

Tiger Conflict in Bangladesh: Initial visit January 2010

Tigers in Bangladesh

Tigers are critically endangered throughout their range. However, the mangrove forests of the Bangladesh Sundarbans are currently thought to support 300 – 500 individuals, one of the largest populations remaining in the world. In this part of their range prey depletion, habitat degradation and direct losses all threaten the tigers' survival. Bangladesh suffers from an unusually high level of tiger-human conflict, manifesting in human killing and livestock predation. An average of 20 – 30 people are killed each year according to official statistics, but the true number is likely to be much higher. If tigers are found in the villages or nearby fields bordering the Sundarbans they are often killed by the villagers who surround the tiger and beat it to death.



Sundarbans mangrove forest



Riverside crowd at Burigoalini

Bangladesh Tiger Action Plan 2009-2017 and WVI

The Bangladesh Tiger Action Plan details the current situation of tigers in the Sundarbans, the threats they face and a strategy to conserve them, and was officially presented to the local and international press on 25 January by the Minister of Environment and Forests and the Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh (WTB). This document recognizes that dedicated teams are required to deal with conflict situations requiring tiger capture. However, this requires specialist training in immobilization techniques currently unavailable in Bangladesh. WVI was approached to provide such training. *"Currently the Forest Department (FD) has no staff available with the necessary skills to capture and immobilize problem tigers. WVI's support for the immobilization workshop would therefore greatly improve the capacity of the FD to deal with tiger-human conflict by reducing the number of tigers and people killed each year. This in turn will help improve local attitudes and create better conditions for implementing tiger conservation initiatives."* Dr Adam Barlow, Tiger Project Manager, Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh.

Dr Lewis takes samples from the Chandipur tiger

Conflict

As Dr Lewis was arriving in Bangladesh, an adult female tiger had entered a village on the edge of the Sundarbans. A joint WTB-FD Tiger Response Team were present keeping the situation under control while Dr Lewis and senior members of WTB made the eight hour journey to assist in the animal's removal.

Unfortunately as the day progressed the crowd swelled to many thousands from the surrounding villages and tensions rose. The situation deteriorated beyond the control of the authorities by sundown - just before Dr Lewis's arrival - and the tiger was beaten to death by the mob. Examination away from the crowds was only possible after the carcass had been removed by the FD and put onto a WTB boat. Estimated to be 4-5yrs old, this tigress was in good condition and showed no wounds other than those inflicted by the crowd on the day. Samples were taken for genetic studies and the carcass returned to the FD for a full post mortem examination.

This tragic event was a typical example of the usual outcome of tiger conflicts in the villages around the Sundarbans, providing a dramatic illustration of why in-country training in tiger immobilisation techniques is so badly needed.



Tiger Conflict in Bangladesh: Initial visit January 2010

Workshop on tiger immobilization

A tiger immobilisation manual was prepared in Bangla for the 30 selected Forest Department (FD) and Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh (WTB) workshop participants.

The workshop was held at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Safari Park. Practical and theoretical sessions covered animal capture techniques, anaesthesia of carnivores, assessment and planning of capture operations and options available for problem tigers. John Lewis acted as lead instructor but Adam Barlow and Prof Md Anwarul Islam of the WTB also made substantial contributions. The workshop was well received but it was recognised that this was only the *first* step towards training competence in tiger immobilisation.



Dr Lewis' leading practical dart (above) and anaesthesia (below) demonstrations



The future

Although this visit was intended simply to provide training in immobilisation of tigers, far wider veterinary concerns relevant to tiger conservation in Bangladesh soon became apparent.

The FD, in cooperation with WTB, is organising four trained rapid response teams to cover human-tiger conflicts throughout the Sundarbans. It is planned to have two FD vets available to these teams, and the WTB will employ its own vet to work alongside those of the FD. Given that there are no veterinary facilities within Bangladesh that can provide specialist wildlife veterinary training, **WVI proposes** to second a full time vet to WTB for 2-3 years under the guidance of Dr Lewis. This vet will continue the training of FD and WTB staff in immobilisation and other aspects of wildlife medicine.

The Bangladesh Tiger Action Plan acknowledges that disease may kill tigers and other wildlife in the Sundarbans, but that no specific information is available. One potential source of serious infectious disease is the domestic dog and cat populations living in and around the villages. **WVI proposes** that the vet seconded by them will conduct a disease risk assessment with WTB, in the light of which preventive measures can be designed to protect the tigers. To our knowledge, this would be the first **preventive medicine programme** designed specifically to protect wild tigers.

Wildlife Vets International (WVI) is the British charity that provides the specialist veterinary services of Dr John Lewis for this project. WVI is committed to long-term support in Bangladesh, and further funding is urgently required. Your support is greatly appreciated. Thank you.



*Tiger footprints in the Sundarbans mud
Photo: Adam Barlow (WTB)*



**WILDLIFE VETS
INTERNATIONAL**