



30 days in Sunderban Tiger Reserve

- Panchali Hazarika

"The wildlife and its habitat cannot speak, so we must and we will."

~ Theodore Roosevelt.

We arrived at the entrance of the Sunderban Tiger Reserve on 1 February 2023, and the realisation dawned on us that this survey would be different. The first thing I did was get a good picture of mine with the entry gate 'Thank you and Visit again, Sunderban Tiger Reserve'. I stood at the wrong side, and it was too late to click again. Anyways, our home for the next 30 days arrived at the bank, and my opinion of the M.V. Bishalaxmi much improved when I saw there were actual beds with tiny windows next to them and two western toilet systems. A luxury indeed, the friendly boat crew welcomed us with a homely Bengali meal. Thus, we began preparing for the survey of the wide estimation of the River Dolphin at the Sunderban Tiger Reserve, the largest delta in the world.

The survey commenced successfully on 2 February, and we were all enthralled by the unique landscape and breathtaking views of the sun gliding through Mangroves. The pneumatophores protruded gracefully from the swampy river banks with dense forests wide awake with birds, animals, and insects. We were lucky to encounter the humongous estuarine crocodiles and the Irrawaddy dolphins but equally disheartened not to spot a Royal Bengal Tiger.

We were cautioned about the phenomenon of low tides-high tides, and as carefully we arranged the survey timings and routes, things wouldn't always go as planned. We experienced the first low tide during the survey on the seventh day. The transition from a flowing river with a 5m depth to a naked river bed was so smooth that we were too astonished to react in time. I couldn't even collect my plankton sample; all it collected was mud. But we did take advantage of the unexpected survey break and watched the MMA fight between two mud skippers, which was well interrupted by the sight of a small herd of Chital on the bank (I was rude enough to imagine a tiger jumping right in for its evening catch, but gladly, was disappointed). In the evening, at around 7 p.m., water filled in slowly and as the channel was reborn again, we ignited the engine and hurried-

ly moved to a safer zone. Another incident happened on the 18th day at 2 a.m. The team was sleeping as logs when suddenly, I heard the boatmen talking and rushing to the engine room. Abruptly, the engine roared, except I was thankful that the sound of the engine masked the terrifying snores. We suddenly felt the boat tilt on no side and soon realised what had happened- a low tide caused our boat to incline on a deadly slope of the river bed. It was frightening as the situation was unpredictable, but after a tiring struggle till 2:30 a.m., our boat crew successfully saved the boat and the terrified researchers of WII.

Cruising amidst the dense forests of Sunderban on a full moon night was a time of pure tranquillity. On one such night, when the boat halted for the night near the Bay of Bengal, we got to witness one of nature's incredible creations- bioluminescent plankton. These are dinoflagellates, which contain the enzyme luciferase that catalyses certain chemicals called luciferins, and upon reactions with oxygen, they vibrate and cause luminescence. The plankton net glowed in absolute glory. All that couldn't be captured in any camera but was forever embedded in our memories.

I think Goddess Bon Bibi blessed us throughout the survey. We had stopped at her shrine at one of the forest beat camps; her legend is worth knowing. She is known to have her protective shield over the mangroves of Sunderban. The beautiful legend of Bon Bibi claims that Hindus and Muslims worship her for her bravery and kindness across the region.

We completed 958 km in 30 days and returned to the same gate where I took my picture on the wrong side. It was nostalgic and fruitful, a learning experience in many aspects. We all waved the boat crew goodbye and goodbye to the Sunderban Tiger Reserve.

Contact: panchali@wii.gov.in