

# Sundarbans : A Report

Sundarbans, the world's largest and only tiger dominated mangrove forests, covering about 10,000 Sq Kms of land and water is a recognized 'world heritage site'. About 40 per cent of Sundarbans is in West Bengal, India and the rest in Bangladesh.

IT'S A DELTA FOREST formed here from the sediments deposited by three great rivers - the Ganga IN INDIA AND Brahmaputra and Meghna IN BANGLADESH. The whole FOREST is interlaced by a intricate network of interconnected waterways. SOME OF THESE ARE LARGE BEING TWO TO FOUR KMS wide, WHILE OTHERS ARE AS SMALL AS CREAKS. All these ARE FED by the diurnal tidal flow.

Sundarbans, because of its proximity to Bay of Bengal, enjoys a heavy rainfall and IS VERY humid. Monsoons are usually between mid June to mid September, after which fair weather prevails TILL mid March.

Sundarbans have been named after the Sundari trees (*Heritiera fomes*). Other vegetation which are common are Garjan (*Rhizophora.sp*), Goran (*Ceriops.sp*), Baen (*Avicennia officinalis*), Keora (*Sonneretia apetala*), Hental (*Phoenix peludosa*) etc.

Sundarbans is said to have been ONCE the home of the javan rhinoceros and water buffalo. BOTH ARE EXTINT IN THE REGION NOW. Today it boasts of BEING THE HOME TO the royal Bengal tiger APART FROM LESSER CATS SUCH AS THE fishing AND THE JUNGLE cats AND OTHER ANIMALS SUCH AS wild boar, spotted deer, rhesus macaque etc. ITS waters SERVE AS AN ABODE OF THE dolphins, estuarine crocodile, monitor lizard, olive ridley turtle, Batagar baska, A NUMBER OF POISONOUS AND NON-POISONOUS SNAKES etc, APART FROM A WIDE VARIETY OF FISH AND MICRO ORGANISMS.

Birds also live here. Some OF THE OFTEN SEEN ONES ARE openbill stork, LESSER adjutant storks, white ibis, FIVE variety of kingfishers, egrets, herons, terns, owls, raptors, EAGLES etc.

Ruins are found in the Baghmara and Netidopani areas. ACCORDING TO HISTORY Chaand Saudagar built a city here sometimes between 200 to 300 ad. Much later, during the moghul Empire, Raja Basant Rai and his nephew Dakhin Rai took refuge in the Sundarbans from the advancing armies of Emperor Akbar.

The local population is dependent on the forest in MORE WAYS THAN ONE. About 50,000 villagers enter the forests every year to collect timber, firewood, honey and catch fishes in the adjoining waters. The Sundarbans is home to the HIMALAYAN bee *Apis dorsata*. There is an annual migration of thousand of colonies of honey bee into Sundarbans beginning in December and continuing until January and February. The main period of honey production takes place during April and June.

Often the tiger finds it easy to attack man absorbed in his work in the dark difficult forests of sundarbans. Even fishermen in small boats have been attacked due to the tiger's incredible swimming ability. Hence, the conflict of Bengal Tiger with man is at ITS extreme. HOWEVER, under any circumstances, man is not the primary source of food for the tigers and recently with better management techniques ATTACKS HAVE DECLINED significantly. But the conflict has been made to live and if by any chance a tiger happens to enter a village, it is surrounded and killed. UNFORTUNATELY, this is done sometimes ON intention to make money BECAUSE OF THE DEMAND OF TIGER BODY PARTS from DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE world. The INVOLVEMENT OF THE mass dilutes the crime.

THERE ARE SEVERAL THEORIES FOR THIS BEHAVIOR OF MAN BEING ATTACKED BY THE BENGAL TIGER. One is the salinity of water; the other is HUMAN DISTURBANCE IN THE FOREST. lack of prey IS ALSO PUT FORWARD BUT THE FOREST HAS ENOUGH POTENTIAL TO SUPPORT THE TIGER POPULATION IF LEFT UNDISTURBED. IT IS ALSO BELIEVED THAT TIGERS LEARN TO KILL AND DEVOUR HUMANS FROM THEIR MOTHERS. However most attacks on men are on intrusion. Accordingly precautionary measures have been taken while going into the forest. Wearing mask at the back of the head to confuse the tiger has helped. Fresh water ponds for drinking have been dug for the big cats in certain areas. Electrified Clay dummy of fishermen and honey collectors have been set up at attack points. When the tiger attacks one of these it gets a shock not enough to kill but painful enough for it to remember not to attack man again. Though collection of Phoenix palm for thatching has been banned the need for a roof over the head forces many to move into the forest. Workers usually carry clubs over their right shoulders as most of tigers attacks are on the right nape.

However, the tiger needs protection just as this unique forest. Tiger population is as low as 271 in the Indian side. This has made the animal extremely vulnerable for becoming extinct.

