



A flock of Indian Skimmers, the entire population of this species depend on the south central coast of Bangladesh.

PHOTOS: SAYAM U CHOWDHURY

Can protecting the seas, help protect the wild?

Dolphins, Hilsha and Shark to be conserved in vast Marine Protected Area in the Bay of Bengal

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In a country bursting at its seams with a continuously growing population, it can be hard to get things right especially when it comes to wildlife conservation. But the recent declaration of its second ever Marine Reserve or Marine Protected Area (MPA)—Marine Protected Areas involve protective management of natural areas so as to keep them in their natural state—in the Bay of Bengal, seems to be a step in the right direction.

Just recently, news broke out of a massive dead zone in the Bay of Bengal. Can you imagine, one of the most productive bays in the world, connected to rivers that flow from the Himalayas draining in hundreds of tonnes of nutrient dense sediment, just ending up dead? This is a glaring example of the exploitation of natural resources that is rampant everywhere and especially at the coast.

In spite of this, after every expedition

to the bay conservationists' have chanced upon some new discovery—from Humpback Dolphins to humungous Sawfish, the ocean is full of enchanted beasts that roam the blue-black waters of the ocean bed. This is because, despite aggressive development, growing threats of climate change, and an immense pressure on natural resources and of growing tourist pressure, the bounties of the bay still continue to thrive and grow.

All of which makes this declaration made on June 24 by the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock, an especially important one. This provides all stakeholders—government, law enforcers, fisherfolk, locals and wildlife conservationists—a legal basis to protect and manage the waterways here.

Spanning across an area of nearly 3,188 sq km, the second marine reserve of Bangladesh is the area around Nijhum Dwip and adjacent to it. The species that will be protected by the MPA include globally threatened Irrawaddy and Humpback Dolphins, Finless Porpoises, Olive Ridley Turtles, Scalloped Hammerhead Sharks and at least six species of Rays including the endangered Giant Freshwater Whipray. Along with this, it also aims to protect the migration routes and highest priority spawning grounds of the Hilsha.

The first MPA declared by the country is the Swatch of No Ground way back in 2014, which remains a biodiversity hotspot to this day and is home to species such as Irrawaddy and Bottlenose Dolphins, Finless Porpoise, Bryde's Whale, Orcas, and Hammerhead Sharks, Tiger Sharks among others.

The difference between the first and second MPA is in their relative distance from the mainland which determines how each one is managed. The ships that can access the Swatch of No Ground are usually commer-

cial vessels but in case of Nijhum Dwip, accessibility is easy meaning every day the area has a number of visitors. Be it via tourist launches, fishing vessels or a fleet of Hilsha fishermen, Nijhum and its nearby areas are a busy one, owing to its proximity to the mainland.

This excessive pressure on the sea results in mayhem underneath the waters. Endangered dolphins and turtles get caught up in the fishing nets laid out by the Hilsha fishermen as by-catch. They also get injured often during playtime as they hit the rudder of a whirling ship. Along with that a year-round flow of people means the natural resources get no chance to rest, recuperate and rejuvenate. Something the MPA hopes to reverse.

The MPA took years of work which was kickstarted by IUCN and WorldFish in 2016. Other stakeholders such as the Wildlife Conservation Society and key government bodies joined along the way.

"The process to establish this MPA was significantly different from the first MPA because a bottom-up approach has been taken up here instead of top-down. The ministry is already coming up with a management plan and here too, all stakeholders will be involved, from conservationists to local fisherfolk to the Bangladesh Coast Guard and Bangladesh Navy, everyone's expert opinion will be taken on the matter," says Raquibul Amin, country representative of IUCN Bangladesh.

This area was declared as protected under law after considering expert opinion on how to optimise marine conservation benefits, support sustainable fishing livelihoods and ensure a productive future for the diversity of our marine fisheries, said Abu Sayed Md Rashedul Haque, director general of the department of fisheries.

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A fine example of how birds benefit from local fishermen, although this method pose threat to other creatures such as dolphins.