

World Wetlands Day in Tanguar Haor, Bangladesh

In the pink light of the early morning of 2 February 2009, several hundred country fishing boats slid into Tanguar Haor, their peaked nets cocked, taking part in a rally to mark World Wetlands Day. The boats were equipped with various types of fishing gear to demonstrate fisher communities' relationship to, and dependency on the *haor* (a *haor* is a natural bowl-shaped depression between the natural levees of rivers, subject to monsoonal flooding each year)



The rally was organized by the Community Based Sustainable Management of Tanguar Haor Program (CBSMTHP), and was followed by an open discussion session. Community leaders addressed the progress made by the project activities, and outlined some of the limits and constraints they are encountering. The project is implemented by IUCN Bangladesh on behalf of Ministry of Environment and Forest and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

Project staff commended the community for its involvement in managing the resources of the *haor* under the CBSMTH project. The theme of World Wetlands Day 2009, '*Upstream-Downstream: Wetlands connect us all*' was explained to the audience, relating it to the lifestyle and livelihoods of communities in Tanguar Haor. Participants noted that many of the *beels* (low lying depressions in a *haor* system

that retain water during the dry months of the year) have already silted up, resulting in encroachment into other water bodies. As part of habitat restoration, well-planned earthworks are essential.

CBSMTHP staff also expressed concern at the rate at which green coverage in the *haor* has been disappearing, and recommended better plantation initiatives from government bodies.



About Tanguar Haor

Tanguar Haor covers around 10,000 hectares of water bodies in north-eastern Bangladesh. The *haor* provides for the livelihoods of over 56,000 people in 88 villages, primarily through fishing resources.

Why is Tanguar Haor significant?

Tanguar Haor was declared an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) in 1999, and as Bangladesh's second Ramsar site in 2000, because of its national and global significance. Due to this status, the Government of Bangladesh has been keen to put in place a community based management system, effectively ending the previous system of leaseholdings.

The haor supports a significant number of rare and vulnerable species including 10 IUCN Red Data Book and 22 CITES-listed species. A total of 110 resident bird species have been recorded here. Globally threatened *Haliaeetus leucoryphus* also

has been recorded here. Nearly 200 species of wetland flora, 141 species of fishes (which is half of Bangladesh's total fish species and 55 of them are listed in threatened categories by IUCN), 11 amphibians, 34 reptiles (including 6 turtles, 7 lizards and 21 snake species) and 34 mammal species are found in this unique ecosystem.

Tangaur haor sits in the important flyway of migratory birds and offers excellent staging ground for them. Every year more than two hundred thousand migratory birds visit the haor and that comprise about 98 species.

What is the Community Based Sustainable Management of Tangaur Haor Program?

The Government of Bangladesh had previously shown its commitment to re-establish access rights for fishermen by restricting the leasing system of public water bodies to fisher cooperatives. However, this has had mixed success. In order to support the Government's intent to replace the traditional leasing systems with a real 'resource sharing' approach by the community, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) entered into a contract with the Government to provide the necessary financial support based on an independent assessment in 2006. Accordingly, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) nominated IUCN Bangladesh to implement the project on behalf of the Government. IUCN Bangladesh is working with its partners Intercooperation, CNRS, BEAL and ERA on this project.

The CBSMTHP is aimed at addressing ecology, economic and livelihood issues in Tangaur Haor depicting the Ramsar Wise Use Principle. The overarching strategy of the project is to combine the conservation and regeneration of the natural resources of the *haor*, with the sustainable and responsible use of those resources. In summary, the *Wise Use Principle* of the Ramsar convention will be fulfilled.

The CBSMTHP intends to replace the lease system of fishing rights with a co-management approach in which the communities of Tangaur Haor are encouraged to develop organizations and the capacity to negotiate access rights to *haor* resources. Simultaneously, Government capacity to support and recognize the rights of the Tangaur Haor community is also being developed.