



MANGROVES AND MAN-EATERS



The sun was lifting from the sea like an enormous egg yolk when we set out from Hiron Point in our double-engined boat. Hugging the coast for the first kilometre, past the graceful silhouettes of Bengali fishermen setting their nets, we turned into the mangroves and chugged up a narrow creek, an open highway through a tangled maze of roots and branches. We were nervous and I remembered the warning on the *Rocket* paddle steamer as we travelled south from Dhaka to Khulna on our way to the Bangladesh Sundarbans.

‘But why,’ the stranger had enquired, ‘why would you ever want to go looking for man-eating tigers? They eat so many people who are doing their best to avoid them, you are certain to be killed.’ *Rocket* logic, perhaps, but not science.

Tessa and I were nervous that morning because we had left Alan 18 hours earlier in what we hoped was a tiger-proof hide. The hide was 30 metres from the carcass of a deer which we had staked out above the high-tide line. If a tiger came after sunset, Alan would not be able to film it in the dark. His only chance lay with it staying on the deer until the sun rose, giving enough light for a decent exposure. It was a long shot, not without danger. The forest’s beauty is overshadowed by its man-eating tigers. Accepting the risk of being eaten is a condition of entry.

The people of Bengal have lived with this occupational hazard for at least 4,000 years. But as their population has increased, particularly during the past

century, more and more of them have needed to enter the forest to make a living; maybe 50,000 people each year, from both India and Bangladesh, because the Sundarbans is divided between these two countries. The forest offers food and firewood, but to collect such vital resources means confronting the tiger. And tigers must kill regularly: spotted deer, wild boar, rhesus monkey and people. All are vulnerable to attack.

The forest stands on a maze of islands where two great rivers, the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, merge after their long and separate journeys round the Himalayas. Where they empty their freshwater into the tidal Bay of Bengal, they form a vast delta, their shifting, muddy deposits so fertile that nearly 10,000 sq km of mangrove trees, criss-crossed by innumerable rivers and creeks, clothe the entire region. The Sundarbans takes its name from its most common mangrove tree, the sundari, a Bengali word for beautiful. Among the trees is a wealth of wildlife, and presiding over all others is the guardian of the Sundarbans, the Royal Bengal tiger.

The sun had climbed high above the trees when we secured the boat and set out on foot with our mandatory armed guard. His cumbersome .303 rifle, accurate over several kilometres, would, we all knew, be of little use in a hurried close encounter with a tiger in the forest. The mud sucked at our feet, slowing our progress through the stubby mangrove roots exposed by the low tide. We were still nervous, and not just for Alan. We had heard stories of how tigers take their human prey, of two men standing near each other, talking, one turning away and then turning back to find he is alone, muddy pugmarks on the tree. The tiger, unseen, had been watching, waiting for averted eyes before springing, ghost-like, hitting the tree and pushing off, whisking the unfortunate man away in its vice-like jaws. All, we were told, in a split second and with barely a sound.

We caught sight of the hide through the trees and stopped to search for the carcass with our binoculars. We were hardly expecting to see tigers, although some less sensitive scavenger like a monitor lizard might have been tearing at the decaying meat. We could see nothing that Alan might have been filming and moved slowly forward. There was no response to our arrival from within the hide. A jungle fowl, the first chicken, called nearby; and then a monkey. Had they seen us, or a tiger? Tessa called again, quietly.

'Thank God you're here,' came the strained reply which, despite its anxiety, filled us with relief. But then Alan continued in a loud whisper, 'Have a look round the back of the hide and tell me if there are any pugmarks.' We found a single line of them leading to the tower supporting the hide. They stopped at the wooden ladder we had wrapped in barbed wire the day before.

Alan emerged from his sleepless ordeal. In the middle of the night he had heard more than one tiger on the kill, a two-hour crunching of flesh and bone.