Apart from the initiative from the government, an initiative has come from some enterprising young men from the village of bally near the forest.

As soon as the tiger enters into a village, they rush to the site after passing on information to the forest department. They motivate villagers not to harm the animal. Meanwhile the forest department with the help of the villagers cordons the area with nets. The tiger is finally tranquilize, put in an iron cage and carried across the river to a nearby forest to be released. In the recent times a number of such operations have been successfully undertaken. Thanks to the bravery of these men the awareness to save the animal is on the rise.

This has been so successful that the forest department too has begun to depend on these young men and inform them of tigers straying into villages to take necessary action.

The Sundarbans Tiger Reserve Management and the WWF India West Bengal State Office has taken special steps to find out ways and means for sustainable development of the village of Bali with the help of these dynamic young men. Help Tourism, an organization working for development of Community Tourism that supports the process of conservation has also joined hands. A demonstration project -

Sundarbans Jungle Camp – a low cost tourism infrastructure involving local people will be developed to be replicated by other villagers. This will turn Bali into a tourist destination. The model will gradually be picked up by the other villages, thus supporting a large tourist inflow to the world's largest mangrove forest.

The effort is not just to develop a tourism destination but to allow villagers an alternative source of income so that intrusion into the forest declines. It will have a direct impact on the forest as well as local villagers will turn protectors rather than poach. Visitors to this destination will have the opportunity to experience this unique forest with its rich diversity of life. This will also help preserve local culture.

Here villagers will be the owners who will manage their property.

We want you to be a supporting member of this demonstration project - Sundarbans Jungle Camp. The management of Sundarbans Tiger Reserve has confirmed to give permission from the adjoining Bidya Range office to set up a jetty, a sweet water source. A manual boat will also be provided to venture into creeks to see wildlife.

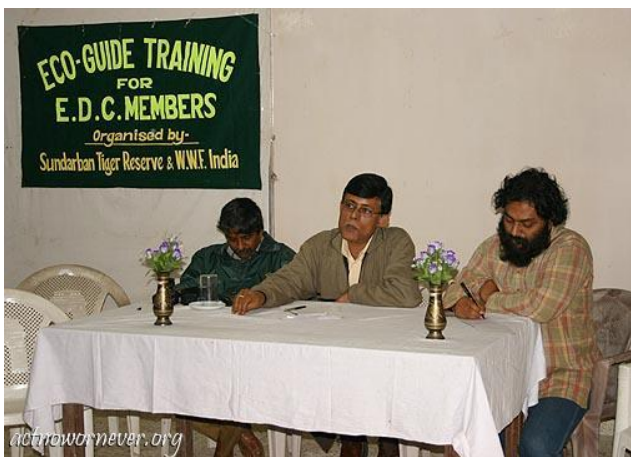
As a member, you will have access to all these services with free accommodation in a double bedded room for five days a year, for a period of 10years. You will also have the facility to avail an attractive discount of twenty percent on accommodation at all the other locally developed tourism infrastructure in the following units:

- Rishyap Tourist Centre, Village Rishyap, P.O.: Lava, Kalimpong Division, Dist:Darjeeling, West Bengal
- The Tinchulay Initiative, Village Tinchulay, P.O.: Takdah, Dist: Darjeeling, West Bengal.
- Garumara Jungle Camp .....

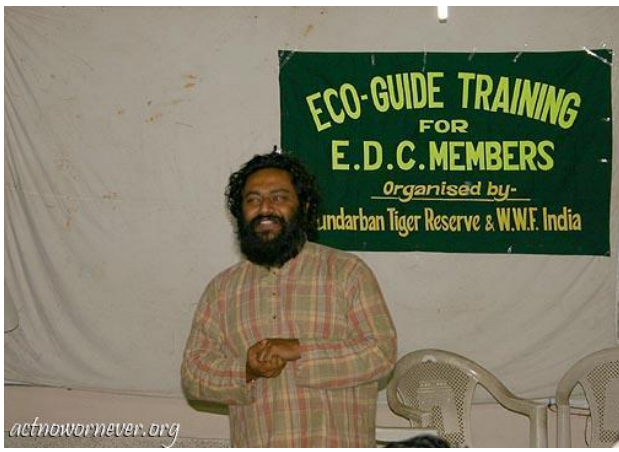
This facility will also be extended to all other tourism destinations developed and promoted by Help Tourism for the cause of development of communities through tourism.

[ACT Letter to UNESCO on Nomination of Bonobibi Yatra of Sunderbans, India as "Intangible Cultural Heritage of the World" - PDF \\*](#)

## **Suderbans Photographs**







## Biosphere in Peril

Biosphere in Peril ... and what is responsible is a corporate project that has all the ingredients of a modern day tourism blockbuster, and one that could well sound the death knell of this unique ecosystem, says PANKAJ SEKHSARIA.

