

CONSERVATION



A sawfish being transported by a crane. The rostrum has been cut off.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

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A conversation with the Bangladesh Forest Department reveals that we are heavily underequipped in monitoring the trade. The department does not have large seafaring vessels and are mostly focused on protection of forestland. In fact, not much focus has been given on marine life until now.

But there are undertones of change, as sensitisation programmes are being planned to make all stakeholders—the Bangladesh Forest Department, the fishermen, locals and law enforcers—more aware of the need to protect the bay for mega marine fauna, under which Sawfish falls too. We are hopeful of rigorous scientific work to be done in the coming years for evidence-based conservation work.

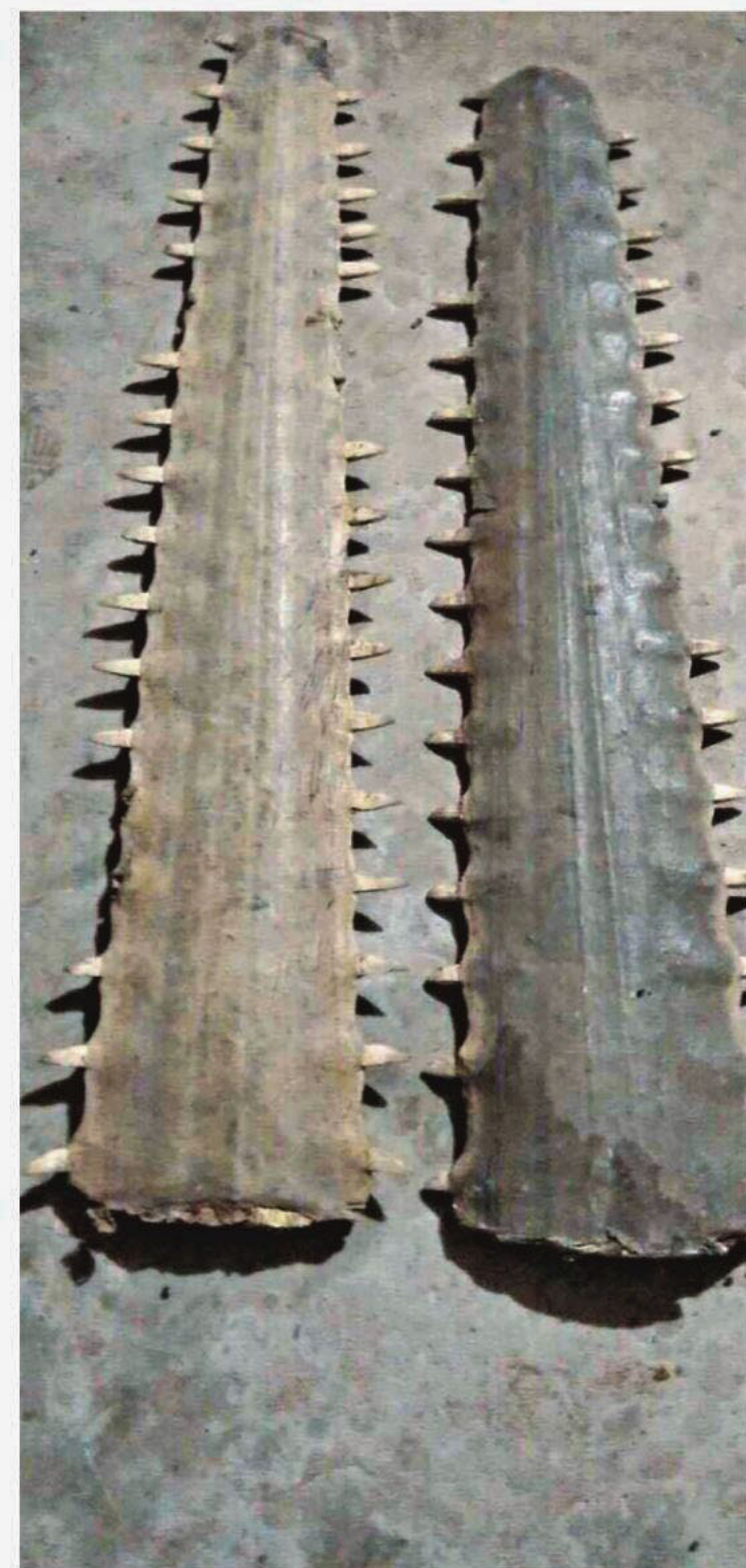
WHY AND HOW SHOULD WE CONSERVE?

Sawfish, although alien-looking creatures, hold significant cultural value in most areas where they were reported to have been found. In Southeast Asia, Sawfish plays an important role in the traditional account of the spread of Islam to Borneo.

According to IUCN's Global Sawfish strategy, the first Muslim teacher to reach this island became known as "Sawfish Rider" after he performed many miracles involving an immense Sawfish to convince the local kingdom of the truth of his faith.

The reason for bringing up the cultural value of Sawfish is that it often becomes difficult to garner conservation interest for relatively obscure species. But the sawfish is one that has connection to the humans and that should, if nothing else, at least mobilise some interest in its conservation. Scientists are hard at work coming up with possible and plausible conservation measures. These involve: using fishers' ecological knowledge to identify critical habitats for sawfish, especially in the Sundarbans, using environmental DNA to find any existing population of Sawfish, cell-phone generated improved reporting system, working in close collaboration with fisherfolk and policymakers to come up with a Sawfish conservation action plan and sensitising stakeholders on the importance of the species.

Whether conservation actions will bring any tangible results, only time will tell. But actions need to be taken quickly, to ensure our rich marine fauna thrive.



