



The Sundarbans in captivity

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THE Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the largest biodiverse salt-tolerant mangrove forest in the world. But its existence is in jeopardy because of the arrogance and ignorance of the power brokers and policy makers of Bangladesh. Their self-serving, shortsighted view is placing humans and the ecosystem of the Sundarbans biotic and abiotic in harm's way.

The wetlands of the Sundarbans are the habitat of a unique mix of animals, birds, trees and exotic plants that cannot be found elsewhere in the world. However, over the last 100 years or so, unrestrained human activities brought about radical changes in the ecology and faunal composition of the forest. Some species such as Hog Deer, Water Buffalo and Javan Rhinoceros became extinct due to extensive poaching, game hunting and destruction of their habitat.

The mangrove trees of the Sundarbans, such as Sundari, Keora, Gewa, Garjon, Goran, Dhondul and others, have gone through a series of remarkable evolutionary processes. Over time, they developed the capability to thrive in salt water, store fresh water in their succulent leaves, and withstand the extreme condition of estuaries and brackish deluge of the tides.

A large number of animals of the Sundarbans including the Royal Bengal Tiger, Gangetic Dolphin, Fishing Cat, Water Monitor Lizard, River Terrapin, Hawksbill Turtle, Horseshoe Crab and Estuarine Crocodile are on the endangered list of the World Wildlife Fund. The Spotted Deer, Pangolin, Porcupine, Macaque and Wild Boar are just a few of the scores of other animals that are denizens of the forest. In addition, fish, shell-

fish, amphibians, reptiles, aquatic mammals and hundreds of species of birds call the Sundarbans their home.

The trees of the forest provide natural protection against killer storms. That's why regions behind them suffered minimal damage during the tsunami in December 2004. The trees also moderate the climate by acting as a sink for the greenhouse gases and help perpetuate the water cycle by releasing water vapor into the atmosphere.

The wetlands of the Sundarbans remove sediment from surface runoff, thereby preventing sedimentation in the rivers. Their plants absorb nitrogen and

ing volume. A palm-like tree called Golpata is unsustainably cut to build roofs for nearby homes.

The water around the forest has been polluted by sewage and industrial effluents from nearby villages and towns. Oil spills are compounding the damage. Clean-up after an oil spill is a challenging task because of the network of rivers, varied landscape and inaccessibility to remote areas of the Sundarbans.

Forests are the lungs of a nation, purifying the air we breathe. Yet, the Sundarbans is being abused without any moral restraint by the guardians of the nation's resources. The relentless abuse is

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phosphorous, two common pollutants washed away from fertilized land, thus reducing water pollution.

The intricate aerial root system of the trees helps them breathe and ensures their growing space. Moreover, together with the water among the trees, the roots protect the crustaceans from their predators by providing them with a safe breeding ground and nursery.

Today, the Sundarbans is in captivity. It has become a battlefield, beleaguered by pollution, poaching, politics and human activities. The Gewas have been methodically felled for a newsprint mill, causing a significant decline in its stand-

making it extremely difficult for the lungs of the world's richest terrestrial biome to function properly.

The slow destruction of the Sundarbans is a tragic symbol of poor planning, infectious greed and unbridled corruption by the nation's guardians. Their cavalier attitude leads one to wonder: Are they cognizant of the hierarchy of natural systems? Do they understand that for our survival, there has to be a broad spectrum of natural environments forests, mountains and rivers down to the ponds? Does the Sundarbans exist for their selfish gratification? When will they shed their anthropocentric view that the

cycle of destruction and renewal of the Sundarbans can be ignored because they extend beyond our life span?

We are part of the natural environment just as the natural world is part of us. Hence, injudicious exploitation of a forest's resources would only bring imbalance resulting in disaster for all. Lest we forget, it takes thousands of years for a self-sustaining rainforest to grow, but it takes only a few years of hostile human activities to turn it into a barren land. History shows that nature refuses to accept our maltreatment without exacting a hefty price. And Sundarbans is part of the nature.

The future of Bangladesh depends to a large extent on a healthy Sundarbans. We can ensure a robust and healthy Sundarbans if we rise from the darkness of ignorance, grant its eco system some measure of ecological freedom and allow it to change in accordance with the natural events to which forests are adapted to respond, without interference from us. In other words, we must through ecological research devise a sustainable management strategy whose beneficial effects would ripple through the biosphere just as the adverse effects do now. As a first step towards that end, the Rampal Power Plant should be relocated to an ecologically less sensitive area. Otherwise, Rampal will be the last straw that broke the camel's back.

We want a forest—inviolate and unspoiled. We want the national resources of Bangladesh to be managed wisely and efficiently, minimizing damage and ensuring future generations the use of treasures we now enjoy and too often take for granted. Let us give our future generations at least a glimpse of how our planet once looked like.

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