



SHUSHUK MELA 2014

PROTECT DOLPHINS – SECURE LIVELIHOODS





SHUSHUK MELA 2014 REPORT

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The Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Bangladesh Cetacean Diversity Project (BCDP) works to conserve the cetacean diversity and abundance in Bangladesh with local communities and institutions.



The BCDP's Educational Outreach Program aims to foster support among local communities, resource users and managers, partner organizations and institutions for effective cetacean conservation interventions.



The goal of the *Shushuk Mela*, an interactive, traveling exhibition featuring the amazing diversity of cetaceans (the scientific grouping of dolphins, whales and porpoises) living in the rivers, estuaries and deep-sea waters of Bangladesh is to share information about endangered freshwater dolphins, and engage villagers in discussions about efforts to conserve these animals, maintain sustainable fishing livelihoods, and cope with the impacts of declining freshwater flows and climate change.



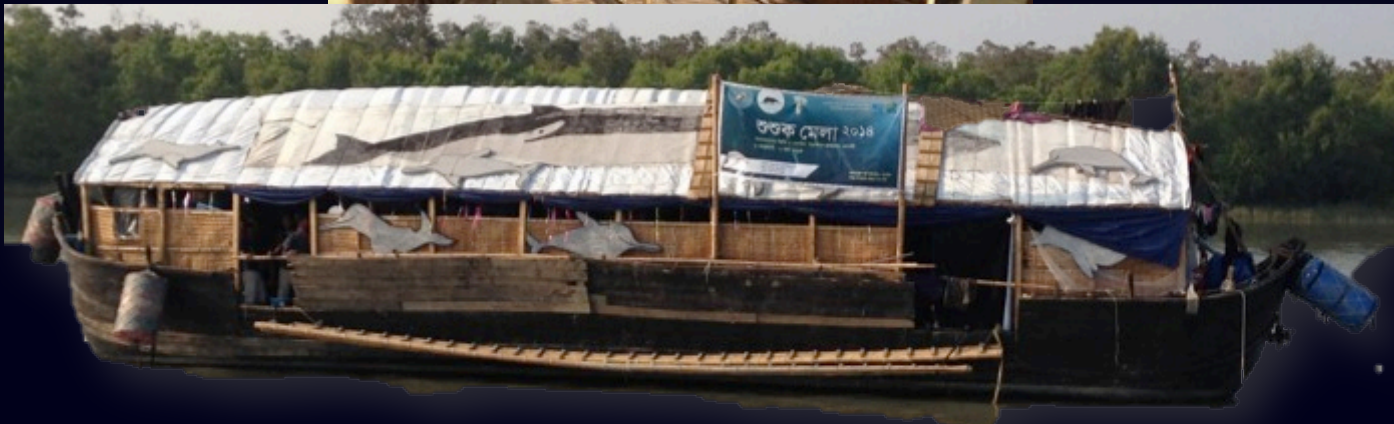


Before - Empty *Golpata* boat

A traditional wooded Nipa palm frond (*golpata*) collection boat was modified into a floating exhibition space.



After - Floating exhibition space



A floor, roof and walls were added to transform the barge into a platform to accommodate the exhibits and provide sleeping space for the interpreters and crew.

Theme

WILDLIFE SANCTUARIES SECURE OUR LIVELIHOODS AND PROTECT DOLPHINS

Key Messages

A Our waters support a great abundance and diversity of cetaceans.

- General facts about cetaceans
- Ganges River Dolphin & Irrawaddy Dolphin
- Other cetacean species present in Bangladesh

B The three new wildlife sanctuaries aim to secure local livelihoods and protect threatened freshwater dolphins.

Benefits of sanctuaries for human communities and freshwater dolphins:

- FOOD – protect breeding grounds for fish & crustaceans
- LIVELIHOOD – ensure availability of aquatic resources
- ASSETS – safeguard ecosystem services our lives depend on

c Following fishery regulations can ensure healthy fish stocks.

- Reduce dolphin mortalities
- Follow the law
- Share knowledge & sustainable practices
- Help us learn more about dolphins



The fourth boat-based *Shushuk Mela* was designed to synthesize and reinforce lessons learned from earlier years, as well as highlight the importance of a community-informed management plan for the wildlife sanctuaries for freshwater dolphins.

The cetaceans of Bangladesh were introduced in the first section, with a special focus on Ganges River and Irrawaddy dolphins. Fascinating facts about these air-breathing freshwater dependent mammals were combined with information about the threats they face.

The second part of the exhibition was dedicated to the three new wildlife sanctuaries established for the protection of freshwater dolphins in the Sundarbans and their potential benefits for local communities. Sustainable fishing practices, alternative income generating activities and compliance with sanctuary regulations were promoted. The sections of the exhibition on fishery regulations and sustainable practices were enriched with new interactive displays that encouraged visitors to discuss the potential benefits of sustainable fishing practices for their livelihoods as well as for freshwater dolphins.





