

INTERNATIONAL TIGER DAY

A sustainable way to increase tigers in Sundarbans

Md SHAHADAT HOSSAIN SHUVO

At the last count, there were 114 tigers in 2018 as per the Bangladesh Forest Department—an increase of eight since the 2015 tiger survey. In India, however, there were 97 tigers in 2019, up from eight in 2017. The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest comprising 10,000 square kilometres of Bangladesh and India, is the only place in the world where Royal Bengal tigers can be found.

In comparison to Bangladesh, the Indian Forest Department has

occurrence in Bangladesh (this has now largely declined). Still, the movement of people in Bangladesh's Sundarbans is much greater than in the Indian part. People are free to enter the forest for honey, *golpata*, fish, forest timber, and firewood. As a result, tigers are becoming insecure in their habitat and conflict between tigers and humans is also on the rise.

To control public mobility in the Sundarbans, CCTV cameras should be placed in strategic locations and forest-dwellers should be rehabilitated outside the forest. Fish farming, cattle rearing, renewable fuels, and artificial honey farming projects and other operations can help to minimise the number of people who rely on the forest. It is possible to also reduce tigers' presence in areas where people live by installing solar panels between the forest and the locality. Bushes in the forest are diminishing due to illegal timber collection, making it more difficult for tigers—who prey mainly on small mammals and deer—to hunt. In addition, the water level and salinity are rising due to unnatural cyclones, storms, and tidal surges. Natural reservoirs need to be created to address this.

Besides the measures stated above, the reintroduction process may protect and increase the tiger population in the Sundarbans. The number of tigers has not grown as expected—if there were 20 adult female tigers out of 114 tigers, they should have raised at least 20-40 tiger cubs per year. But the number of tigers is not increasing that way, which may be due to the lack of genetic diversity in the population. Due to the small number of tigers, there is more likely to be inbreeding—which has the potential to cause morbidity and increase the mortality rate of tiger



The elusive Bengal tiger spotted in the Sundarbans.

PHOTO: RAKESH NARALA

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been working hard for a long time to enhance the tiger population in the Indian Sundarbans. Accordingly, its tiger population is growing faster than that in Bangladesh. Indigenous peoples that lived in the Indian Sundarbans have been relocated and CCTV cameras are being installed and public mobility is monitored and restricted at tiger sanctuaries. On the other hand, just a few years ago, shootings and abductions of bandits and law enforcers in the depths of the Sundarbans were an everyday

cubs. Therefore, it is necessary to bring about genetic diversity by increasing heterogeneity; this will help the tiger population by increasing the number of offspring as well as increasing the tigers' immunity and adaptability to different environments.

Reintroduction can be an effective way of increasing genetic diversity. By adopting a long-term project and through the following steps, it is possible to reintroduce a large number of tigers into the wild. First, 10 tigers can be collected from different zoos and safari parks in Bangladesh. The

newborn tiger cubs can be raised in a greater area near the Sundarbans after six months of age and trained to hunt. These tiger cubs will then be released into the Sundarbans when they reach adulthood. Next, to avoid conflict with existing tigers, tiger-free regions should be selected for these new tigers. The tigers released into the wild should also be monitored by CCTV cameras. Last, to give them access to food, deer and pigs can also be released at the same site. A separate captive or semi-captive establishment near the forest can be operated for the breeding

and rearing of pigs and deer for this purpose.

Management of human and natural factors as well as genetic factors must be taken into consideration in conserving tigers in the Bangladesh Sundarbans. The survival of such a small number of tigers in the face of severe climate change will be very difficult in the future. Therefore, along with other measures, reintroduction work should be started to rapidly increase the number of tigers in the Sundarbans.

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Looking for a vacation spot? St Martin's is not it.



ADIBA AHAMED

OVER the past year or so, my Facebook feed has been flooded with posts of people visiting St Martin's Island. The island now hosts multiple resorts, hotels, and various accommodations for its daily influx of tourists and holidaymakers from all across the country, drawn by its clear waters with corals submerged underneath.

Simultaneously, in a course of mine, I was learning about our country's Ecologically Critical Areas. On gaining ECA status, such areas need to be strictly restricted from any sort of human intervention while it recovers naturally; interference is only allowed in a scenario where the ecosystem cannot recover by itself. Coincidentally, St Martin's Island (also called Narikel Jinjira) was listed there, declared to be an Ecologically Critical Area all the way back in 1999!

On contemplating the two, my mind was frazzled with one question—how can we call this area an ECA whilst allowing humans to trample all over it? It turns out that due to external pressures, the island was forced to open up. The island's beauty fell captive to the money-hungry and is now treated like a gold mine—and just like a mine, it will soon be exhausted and left barren. Can we call it an ECA then? What will be left there for us to conserve or recover?

Section 5 of the Environment



Conservation Act 1995 (last updated in 2010) states that once an area is threatened or damaged due to human activities, in the eyes of the government, it is to be given ECA status. They will then impose necessary restrictions in the area, which includes not letting any establishment or industry be developed that cause either land, air, water, or noise pollution. The Department of Environment also has the right to take necessary actions if the rules are violated in these areas.

