



The Dolphin Boat made out of Golpata, that was collected last year.

PHOTO: FAYED MASUD KHAN

A JOURNEY BY BOAT, FOR DOLPHINS

Art is helping in conservation of the endangered dolphins in the Sundarbans

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Among monstrous ships of all shapes and sizes on the river Rupsha, I first saw the “Dolphin boat”, shining and bobbing its snout in the soft winter light. The impact is one of awe and curiosity, which is what the art form had intended – to spike the interest of onlookers as it cruises the riverways of Sundarbans eventually creating awareness on dolphin conservation.

That art and nature are connected is a no-brainer. But to see artists harnessing that inspiration to protect the very nature that inspired them is beautiful — art and wildlife conservation have amalgamated and given birth to something new, something that captures the imagination.

A MOBY DICK-KIND OF A BOAT

In the banks of river Rupsha in Khulna, chowais (people who work with golpata in Sundarbans), had worked day in and out to turn the traditional golpata boat into one that

would resemble a River dolphin, or shushuk, which is a globally endangered creature and can be found in the waters of Sundarbans.

The brainchild of artist Kamruzzaman Shadhin, the Golpata Dolphin Boat, was going to sail from Khulna all the way into the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world, making pit stops at villages and bazar-ghaat adjacent to the mangrove forest to showcase the importance of saving dolphins.

The reason these villages were chosen, is because, most of the inhabitants are fisher-folk who make their living by fishing inside the Sundarbans and come across dolphins regularly. And one of the main threats for dolphins, as identified by conservationists, is entanglement in fishing nets, making it crucial to ensure that the message for their protection reached the villagers.

Prior to my visit, I had already conjured up a mental image of what this boat would look like but I was not entirely prepared for what lay in wait for us. It was almost a small house, practically designed as a part-time gallery to exhibit dolphin photos, as a makeshift stage for puppeteers, an art and crafts classroom and during its slow hours, as a home to the crew members who would take the boat around to villages. It was lifelike, an art that you became a part of and interacted with.

It was early days of November when we set sail from Khulna; us on a larger ship, towing the “Dolphin Boat” along, for the first village by the forest.

In the tide country though, our timing and planning took a back seat as we had let the course of the tide take our decisions. It was morning – the next day – before we could reach our destination.

As the boat anchored by the village, hundreds of school children, men in colourful shirts and lungis and the



A girl holds the dolphin cutout she made.

women in equally colourful saris converged upon the boat.

For the villagers of the south, an “NGO” or any city people coming and promising them many a thing is commonplace. They are often wary of men and women shoving posters and placards on their faces. But despite all of that the villagers came in droves that morning.

At Joymoni village, right opposite the sprawling Sundarbans, students came by the hundreds, all voicing one word “Shushuk Nouka”. And it became clear that art as a means of reaching people to create awareness on River dolphin and Irrawaddy dolphin (both globally endangered) conservation had clearly made an impact.

“The point is to spark a conversation, make people want to question and create a platform for activists, and in this case conservationists wanting to protect dolphin habitats and dolphins in Sundarbans, to get their message through to people,” says Kamruzzaman Shadhin, an artist, who has made it his life's work to work closely with local communities.

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Eager villagers peer into the bioscope.

PHOTO: FAYED MASUD KHAN