



Cat in the net

The fishing cat is threatened by habitat destruction in Howrah

TIASA ADHYA AND PARTHA DEY | HOWRAH

IT TAKES a two-hour drive from Kolkata to reach our study site, a place in Howrah dotted with cultivated marshy reed beds, rice fields and ponds. In the evenings, one can hear a peculiar sound—barks of a dog embedded in a cat's tone. This is the sound of the fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*), an animal as big as a domestic dog with stripes and blotches streaking its grizzled grey coat. Known locally as *baghrol* or *gobagha*, it visits the area to catch fish in the ponds and is an integral part of the social ecosystem.

On June 5 this year, while the world was

celebrating World Environment Day, a different kind of celebration was taking place in Howrah. Five residents in Hafjgunj village in Munsirhat *tehsil* hunted five fishing cats. However, the men committed an error: they got themselves photographed.

On June 10, a photograph of one of the poachers about to behead a fishing cat was posted on a social networking site and went viral across the world. It caused an outrage which, in turn, gave birth to a global petition where more than 5,000 people from 49 countries urged the chief wildlife warden of the West Bengal forest department to bring

NEVILLE BUCK



the culprits to justice. Consequently, the forest department and police sprung into action and the poachers surrendered. They are now in judicial custody and a criminal case has been filed against them.

Priority species

This case is one of many—for 27 fishing cats have been killed in Howrah between 2010 and 2011. This is despite the fact that the fishing cat is in the “Endangered” category of the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Red List, 2010, and is a Schedule I species according to the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. It is found across 11 south and southeast Asian countries in marshes and swamp lands, which are fast turning into wastelands. Thus, internation-

al organisations have declared the fishing cat to be a “priority species”.

In India, fishing cats are mainly found in human-dominated landscapes outside protected areas, including the Terai belt of the Himalayan foothills, West Bengal, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. In West Bengal, the cat is found in the Howrah marshes. Howrah comes from the word *haor* meaning low-lying areas and is naturally rich in reeds like *Phragmites*, *Typha* and *Saccharum narenga*. Since it is a flood-prone region, the locals dug up soil near their homes to raise their plinths for years. The areas from where soil was dredged, accumulated water and turned into ponds. Thousands of these dot the landscape today. This ecosystem of reeds and ponds in Howrah is the

ideal habitat for the fishing cats, providing a refuge in a high human density area (600-1,600 people per sq km).

Beyond protected areas

A major part of the fishing cat’s habitat is threatened. Howrah has lost 44 per cent of its marshes in the past two decades due to “development”. Between 2001 and 2011, marshes in West Bengal declined by 16 per cent (see “Cat space”). When the cats venture into human-occupied spaces to scrounge for food, say poultry or goats, they are killed in retaliation, besides being killed for ritual purposes by tribal hunters as in the June 5 case. The irony is that much of the cats’ diet is composed of agricultural pests like rodents. Just one fishing cat in a locality might kill 365-730 rodents in a year, thus naturally deterring rodent-induced damage and diseases. Most people don’t know that they are killing their friends.

This alarming scenario should force all national conservation organisations to reconsider wildlife policies and priorities. Much of India’s wildlife is found beyond protected areas. Ecologically blind national policies have a major presence here but conservation prioritisation does not. Under the Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and the Biodiversity Act, 2002, legal provisions like “Community Reserves”, “Conservation Reserves” and “Biodiversity Heritage Sites” can help create spaces for such wildlife. Unfortunately, such demarcated spaces have not been explored. As conservationists, we should rethink our priorities as to how wildlife is surviving beyond the ‘protected areas’.

India is a signatory to the Ramsar Convention, under which it recognises the ecological, economic, cultural, scientific, and recreational value of wetlands. Marshes and swamp lands should be removed from the “wastelands” category and given special attention in wetland policies to conserve the species. Conservation needs to become a social process, not only involving the departments concerned, but also biologists and the general public. ■

The authors are members of the International Fishing Cat Working Group



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Cat space

The fishing cat faces a number of threats in West Bengal

- National Highways and rail routes cut through the fishing cat’s habitat in Howrah
- Howrah has lost 44 per cent of its marshes in the last two decades due to development. Between 2001 and 2011, marshes in West Bengal declined by 16 per cent
- Factories in Howrah, release untreated water and plastic waste into the marshlands, which cannot support flora and fauna
- As many as 450 brick kilns that have come up along the river banks in Howrah in the past three years are illegal. They have further damaged the marshes, the habitat of the fishing cat
- Fishing cats often face retaliatory killing. In 2010-2011, 27 fishing cats were killed
- Tribal communities in Howrah district continue to hunt fishing cats for ritual purposes



A fishing cat catching a young python; (inset) the main accused in the June 5 hunting case holds up one of the cats he killed