And then silence. Complete and utter silence until he heard a slight sound immediately behind him. Somehow, he thought, one of the tigers had left the kill, circled the hide and approached slowly from behind. How slowly is impossible to tell, but the tiger, if indeed one had arrived, would have taken its time, gently transferring its weight from one paw to the other as it moved silently and purposefully through the thick, cloying mud.

Alan had hardly dared breathe. His arms were folded on top of his camera, cushioning his head while he listened for sounds from the kill in front of him. That nagging silence, he had been thinking, could have been explained because the tigers had made short work of the remains of the deer. But were they now sleeping nearby, or had they already gone? His best thought, before the slight sound, was that they were taking a break and would resume feeding closer to daylight when filming might be possible.

In his heart of hearts, though, Alan was not convinced that all was well. The feeding had stopped too abruptly, as though the tigers had been disturbed. What if they had detected his presence and were indeed coming to investigate? If they were man-eaters and the deer had not been enough, could they, at that very moment, be weighing up their chances of another meal? And then, to give shape to his fear, there was that first slight sound immediately behind him.

It was dark and Alan was alone. Perhaps he was imagining things and should try to relax. But then there was something else: a gentle sniffing. It really was a tiger, and it really was less than five metres from his back. Despite the urgency of his brain, his muscles froze and his hand refused to reach out for the machete that stood beside him. At that moment, it felt as though the barbed wire counted for nothing. Defenceless, he waited for whatever might happen next.

There was no attack, no audible retreat, and yet, within half an hour, Alan knew he was alone. The tension had lifted, the tiger had gone. As the colourful wash of dawn embraced the night-soaked trees, Alan's muscles re-engaged with his brain. A cold mist rose from the muddied floor, thinned and drifted away. Birds took to their song posts and a jungle fowl approached the scant remains of the deer and began picking at its bones.

There was no knowing where the tigers were when Tessa and I returned to the hide in broad daylight. We drank black coffee with Alan while our guard kept watch with his rifle, trying to reassure us that we were not actually in that much danger. Had he missed something? There were, he continued, very few tigers in the Sundarbans. It was just that they are so persistent that they will follow boats all day long under the dense cover of the forest, biding their time. That was why local people thought there were so many man-eaters. Whenever they stopped, a tiger would always appear and attack them.

There are probably at least 300 tigers in the Sundarbans, more than in any other stretch of habitat in the big cat's entire range. Some of them – more, it

would seem, than can be explained by the accepted causes of old age and injury – have taken to feeding on human flesh. It is a real problem for the people of an impoverished region who must enter the forested delta throughout the year. Filming the relationship between people and tigers in the Sundarbans was the task we had set ourselves. Alan McGregor, Tessa Woodthorpe-Browne (soon to become Tessa McGregor) and I were here in 1984 to make a BBC *Natural World*.

Nobody knows how many people are killed each year by tigers in the Sundarbans. Twenty? Forty? Two hundred? A lot of people enter the forest illegally to avoid paying their dues and their deaths are not recorded. Officials are reluctant to publish figures that might give the mangroves a bad press. The truth might deter those people who enter the forest legally and pay permit fees and taxes on their collections of wood, fish and honey. We heard stories about where some of this money might be going but the Minister for Forests in Dhaka later denied that corruption was at work. He did not know how much we knew about him, that his first job when taking up office had been to tour the Sundarbans to negotiate a good percentage of the money raised in the forest for himself. And he was not, in our own limited experience, the only minister on the make.

One evening at our filming base at Hiron Point, the pilot rest house where the mangroves face the open sea, we were invaded by a workforce, each person armed with a mop and bucket. They had been despatched from Khulna on the morning boat and now, after a ten-hour journey, they began spring cleaning every single room. Our minder from the Bangladesh Film Corporation, Saiful Haq, told us that the Minister for Telecommunications was coming to stay for a few days and that he would decide when he arrived whose rooms he would commandeer. Saiful advised us to be half-packed and ready to move. To our relief, because we had the best rooms, the Minister stayed on board his boat and even after two days we had not seen anything of him. At nine o'clock on his third evening, however, we saw his brightly-lit boat slip its mooring and head for the open sea, suggesting that he was not returning upriver to Khulna, at least not via the shortest route. Curious, we went down to the jetty and asked the guard on duty if the Minister would be returning. With the straightest of faces, he told us that he would be back in a few hours when he had finished hunting, and hopefully with a tiger.

