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AN EPIC SAGA OF LOSS

Why is the fiercest predator of the forest, the Bengal Tiger, in danger and can it be saved?

Once upon a time, in the winter of 2014, in a land far far away—Sundarbans—a young man in his twenties, seeking adventures, missed out on the chance of a lifetime; to witness a Bengal Tiger in the wild, because he was too busy checking on the lunch menu inside the ship kitchen. Although he did not see any tiger to this day, this story of an ordinary man who almost saw a tiger dominates many conversations. So majestic and so elusive are these Bengal Tigers that an almost-sighting has become an epic saga of loss in a young man's life.

The Bengal Tigers once roamed the creeks and meadows of the Sundarbans, large and wide, but as human pressure grew, tiger numbers began to fall, a trend that continues to this day. A fall that threatens to spiral out of control and one day declare the end of the species from our forest. Even 10 years ago, the Bangladesh Forest Department put the number of tigers in the

Sundarbans at around 400 to 500. Alarm bells have been ringing for decades now to turn back the clock on the dwindling tiger population in the country. Yet project upon project and initiative over initiative have failed to produce any tangible results. According to the Bangladesh Forest Department's last estimate, the number of tigers in the Sundarbans has dwindled to 106. That was in 2015. Since then, much has transpired in and around the forest—oil spills, coal spills and rampant industrialisation projects around the forest. In this time, many conservation projects have also been undertaken.

In 2017, another study on tiger genetics has put the number at 121.

"The studies which have estimated the population of tigers between 106 and 121 have had the most scientific methodology," says Hasan Rahman, a conservation scientist in Bangladesh who is closely working with

tiger conservation in Bangladesh.

All previous studies which have claimed that tiger population was around 400 a decade back was not conducted in a scientifically acceptable method and thus that count is unacceptable, says Hasan.

Which essentially indicates that 106 is our baseline number and any and all conservation efforts need to be based on that number.

What threats do tigers face in the Sundarbans?

A study published last month claimed that by 2050 to 2070, salinity intrusion and the impacts of climate change would result in disappearance of the Bengal Tiger completely from the Sundarbans.

However, many tiger experts believe that given the current rate of extinction and without mitigating the more immediate threats to tiger conservation, there will be no more tigers left in the wild by 2050. Experts identify the following as major threats to the tiger population—poaching of tigers and their prey, habitat degradation, poison fishing in the Sundarbans, lack of capacity in both government and non-government sectors, lack of scientific research and subsequently, difficulties in linking research with conservation policy.

In fact, poaching of both tigers and one

attributes to enhanced patrolling initiatives taken up by the government.

However, researcher Dr MA Aziz, a professor of zoology at Jahangirnagar University and who has completed his PhD research on tiger genetics and tiger population in Bangladesh, questions BFD's explanation. "Yes, incidents involving tigers straying into villages and of tiger poaching are reported much less now but this is because of better patrolling or because tiger numbers have fallen further?"

From 2008 to 2014 in the villages around Sundarbans, out of 14 stray tiger incidents (where a stray tiger was trapped/surrounded by hundreds of villagers); eight were killed, two tranquilised and released by the government, and only four were successfully chased back into the forest, says Samia Saif, a researcher whose work aims to fill the knowledge gaps in the tiger parts trade.

Law enforcers recovered 30 body parts of tigers, including 22 skins, between 2011 and 2016. Of them, 21 skins didn't have any holes made by bullets. This suggests poachers used insecticides to kill tigers.

The wildlife trade is fueled in many parts by superstitions among local people, opines Samia. In Bangladesh, at least five groups have been found to be involved in tiger killings—village tiger killers (i.e. local people



PHOTO: AFP

who kill tigers that have entered their village), poachers, shikaris, trappers and pirates.

For all the five different groups involved in the killing of tigers, all of their motives were commercial trade, says Samia. Even village tiger killers have been known to sell tiger parts as there is a demand for them for medicinal purposes in their localities.

