



LOCATION INFORMATION

Sunderbans — the engrossing mangrove rainforest

Spread over a total area of 10,000 square kilometres the virgin mangrove rainforest in the Gangetic delta at the head of Bay of Bengal has 40% of the area under the Indian state of West Bengal. Rest 60% of the area is in Bangladesh.

The Indian Sunderbans comprise of 54 islands, criss-crossed by innumerable rivulets. It gets its name from the abundance of *sundari* trees in the area. 'Sunder' in Bengali means 'beautiful' and 'Bon' means 'jungle'. Inhabitants of this inhospitable wetland, engage in honey gathering and fishing for livelihood. They make their jungle errands at great risk of getting mauled anytime by one of the 249 big tigers of the area.

So, traditionally they worship 'Bon Bibi', the deity who they believe protects them from harms way. Each spring when the men folk enter the deep jungles to gather honey, their wives take on temporary widowhood till their men return. It is a folk ritual practiced for the safety of their men.

Sunderbans was accorded World Heritage site status by UNESCO in 1997 and it has the largest concentration of the magnificent Royal Bengal Tigers in any area [total 668; Bangladesh Sunderbans has 419 tigers; India has 249 as per UN Tiger census 2004]



The wetland at the estuaries is influenced by tides all through day and night and naturally harbours an amazing aqua-terrestrial eco system. From dolphins to the large crocs and colourful crabs, mudskippers and Olive Ridley turtles in the water to the tiger, spotted deer and other small animals and exotic birds, the jungle teems with life at every bend.

Jungle and river expeditions are conducted by boat through the rivulets and animal spotting are organised from the watchtowers strategically placed at places where the tiger frequents.

Jungle Rules

Nature hides in itself enchantments that are waiting to be discovered. When we enjoy it we must also remember to leave it unaltered for our progeny to experience its charms.

India Dreams advocates and encourages responsible travel into nature's exclusive territories.

Jungles are few remaining nature's territory, mercifully spared by the spread of civilization. Those who value the remaining of nature's eco parks would also spontaneously respect, we believe, the rules of the place. Some of the ways we can keep these places undisturbed and help retain its character are:

~ No smoking or lighting fires. One accidental spark can devastate acres of forests rendering its inhabitants homeless and vulnerable. The trees that have taken half a century or more to mature would have to regenerate, needing the same time. That means our progeny and we will have more toxic air to breathe. We have examples from Australia, Europe and America of ravaging forest fires in recent times, all triggered by man.

~ No litter, not even the biodegradable ones. Remember even the harmless looking discards can be an item of curiosity and inquisition by animals and in the process can hurt, choke or injure the animal. Besides, the jungle is the only place we are spared the ugly sights of civilization let us vehemently retrain the civilized rubbish to find its nest in the jungles.

~ The jungle is a silent zone. Let's respect that. Unfamiliar noises drive away the wary animals and you deny yourself the rare sighting of nature's exotic treasures.

~ Do not disfigure the natural ambience. Do not break tree branches, chisel out names on the tree barks. Leave behind only footprints if you like, and take back memories in slides.

~ Discourage trade in wildlife. They attract stringent punishments. Entomological collections need permission from authorities. Some are even banned and punishable with imprisonment.



Tiger Tales

Feared erroneously as man-eaters yet revered as majestic icon of the wild, the tiger is on the path of rapid extermination from the loss of its habitat from swelling population and increasing demand of tiger products including its skin in the international market.

Only about 3,250 to 4,700 of the striped cats are left in Asia, the region of their original concentration.

There are five sub species of Tiger left in the wild: the Bengal Tiger; the South China Tiger; the Siberian Tiger and the smaller Java & Sumatran Tigers.

In India the tiger population at the beginning of the twentieth century was over a hundred thousand. It was then regarded as game animal and the colonial rulers glorified their lordship worth by hunting down the king of the jungles for trophy. The sport remained the fancy of the elitist Indians much after the British had left. And combined with the apathy of the government to implement tiger conservation seriously, the animals were reduced to just 1,827 by year 1972.

It was only at this stage with international cries for Tiger protection that the Project Tiger was instituted in India. The project envisaged the creation of tiger reserves [27] among the national parks and management of the species by experts in these reserves. The effort saw a spirited comeback of the animal and their numbers grew to 4,334 by 1989. The project tiger was billed as overwhelming success resulting into critical complacency among the authorities giving way to unchecked poaching which has already brought down the animal's population again to less than 2000 in 2005.

The way the animal's fate is hanging loose, tiger lovers would perhaps see them in the wild only for the last time in these years.