We grabbed lifejackets and a spotlight, jumped into our boat – all 120-horsepower of rigid-inflatable inshore rescue craft shipped out from England – and, with Alan at the helm, sped off into the night. Cutting the engine every few minutes, we soon located the much larger craft and its noisy, excitable crew. The resounding report of a 12-bore shotgun echoed through the forest. The Minister, seated at the prow of his boat, and with the bank illuminated by

hand-held lights, was firing randomly into herds of spotted deer, half-blinded before they could flee back into the forest. Amid excited shouts loud enough to attract the curiosity of any number of distant tigers, minions were being sent overboard to retrieve the deer that had been killed or wounded. Apart from the obvious danger to life and limb, it was mayhem, a real disgrace. It was time to do our bit for Greenpeace.

Under the challenging glare of our own spotlight, and rather taken aback by our sudden appearance, the Minister composed himself quickly. He was not impressed by my advice that animals in a Nature Reserve are to be conserved, not killed. 'They are conserved for me to shoot,' he laughed back, before adding threateningly, 'and I know who you are, you are the BBC and I can have you thrown out of my country any time I like.' We decided at this juncture – he was leaning over the rail above us with a loaded gun – to retreat and face him in the morning at Hiron Point. But by the time we splashed water on our faces at first light, his boat had already gone, and of his threat we heard no more.

Tigers need small amounts of fresh water every day or so. The Sundarbans is tidal, inundated twice a day by saltwater sweeping in from the Bay of Bengal to contaminate the fresh water carried down by the rivers from the north. So here in the mangroves, many animals must get their 'sweet' water from their food. Some eat succulent leaves, particularly in the morning when these are also wet with dew. Tigers are carnivores. They might chew on wet grass at times but, if they can't drink, their water requirement can be metabolised, at least in part, from the meat of the animals they kill. Deer and wild boars are special tiger food but they are not easy to catch unless ambushed at close quarters. Monkeys, another favourite, will stay up in the trees unless they have to cross open spaces or they feel the need to beachcomb for small creatures in the mud exposed by the falling tide. By dropping leaves from the treetops they attract the deer to come and feed beneath them. Now, in a reciprocal arrangement and with the deer providing the low-level tiger-spotting eyes, the monkeys can descend from the trees with more confidence. But once down they must now be on the lookout for giant pythons slithering along shallow tide-drained creeks, and crocodiles floating close to the shore, mostly submerged but alert and ready to lunge.

People are easy prey for tigers in the Sundarbans. They are clumsy, their senses inadequate and when they try to escape on foot they blunder, stumble and cry out, their hearts pounding with fear. Their only advantage is technology – weapons, fire on demand, boats. Without these, they are hopelessly vulnerable. On occasion, we ventured forth without our armed guard, feeling that we were probably safer without him than with him. We found ourselves one day, just the three of us, gliding along narrow creeks, chatting away and looking for things to film while the tide was low. Limpets on the exposed trunks of golpata palms