Not all those who hunt tigers are poachers by profession. One such shikari says he is simply an opportunistic tiger hunter but adds that it is good income, given that a tiger brings in a total of five lakh taka.

This trade in wildlife parts continues more or less unchecked, even though the Wildlife (Preservation & Protection) Act 2012 declared tougher punishment for killing tigers in the Bangladesh Sundarbans.

As per Article 36 in the Bangladesh Wildlife Conservation and Security Act 2012, first-time offenders can be jailed for

two years to a maximum of seven years and fined a minimum one lakh taka to 10 lakh taka. If an offender is found to have repeated the crime, they can then be sentenced to a maximum of 12 years in jail and a penalty of 15 lakh taka. However, none of the punishments are applicable in case of self defense.

On paper, the law and policies in the country are sufficient. They are hardly translated into action though.

An offender who was caught with three tiger skulls and body parts way back in 2011—one of the first of such incidents—is now out on bail. After he was released, he went back and threatened those who he suspected to have caused his arrest, says MA Aziz.

When asked whether anyone has been indicted in a wildlife crime to tigers so far, "There are several cases filed in court and the cases are under trial," says Modinul Ahsan. He was unable to confirm how many have been arrested or indicted in tiger poaching cases so far.

Tiger experts have suggested that a taskforce comprising of Bangladesh police, Ansar members, Rapid Action Battalion and others needs to be formed to ensure maximum protection.

As for habitat degradation, it is becoming more and more difficult to actually stop the onslaught of development projects around the forest area. Plots have been cleared around the periphery of the forest to set up industries—a whopping two hundred of them at least. Among these industries is the Rampal coal-fired power plant, the impacts of which have been discussed in alarming detail previously.

Dr Md Anwarul Islam, professor and former chairman, Department of Zoology, University of Dhaka and general secretary and chief executive, WildTeam, argues that tigers have some basic requirements in order to survive and that the chances of survival diminish astronomically when they lack these components.

"As human populations increase, urbanisation and development seem to be a necessary evil, robbing the wildlife of their natural habitat. As their room for