Visitors entered the exhibition through a tunnel simulating the underwater world of cetaceans.



Displays in the first section included life-size models of seven dolphins, information panels enriched with photographs and illustrations, and a vitrine with the skeleton of a Ganges River dolphin, a skull of an Irrawaddy dolphin, and teeth of both species.



Interactive elements in the first section of the exhibition included a panel with transparent layers showing skeleton and organs,



a game about body parts, where a light indicates the correct name being linked to the body part,



and a manually powered bioscope showing the live birth of a dolphin calf.



In the second section of the exhibition, interactive elements included a turn-chart depicting direct impacts of sustainable fishing practices on livelihoods,



a board with 'windows' that open up and reveal anticipated benefits of the three Wildlife Sanctuaries for Ganges River dolphins,



and a bean-bag-tossing game with information about the Wildlife Preservation Act, including penalties for killing or trading dolphins or any parts thereof.



A selection of handicrafts produced from locally available materials was displayed in a showcase along with a blackboard, on which suggestions from visitors for alternative income generating activities were listed.

All the exhibits were prepared using minimal texts and clear depictions, images or symbols to enhance the understanding for visitors of all literacy levels. All games were designed to reinforce and test the acquired knowledge.





The *Shushuk Mela 2014* visited 15 locations along the north-eastern fringes of the Sundarbans forest. The locations had been identified during earlier studies as places of origin for fishermen active in the three wildlife sanctuaries and areas known for high entanglement rates and dolphin product trade.

This years floating exhibition was open to visitors on 26 days from February 6th to March 2nd.





A total of 16,846 exhibition visitors came to the *Shushuk Mela* this year, between 1227 and 413 visitors every day. 73% of them were less than 17 years old, 21% were between 18 and 40 years of age. 4627 of the adults were female – more than double the number of women we welcomed in 2012.





Groups of maximum 10-15 visitors were formed considering age classes to facilitate age-appropriate interpretation. They were guided by one of the 17 interpreters.





The interpreters played a key role in the exhibition, since the exhibition was held in areas where most people have limited reading skills or are illiterate. They guided visitors through the exhibition, stimulated their interest, encouraged and answered questions and facilitated constructive discussions, as well as collecting information about cetacean bycatch and entanglement incidents.

Selected students from several public universities went through an intensive two-day training that equipped them with an in-depth understanding of cetaceans, their habitats, threats, ongoing conservation efforts, as well as communication and interpretation skills.





In addition to their duties as interpreters and guides, they were responsible for the public announcements, school visits, community consultation facilitations, data entry as well as assisting the crew with various tasks in and around the boats.





All schools, colleges and madrassas within walking distance were visited to encourage the participation of all students and teachers. The interpreters held an introductory session in every classroom or at the morning assembly.

About 10,000 children and adolescents from over 70 educational institutions visited the exhibition. Often teachers accompanied their classes, or at least encouraged that they visit the event.





Considering the politically volatile situation in the months before the national election, safety was a major concern this year. District commissioners and union officers, local police stations, Forest Department offices as well as all our NGO partners were requested to extend their assistance as needed. The *Shushuk Mela 2014* did not face any security issues.





During the three previous floating exhibitions insights from local community members were collected informally. In the *Shushuk Mela 2014* we incorporated short formal consultations.

Altogether 220 people in 80 groups participated in these consultations. Questions used to initiate discussions included:

- What regulations do you suggest for effective sanctuary management?
- How can the Forest Department involve local communities in sanctuary management?
- What challenges do you face due to living near the sanctuaries?
- What would convince you to follow sanctuary regulations?
- What alternative income generating activities do you suggest for fisherfolk engaged in illegal fishing practices?



Participants generally agreed that illegal fishing must be stopped, and many thought that all fishing should be prohibited in the sanctuaries. Participants generally thought that awareness-raising programs, such as the *Shushuk Mela*, were very useful for disseminating information about conservation management in the wildlife sanctuaries. They recommended that the FD organize similar events, possibly in collaboration with local conservation committees. Challenges mentioned included declining freshwater supplies, increasing salinity, land being taken over by shrimp farms, storms, pirates and poverty. Suggestions for ensuring compliance with regulations in the sanctuaries included regular patrolling and monitoring by the Forest Department, strengthening law enforcement and pursuing violations, and stopping the production/import and sale of illegal nets.



Entry-exit interview were used to assess short-term gains in knowledge of visitors to the *Shushuk Mela 2014*. A total of 347 visitors were interviewed before and after visiting the exhibition; 80% male and 20% female. Altogether 53% were younger than 17; 33% were between 18 and 40; and 13% were older than 40. Almost half (44.4%) had visited the *Shushuk Mela* in previous years: once (39.5%), twice (3.2%) or three times (1.7%).

Changes in knowledge were documented according to the differences in answers before and after visiting the exhibition.





