythons cause havoc.

CHAITY, THE LUCKY GIRL

One day in the dead of the night Phoolmati had woken up to the ducks quacking in the pen. Thinking it was a jackal, she came out with a flashlight. And then she had the fright of her life.

Six dead ducks were lying on the ground and in the corner sat a huge python all coiled up. Its unblinking eyes looked innocently at Phoolmati. Its forked tongue flickered in and out.

She immediately called Kanai who came rushing and took away Chaity. But Phoolmati's loss remained uncompensated.

"I am a poor lady. It's a great loss for me. But they only cared for the python and not me," Phoolmati said.

Chaity was lucky but not the other three of her kind. These three pythons also telemetered were ruthlessly killed by villagers. One's head was chopped off. Another was pierced with sharp

there in Lawachhera. Pythons in Bangladesh fall in the vulnerable group just above the near extinct status.

They have so far come across about 25 individual pythons. But the recent trend of python rescue is quite disturbing.

"In the last one year, all the pythons we have rescued from villagers or those which killed ducks are those four telemetered by us," Caesar said.

This raises the question: Where are the others? Why only the telemetered ones are entering the villages? What has happened to all those pythons released by the forest department?

One explanation may be those

Caesar has charted his positions and it shows the snake is moving in the direction of the village she was captured from. As the winter is approaching, she has picked up speed. She is clearly in a hurry.

Caesar measuring her weight, as Rashid looks on

where it was caught. It was definitely moving fast towards its home and it could feel the urgency of the approaching winter. Nights were already getting quite chilly.

I held Chaity and felt its cool body. I gently stroked its beautiful body, shiny with iridescent colour. I could feel the pack of strong muscles beneath its skin. It had coiled my legs and was putting pressure.

I looked at its unblinking eyes. A mysterious 15 kg giant monster was looking at me. Was there a mischievous smile in her face?

PHOTOS: INAM AHMED