seemed to say 'tidal' in a strong visual way, so we stopped. Alan and Tessa set up their tripod and camera. Curiosity led me out of the boat, up the slimy 2-metre-high bank and into the thin covering of trees. I could see ahead for at least 30 metres and, given that we had neither seen nor filmed a tiger, was not at all concerned. Alan called up for me to be careful, not to wander too far out of their sight or out of their minds. Five metres ahead of me, a shallow gully was reduced to just a trickle as the water seeped in from the surrounding mud. A line of indentations caught my eye and I went to have a closer look. Pugmarks, and fresh enough to have been made quite recently. Closer still and I could see how sharp the edge of each print was in the soft mud. And then I saw that they were slowly filling with water. The pugmarks to my right were already full, losing their sharp outline, while those to my left, leading towards a clump of bushes 40 metres away, were still empty, fresh and crisp. Had a tiger been following us? Had it been alarmed by my climbing the bank? Had it already made for the little bit of cover where it could ambush us as we passed by in the boat? Had stopping to film the limpets saved us from an attack? Keeping my eyes firmly on the bushes – it is generally accepted that tigers prefer to attack from the rear – I backed off through the mud and slid down the bank. Alan and Tessa had completed their filming, so we packed up, turned the boat round and slipped quietly away.

Boats travelled down from Khulna to Hiron Point quite frequently. From one of these stepped a man with a cow which, he said, was for us to put out as bait. He had heard of our repeated failure to film a tiger and thought this might be a way to help us succeed. Not wishing to reject his concern and his generosity, we agreed to take the cow for a few days, on the understanding that if it was killed we would pay for it, and if it survived we would hand it back with a small payment as rent.

The cow was tied up in a grassy clearing a day or two before the full moon, just beyond a large tree where Alan could sit safely in a hide mounted on a platform. He spent more than 50 hours in that hide, staying overnight so he was ready to film for a few hours after dawn. At the end of three tigerless sessions, we were feeling so sorry for the cow which, it seemed, moored more from loneliness than fear, that we decided she should go back to her owner unscathed. Setting out from Hiron Point with two guards, I left one in the boat and walked with the other through a narrow corridor that had been cut through the mangroves to let people in and out. We then crossed the clearing to meet Alan at his tree. We quickly dismantled the hide, untied the cow and made our way back across the open glade.

Halfway down the little corridor, not ten metres from the boat, Alan realised he had left his binoculars hanging in the tree. On the spur of the moment we left the cow – it could not turn round and the guard on the river was just ahead

of it – and retraced our steps. We were back within five minutes. The cow had gone. Up ahead, the guard in the boat had seen and heard nothing.

If the cow had managed to double back, we would have seen her, or at least her tracks. The two guards examined the evidence, what little there was, and declared that a tiger had followed us from the grassy clearing, keeping low under the tangled mangrove roots close to the corridor. When we turned to retrieve the binoculars we had given the tiger a choice – us or the cow. It had chosen the cow, they continued, either because there were three of us or because it was not a man-eater. Having crept up to the unfortunate cow and killed her with a dislocating bite to the neck, the tiger had picked her up by the small of the back and lifted her clear of the roots that hemmed her in. Then, carrying the cow across a raised lattice-work of roots – the guard now pointed to some mud as his evidence for this conclusion – the tiger had dropped down some distance from where we were standing. She would, even now, be crouched over her victim, her eyes fixed firmly on us. If the guards had painted an accurate picture of what had taken place in those few minutes, it was more than just spine-chilling. It demonstrated an incredible feat of strength, as though the cow had just vanished into thin air. We felt sad, guilty and vulnerable, and returned to the boat in silence.

When a human has been killed by a tiger, the warning is a stick flying a fragment of cloth, often red, placed in a prominent creek-side position. People are reluctant to go ashore. They tie up in mid-river, anchored to a pole driven deep into the mud. But tigers are not averse to swimming out to moored boats to secure their human victims, even in the dead of night. Isolated in the mangroves, people are both vulnerable and available, 24 hours a day. Sundarbans tigers know this and they have acquired a reputation for being more nocturnal than tigers elsewhere. They come and go as they please, like phantoms of the night.