IT cannot get bigger, more ambitious or expensive than this. At least that is how it is being projected.

The location is the famous Sunderbans in the State of West Bengal. The largest delta and mangrove forest in the world, the Sunderbans is spread over 10,000 sq.km in India and Bangladesh. Of this roughly 4,000 sq.km lies within Indian boundaries and roughly 2,500 sq.km is being conserved at the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve.

The Sunderbans Tiger Reserve is home to the largest contiguous population of the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger. It also plays host to 50 of the 60 mangrove species found in India, hundreds of species of migratory birds, and a wide range of biological diversity. The sea and the creeks support significant populations of marine life including crustaceans, molluscs, crabs, dolphins, and sea turtles that nest on some of the beaches here. It is an extremely rich and productive eco-system that supports millions of families and livelihoods. Thanks to its uniqueness and importance it has been declared a "World Heritage Site" and was also made a biosphere reserve in 1989.

The "It" (in paragraph one) is the over Rs. 500 crores Sunderbans Tourism Project, which itself is a part of the Sahara India Pariwar's huge Integrated Sahara Tourism Circuit In West Bengal. The Air Sahara website (<http://www.airsahara.net/airsahara/Sunderban.jsp>) presents as rosy a picture as is possible. "The Sahara Group", the website says, "will develop five virgin islands in the 36,000 sq.km of water area in the Sunderbans ... as tourist destinations of global standing ... these islands would set new standards in hospitality and entertainment. Some of the facilities planned for this dream destination are: modern aqua sports, a mini golf course, a spa, a health centre, a club house and a casino. About 75 per cent of the accommodation would be on floating boat houses and 25 per cent as on-shore cottages, stylish huts and fabulous tents. The exclusive, beautiful virgin beaches of the region would be preserved in their pristine glory. The complex would also have a 30-seater, multi-utility high-speed power craft for a floating clinic, a fire fighting unit, an ultra modern security system and both small and big ships. All cottages and house boats would be equipped with broadband internet facilities, video on demand with interactive dish antenna".

(Also check <http://www.saharaindiapariwar.org/forthcom/sunder/default.htm> and <http://www.saharahousing.com/project/sundarban.htm>)

"Virgin" islands and beaches of "pristine glory", a project with "global standing", dream destination, floating boat houses, and a casino. Throw in a tiger breeding centre (it's been advertised) and even scuba diving facilities ... and you have it all perfectly laid out — a modern tourism (it's also being pushed as eco-tourism) blockbuster if there was one.

Importantly, this time, even the "Leftist" State Government is playing ball. It is the vital signal that West Bengal is coming of age, that this is a State that welcomes large projects and large money and that the

right climate for investment and growth has been created. It is only one in a slew of many mega projects of various kinds that the State is welcoming with gusto.

In January 2004, the West Bengal Government and the Sahara group signed a Memorandum of Agreement for the project as well. It will be a joint venture with the State making available about 750 acres of land on the islands of the Lower Long Sand Island, Sagar, Frasergunj, L- Plot, Jharkhali and Kaikhali for a paltry sum of only Rs. 20 crores. The responsibility of developing and running the initiative would be that of Sahara India Pariwar's sub-agency — the Sahara India Tourism Development Corporation Ltd.

If all seems in place then what is the problem?

Simply, that a project with this investment and ambition, could well sound the death knell of the extremely fragile and unique Sunderbans. It will kill the golden goose, the very ecosystem that makes it such an attractive tourism proposition in the first place. The impunity with which environmental and social concerns have been neglected in the planning of this project could certainly be called spectacular, if indeed they were not so serious and "deadly". There is violation on every single front, as was found by a team of independent observers who investigated the project area in March this year. This included among others, representatives of People United for Better Living In Calcutta (PUBLIC), Kolkata; Bombay Environment Action Group (BEAG), Mumbai, and the Bangalore-based EQUATIONS that works on issues related to tourism.

"It is important to remember," says Samir Mehta of BEAG, "that the entire Sunderbans, including all the project sites, has been notified as a Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) I region." It is an acknowledgment of the fact that this is an extremely sensitive zone and any activity has to be initiated with care and concern. None of this is, however, evident in any of the project documents of the promoters. "First and probably most important," he points out, "is the violation of the Environment (Protection) Act (EPA) — 1986. As per the Memorandum of Agreement, what we have is only a Rapid EIA and this," he stresses, "is nowhere sufficient or comprehensive enough to deal with a project this size." Further, the West Bengal Coastal Zone Management Authority (WBCZMA) has not yet prepared the Area Specific Management Plan and Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan for the Sunderbans, as mandated by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. Unless these are available, there is no basis for such a project being cleared. Yet, the State Government's expert committee on Environment Impact Assessments (EIA) is said to have cleared the project.