The rostrum of a Largetooth Sawfish.

PHOTO: ALIFA HAQUE

CHILD RIGHTS

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In the last two years, we have not seen any significant steps to set these children free from such exploitative, backbreaking work.

Although there are several legal provisions which prohibit child labour, there are also loopholes in these provisions which need to be addressed immediately. In 2013, the Bangladesh government and ILO jointly published a list of hazardous jobs for Bangladeshi child workers. However, engaging children in brick manufacturing was not mentioned in that list of 38 jobs, activities or processes. It only includes

brick or stone breaking which is not part of the hazardous brick manufacturing process mentioned above.

Section 83 of the Bangladesh Factory Rules, 1979, lists 18 activities as hazardous operations where engaging children is prohibited. However, the list also does not include production of bricks using fixed chimneys. However, the ILO study states that brick kilns, many of which use low-grade coal, emit toxic fumes containing large amounts of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide and oxides of sulphur which are extremely harmful to the eyes, lungs and throat. Moreover, long working hours under the

scorching sun in the brickfields, massive accumulation of dust, the risk of falling from the trucks and piles of bricks, and carrying excessive loads pose serious health hazards for child workers.

In November 2013, the parliament passed the Brick Making and Brickfield Establishment Act, 2013 which compelled brick kiln operators to modernise the method of brick production. Since then, the number of eco-friendly and energy efficient brick kilns, which require more sophisticated technology and skilled labourers, is gradually increasing.

According to the Department of

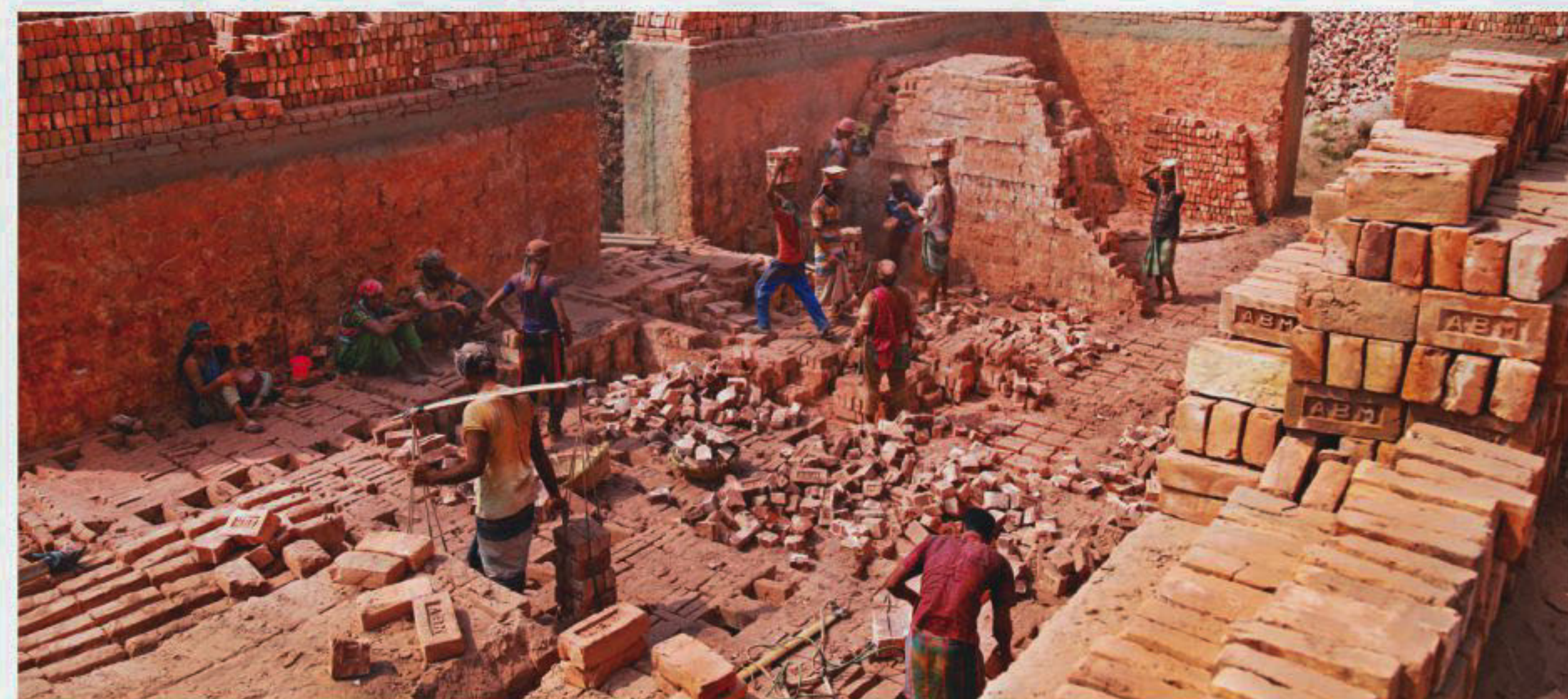
Environment, it has managed to enforce 2013 act in 65 percent of the kilns.

However, this upgradation was limited only to registered kilns. Owners of fixed chimney kilns have already demanded amendment of the act; they claim that had they followed the regulations, at least one million workers would have lost their jobs. However, the fact remains that many of these one million workers are children who are not supposed to work in the hazardous conditions of the brickfields in the first place.

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Brick manufacturing has not been mentioned in the list of work declared hazardous for children by Bangladesh government and the ILO.



Child workers in a conventional brick kiln earn around Tk 100 for carrying 1000 bricks to the kiln.