Possibly due to the strong foundation already established by WCS and partners visitors were already fairly well informed about dolphins in the Sundarbans before entering. There was a measurable increase in their knowledge about dolphins between the entry and exit interviews, and there were also impressive increases in the short-term knowledge of interviewees who knew little about some of the questions asked before visiting the *Shushuk Mela 2014*. These included an increase from only 13.0% knowing about laws prohibiting the possession of dolphin meat and oil to almost 95% in the exit interview; 15.9% demonstrating knowledge about the diversity of dolphins in Bangladesh on the entry interview to more than 95% in the exit interview; and 31.0% understanding the aims of the sanctuaries to almost 90% in the exit interviews.

Although knowledge about the potential benefits of the wildlife sanctuaries to local people increased from 16.7% in the entry interview to more than 50% in the exit interview, 40.0% of the exit interviewees demonstrated no change in their knowledge on this topic. Of the questions asked during the entry-exit interviews this one by far showed the least improvement in the answers.



Interpreters were asked to follow up on reports received from visitors on dolphin bycatch, or consumption of dolphin oil or meat, with questions on the circumstances, locations, prices, etc. Of the 117 reports from visitors about dolphin mortalities we received this year, 59 incidents were related to dolphin carcasses being traded for their oil and meat, and six incidences of intentional killings.

The cause of all other mortalities were reported as probable incidental catches in fishing gear or unknown. The highest number of entanglements occurred in gillnets. Low-caste Hindus and Christians were frequently mentioned as the main consumers of dolphin meat. Locations of dolphin trade and consumption were focused in a relatively small geographical area along the Passur River between Chandpai and Khulna which includes two of the wildlife sanctuaries for freshwater dolphins.



The *Shushuk Mela* is a welcome opportunity to promote the Dolphin Hotline. Since February 2011 we have received almost 50 out of a total of 68 reports about dolphin mortalities, trade or consumption through the Dolphin Hotline.

Posters and stickers with the Dolphin Hotline, illustrated instructions on how to safely release entangled dolphins and information about the laws protecting dolphins in Bangladesh were distributed among all adult visitors.





All children visiting the *Shushuk Mela 2014* were given a copy of our new children's book 'Shuba and the Cyclone', a story about a Ganges River dolphin finding its way back to its mother after being separated by a storm. The book includes several pages of detailed information about freshwater dolphins and conservation efforts.

Children loved the richly and colorfully illustrated publication, which is the first real book for many.





The story ‘Shuba and the Cyclone’ was developed by the students of Joymoni High School adjacent to the Chandpai Wildlife Sanctuary. During a creative writing workshop organized by WCS in collaboration with Dot-to-Dot books the students used their acquired writing skills as well as their improved understanding about freshwater dolphins to develop captivating stories. Their ideas were then pulled together, edited, and finally translated back into Bengali language by the renowned Bengali singer Mrs. Moushumi Bhowmik.

Around 10,000 copies of this innovative educational outreach tool were distributed during the *Shushuk Mela 2014*. While the exhibition was stationed in Joymoni, the authors proudly received a hardcover edition of ‘their’ book.





At each location the two documentaries produced by WCS in collaboration with the acclaimed wildlife filmmaker Tanjilur Rahman ‘Shushuk, our Rivers and Mankind’ and ‘Exploring our Waters’ were shown after sunset. Spectators crowded the riverside, and watched the movies projected on a screen installed on the roof of the exhibition vessel. More than 5,145 viewers came to see the film shows.



Tanjilur Rahman joined this years *Shushuk Mela* team for a full month. With the collected footage we hope to produce a short film about the floating dolphin festival as a way to document this unique outreach approach and encourage others to engage in locally appropriate and innovative awareness raising programs.



Over the past four years we welcomed more than 54,000 visitors to the *Shushuk Mela*; more than 60% of them were children. The visitor numbers increased year by year, especially for women: 2,141 in 2012, 3,008 in 2013, and 4,627 in 2014. Around 18,950 spectators attended the evening shows of our two documentary films on Ganges River dolphins and cetacean conservation in Bangladesh. A total of 42 trained students, WCS interns and fellows worked as interpreters.

Through the *Shushuk Mela* we achieved a measurable increase in knowledge about and positive attitudes towards freshwater dolphins. The *Shushuk Mela* has significantly contributed to building cetacean conservation constituencies among those living and working in close proximity to the wildlife sanctuaries for freshwater dolphins.





The traveling *Shushuk Mela* has been a formidable information-sharing platform. The overwhelmingly positive reactions from visitors of all ages and backgrounds encourage us to continue developing innovative and effective educational outreach tools.

Our Educational Outreach Program is currently developing a compact and easily transportable new exhibition focusing on freshwater dolphin conservation and sustainable fisheries.

The exhibition elements, including interactive parts, will be available for community events. Through our NGO outreach partners we hope to extend our reach and increase our impact.





We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Foundation for the Third Millennium, our NGO partners, the crew and all interpreters who made the *Shushuk Mela 2014* possible.





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