The lack of fresh water in the forest is a greater problem for people than it is for tigers. Beyond drinking every day, people need water for cooking and washing. They must carry it with them on their boats. In some places it has been possible for the authorities to dig large pools to catch rainwater or to fill slowly from below ground where the fresh water table is high enough. People, deer, monkeys and wild boars focus their lives on these vital places. Tigers are also attracted to them, and not just to drink.

In New Delhi, before travelling down to Kolkata (Calcutta) to have a look at the Indian side of the Sundarbans with Alan and Tessa, I talked to the staff of Project Tiger about the problem of people being attacked so frequently. The difficulty, they said, was that while you can control people entering a normal tiger reserve from the fixed point of, say, a village, and you can monitor the whereabouts of the small number of tigers as well, the Sundarbans are very

different. People can enter the forest from all directions. They slip in by boat undetected and once inside the vast labyrinth of islands and tidal creeks, they are untraceable. It is impossible, I was told, to keep determined people out of a place they depend on for their livelihood. At whatever risk to their lives. And matters are hardly improved if you don't know how many tigers there are and where they might be from one day to the next. All you do know is that too many of them kill and eat people, and when it happens, of course, it is too late, not just for that person but also for their family. We talked at length about the man-eaters and why there should be so many of them. One suggestion was that tigers are more likely to attack people who are bending over to cut wood, adopting the profile of a deer, a bit like those surfers who are said to be attacked by great white sharks because their profile, from below, is similar to that of a seal.

We touched on the idea that the sea could contribute to man-eating. Tigers need small but regular amounts of fresh water to drink. Because, in the absence of standing water, some of this can be derived from the meat of their prey, they must kill frequently, even if they consume only a small portion of meat from each of their victims. In other words, they may be killing frequently to satisfy their thirst as well as their hunger. The incoming tidal flow may displace or contaminate the meat, providing food for crocodiles, crabs and monitor lizards. So, instead of returning to a carcass, the tiger simply looks for a fresh replacement. And deer, monkeys and wild boars, the tigers more natural prey, are much better at saving their own lives than we are at saving ours. With so many people out in boats or on foot during the year it is little wonder that tigers turn on them as often as they do.

If 'killing to drink' does contribute to man-eating in the Sundarbans, it would be reasonable to expect all its tigers to be eating people, but they obviously are not. If they were, human deaths would run into many thousands a year. People would stay away and the tigers would either perish or their numbers would be reduced just to those who could make a living out of the forest's other animals. It has been suggested that, because the salinity of the Sundarbans varies throughout the forest, the need to kill people varies from place to place and that this would explain why not all tigers are man-eaters. Having lived and worked there for weeks on end, I can't help coming back to the idea that it is also a question of efficiency. In conditions more favourable than mangrove swamps, tigers manage to kill their natural prey just once in every ten to 15 attempts. If that figure is doubled or trebled in the Sundarbans, where thousands of people flounder around, detached from the nuclear safety of a village, it is not difficult to see why human flesh might be added even to a healthy tiger's diet.

The conversation turned to people wearing masks in the forest. The masks are worn on the back of the head, not the front. The logic of this is that tigers prefer to attack from the rear, waiting for a person to pass before pouncing. The

surprise to the tiger of seeing another face walking backwards, and now staring straight at it, has no doubt been a lifesaver.

Around the freshwater pits, another experiment has been a full-sized human model wired to a battery delivering a nasty 240 volts to an attacking tiger. This, too, has reduced the number of human kills. We agreed, though, that what was required was variety, that tigers would soon learn about shocking dummies and two-faced men. A succession of other devices would be needed to keep these crafty cats guessing, delaying their attacks long enough for another life to be spared.