The current hotels and establishments on the island have produced a considerable amount of waste to the point where clean-ups are being hosted every now and then to raise awareness. In January 2020, a clean-up programme hosted by the organisation Environment People picked up waste weighing a total of 200 kilogrammes. The next month, they went on to hand a nine-point memorandum to the

Deputy Commissioner of Cox's Bazar demanding proper management of the area—including measures such as banning plastic use and tourism, and ensuring that all establishments built have obtained an Environmental Clearance Certificate.

They have all the volition and right to do so, since the effect of such waste is as clear as the light of day—it has led to the decline of coral species from 65 in the late 1990s to 41 in 2016. The plastic dumped in the water covers corals and this further aggravates their already vulnerable state as they are subjected to coral bleaching due to changing water and temperature conditions. Not to mention, tourist ships often collide with the corals, breaking them off and even injuring marine animals.

Such efforts were evidently ineffective since tourism activities in the country never slowed or improved sustainability practices. During the 10th Annual International Cleanup in Keokradong,

Bandarban in December 2020, around 800kgs of waste was collected—which was four times the amount picked up in January. Yet, tourists kept flooding into St Martin's—surpassing the 1,250 limit a day—with almost 4,000 people visiting the island daily. This was only put to a halt recently this April due to rising Covid-19 cases in the area. Keep in mind dear reader, that it took a global pandemic to close the area to tourists, not the degrading environment.

My heart sinks at the thought of no one caring about such a national treasure and its exotic marine life and beautiful coral reefs. However, after searching on the web, I came across numerous articles stating the actions taken by Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) in 2017. Through a survey, they came up with a hefty list of 104 illegal hotel and restaurant establishments on the island. They even filed a writ petition in 2009, under which the High Court

appointed officials to mark all illegal establishments within a 60-day period. But those actions end there. The island's union parishad chairman has failed to remove such illegal structures due to external pressures preventing him from doing so. A rather disheartening end to such promising efforts.

Many may argue that such tourism is beneficial for the area's economy but reality is far from it. The locals, who number around 10,000, have been complaining about the price hikes due to the tourist industry boom which has compromised and deterred their own livelihoods. Gone are the days when they could simply fish and make a living undisturbed.

The degrading environment of the island cannot speak for itself. It needs a persistent voice and proper representation. There is still time to take the necessary steps for the area to live up to its label as an Ecologically Critical Area. The government should exercise its maximum capacity to protect this area, as per the Environment Conservation Act 1995, and do this fragile ecosystem justice. But looking to the high-ups alone will not do. It is my humble urge to all readers to please tick off St Martin's Island from your holiday travel plans and do your part. This will hopefully demotivate illegal establishments there and lead to them shutting down. The land will go back to its people and the government can refocus their conservation efforts once more. Sounds like a happy ending to me.

Adiba Ahamed is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in Environmental Science at North South University.

QUOTABLE Quote

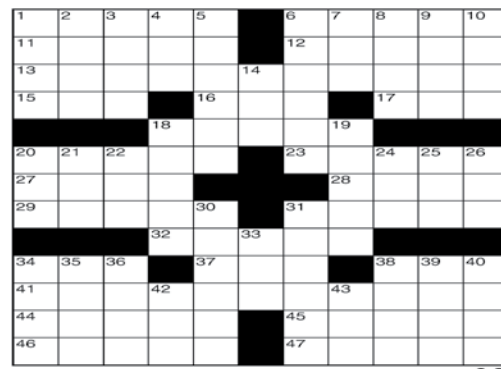


JACQUES-YVES COUSTEAU
French naval officer and conservationist (1910–1997)

For most of history, man has had to fight nature to survive; in this century he is beginning to realise that, in order to survive, he must protect it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Latin music
 - 6 Swift
 - 11 Mariner's place
 - 12 Make blank
 - 13 Reluctantly grin
 - 15 Filmmaker Burns
 - 16 Set fire to
 - 17 Was a pioneer
 - 18 Leg bone
 - 20 Two-masted boats
 - 23 Louvre location
 - 27 River to the Mississippi
 - 28 Region
 - 29 "Cosmos" writer
 - 31 Gaggles member
 - 32 Rome's river
 - 34 Play division
 - 37 Barracks bed
- DOWN**
- 1 Foot holder
 - 2 Land unit
 - 3 Free of fat
 - 4 Pouchlike part
 - 5 Low joints
 - 6 Prepare for a big day
 - 7 Sleeve filler
 - 8 Sandbox toy
 - 9 Cruise stop
 - 10 Title paper
 - 14 Objective
 - 18 Parade sight
 - 19 Shaving need
 - 20 Casual greetings
 - 21 Cry of insight
 - 22 Costume part
 - 24 Aussie hopper
 - 25 Powerful people
 - 26 Notice
 - 30 Metallic element
 - 31 Influences
 - 33 Big snake
 - 34 Skilled
 - 35 Pivotal point
 - 36 Campout sight
 - 38 Euro division
 - 39 Poll numbers
 - 40 Cease
 - 42 In the past
 - 43 Took the title



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.