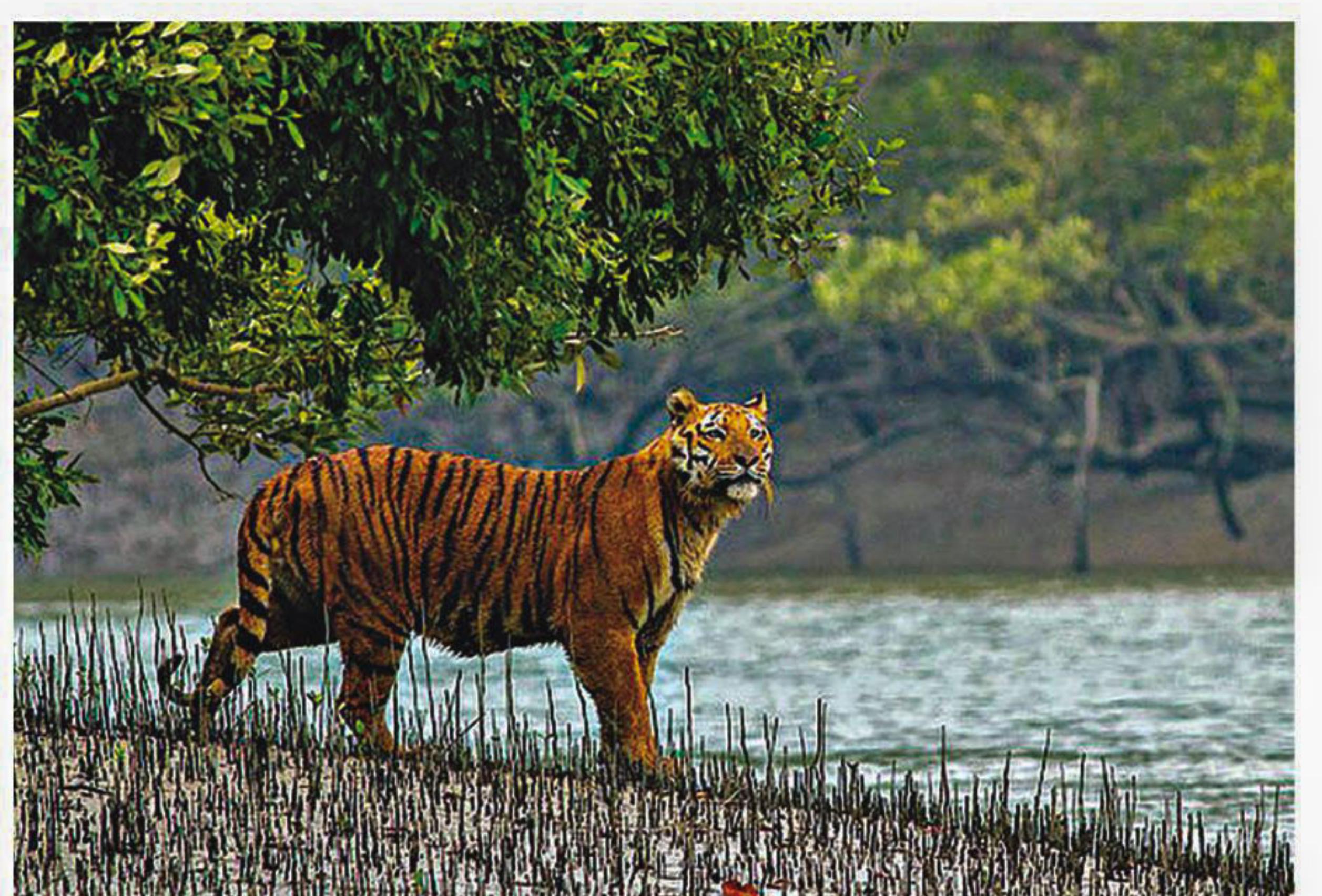


PHOTO: COURTESY

tigers not being poached at all?

Or is it because wildlife crime is one of the most under-reported crimes, as MA Aziz claims. He adds that worldwide 60 percent of wildlife crimes go undetected.

According to USAID officials, which funded and spearheaded tiger conservation projects in Bangladesh till 2018 said, "Bangladesh is designated as a source and transit country for wildlife trafficking. The Government of Bangladesh has apprehended poachers with tigers and tiger parts, and interdicted the shipment of these products. There is still so much we don't know about the illegal trafficking of tigers and other animals. There is need for additional research and development of forensic capabilities to determine the extent of tiger trade from Bangladesh. However, with an estimated population of around 106 individuals in the Sundarbans, there isn't room to lose many more."

On paper, there seems to be no shortage of conservation efforts. In reality, neither the government nor donor agencies could provide any conclusive information about the impact of such efforts over the last decade, although all stakeholders involved in tiger conservation would like us to believe that substantive progress has been made.

When asked about the funding behind

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tiger projects in Bangladesh, Dr Aziz says, "When it comes to tiger conservation it is fairly easy to get funding. Around 110 million USD has been allocated through the WildTeam and around another 33 billion USD through other government projects in the last decade or so. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. Most of this funding is dedicated to simply formulating plans and projects and very little is translated to action. Maybe all efforts are eventually lost in bureaucracy."

Samia Saif believes that whenever it comes to the issue of tiger poaching and trade, more focus is put on awareness and alternative livelihood but that alone will do nothing. "Authorities need to focus more on law enforcement," she adds.

Despite substantial conservation initiatives and a steady stream of funding to protect the tigers over the past decade, it remains unclear what has been achieved, in terms of tangible results. While the government and multilateral donors highlight the many projects they have implemented, there is no data yet to support the extent to which they have impacted the number of Tigers in the Sundarbans. But with only a hundred or so tigers remaining in the wild (as per latest estimates), can we simply cite elaborate "project outcomes" as success?