There are a number of laws that the project and government authorities are either ignorant of, or are deliberately violating. Both, of course, are inexcusable.

The project proposes a number of activities that are strictly prohibited in CRZ I areas. These include dredging in creeks and water bodies and the use of coastal salt marsh for developmental activities during the construction phase. Nothing is known of the plans for the disposal of waste and sewage; neither of those to deal with the inevitable oil, grease and other forms of pollution resulting from the operation of the boats, barges and floatels.

There is serious concern being expressed about availability of fresh water, which is already a problem in this marshy and saline region. Presently available only at a depth of about 1,000 feet, many are worried that the huge requirements of the project will only worsen the situation for the environment in general and the local populace in particular. One such large requirement is for a mini golf course at L-Plot.

There have been serious problems with the public hearing process that is mandated for projects of this kind. This was pointed out by Bonani Kakkar of PUBLIC, after participation in the hearing that was held on January 28, 2004, at Ramganga in the 24 Parganas district. While the project is multi-locational, the public hearing was held in only one place.

In a letter written to the West Bengal State Pollution Control Board, the agency responsible for the public hearings, PUBLIC also pointed out that the average time required for people to travel from places like Jharkhali, L-Plot and Kaikhali to the site of public hearing was about five hours one way, and that most people in these locations had not even heard of the public hearing. "This is not surprising," the letter continues, "considering that two small advertisements were placed in newspapers — and the print medium is hardly read in these areas". (Sahara, on the other hand often releases three to four full pages in leading newspapers for their own advertisements).

"There is also the crucial issue of forest lands and those being protected here in the interest of wildlife," points out Syed Liyakhat of EQUATIONS. Certain critical parts of land and forests to be developed for the project are already designated as reserve forests under the Indian Forest Act (IFA) — 1927, and will need special permission for dereservation.

These have not been sought. Further all the project sites, with the exception of Gangasagar, are within a distance of 10 km from the boundaries of the Lothian and the Sajnekhali wildlife sanctuaries or a wildlife corridor. The Indian Board for Wildlife, that is chaired by the Prime Minister, had taken a decision in January 2002 that all areas within 10 km of the boundaries of national parks and sanctuaries and the wildlife corridors would be declared as eco-sensitive under the Environment (Protection) Act — 1986.

"State governments had even been asked to list out such areas and furnish detailed proposals for their notification. How then," questions Liyakhat, "can the project be allowed to go ahead in this context? The problem with tourism development," he continues, "is that Governments and tourism developers have always overlooked environmental concerns and tried corrective measures only when the damage has already been done. In the case of the Sunderbans, however, there is too much at stake vis-à-vis the ecosystem and natural resources to repeat the mistake. We should also not forget that the Sunderbans extends into Bangladesh as well and any attempt on the Indian side to upset the already stressed fragile ecosystem," he warns, "could have serious international and political implications."

In another significant move, it has apparently been decided that fishermen will not be allowed to fish in areas where Sahara has its project or the creeks where their boats will ply. Presumably, they want their "virgin" beaches and islands. It's also become clear that this project will not only harm the environment but also adversely affect the local population, by direct displacement and by the restrictions on their



fishing activities. Another area of controversy that has now arisen is to do with a directive that no other tourism operator will be allowed into the Sunderbans without the permission of Sahara. Some competition that would be!

THERE has been international concern too. The London based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) recently issued a briefing note challenging Sahara's claims that this was an ecotourism project ([www.eia-international.org](http://www.eia-international.org)). They have pointed out that the project does not adhere to; rather clearly violates basic principles like those of ensuring conservation, environmental sustainability, involvement and benefits to the local communities and ensuring cultural respect; principles that guide and define an eco-tourism project.

All put together, it's not clear how the project can go ahead at all. It has all the potential for an environmental disaster. "The earlier experience of the Sahara group in creating the Amby Valley Lake city near Lonavla in Maharashtra does not inspire any confidence either," says Mehta. He should know, for it was BEAG that had highlighted the serious environmental problems and many of Sahara's legal wrong doings here. There are even serious doubts about its economic viability if the marketing, rather the lack of its success, in Amby Valley is anything to go by.

The Sunderbans, it appears, can **certainly** do without this Sahara.

Pankaj Sekhsaria is a member of the environmental action group Kalpavriksh

## **Sahara & Sunderban**

[http://actnoworever.org/userfiles/file/sunderbans%20\(1\).pdf](http://actnoworever.org/userfiles/file/sunderbans%20(1).pdf)

## **underbans :: Form Tiger Conflict to Tourism**

<http://actnoworever.org/userfiles/file/sundarbans-from-tiger-conflict-to-tourism.pdf>

## **Activity Report of ACT – 2005 to 2006**

<http://actnoworever.org/userfiles/file/activity-report-of-act-sunderbans-2005-2006.pdf>