From meeting the Project Tiger people in Delhi, I flew to Kolkata to meet Alan and Tessa at the Fairlawn Hotel in Sudder Street. They had somehow managed to squeeze past a long waiting list and even reserve a room for me. The Fairlawn is an integral part of Kolkata's history, a colonial outpost perfectly adapted to a modern self-ruling India. Owned and run by Ted and Vi Smith, they busied themselves round their guests, making them feel they were the most important people in the world. Vi sold me material for curtains to take back home and when I had bought almost the entire stock of hand-embroidered sheets, cushions and shawls from the man from Nepal who ran a little stall in the hotel grounds, it was Vi who sent me off to New Market with one of her employees to have a suitcase made for the flight back home. Intrigued by the hustle and bustle of the covered market, I went back on my own a few days later to take some photographs. In a nearby street I came across a sight that made me wonder just how much we had progressed as a species. Tons of rotting vegetables lay knee-deep in a yard by a back entrance to the market. Four young boys were sifting through the putrid pile on their hands and knees, searching for anything that might still be edible. Dogs and crows were paying close attention. They, too, were hungry. The closer the dogs and the crows could get to the foraging humans, the better their chances of success. So while the boldest birds perched on a boy's head, the most daring dogs followed at his shoulder. The moment his hand lifted something for inspection, the crows and the dogs piled in, flapping and fighting. The smell and the mess were dreadful, but they were nothing compared to the human degradation. My camera remained in its case.

Alan, Tessa and I soon realised that the heart of the Sundarbans was a 'man's world', no place for women and children. It was the men who shouldered the yearly tasks of collecting wood, palm leaves, fish and honey to be taken home or sold in local markets bordering the mangroves. The women stayed at home in villages outside the forest, where they were occasionally at risk from tigers, but they did not venture into the forest to work. Around Hiron Point, whose pilot rest house was our home in Bangladesh, fishing was big business. Freezer ships did the rounds, collecting fresh hauls and packing them off to international markets, particularly Japan, where fortunes were paid for the large Bay of Bengal

prawns. We guaranteed our own supply of these delicious shellfish by paying the fishermen more than they were being paid by the racketeers who exploited their labour and left them exposed to the threat of tigers. The heavily-skewed sex ratio of workers in the mangroves means, of course, that virtually all the people killed by tigers are men, leaving a growing number of husbandless wives, fatherless children and brotherless sisters. Beyond the Indian Sundarbans, a special 'Widows' Village' is home to the women and children who have been deprived of their men by man-eating tigers.

There is, however, one time of the year when women and children are actively encouraged to enter the Sundarbans. It is the November full moon, the cyclical beginning of a four-month fishing season that will see a large number of men killed and eaten by tigers. It is a time for the whole family to pray to the Mother of the forest, Bonobibi – the only permanent woman in a man's world – for the safety of its breadwinner over the coming months. We decided to film this festival, sensing it could make a strong opening sequence to the programme.

The day before the festival we went across to Dubla Island, intending to plan the filming and sleep over, ready for a pre-dawn start the following morning. Our overnight accommodation turned out to be a ramshackle wooden shed next to a small freshwater pool. While we considered the pros and cons of putting up with a night's discomfort before a long filming day, news came through that someone had been killed by a tiger within the last week. To spend the night in an unprotected shed close to a supply of drinking water that could be visited by a man-eating tiger would, as our guard put it, be a bit risky. Heeding his advice, we decided to head back to Hiron Point and return early in the morning.

It was cold and dark when we walked down to the jetty from the rest house. The sky reverberated with a brilliance of stars never seen in polluted parts of the world. The usual pre-dawn silence, such a delight before the day wakes, had gone. Boats were everywhere as families and friends emerged from the mangrove creeks and set out across the open sea. Dimly-lit lanterns swayed from the bows and masts of their little boats as they bobbed their noisy, excited way towards Dubla Island.

With an embarrassing, peace-shattering roar of our engines, we left the flotilla far behind. In no time at all we were unloading our gear onto the white sand above the high-tide line, hauling our empty boat ashore and setting up camera and tape recorder. We had to be ready for the rising sun that was such a crucial part of the festival. Alan decided on a little burst of film to check his camera, a trustworthy Arriflex that had never let him down. Nothing. He tried again, still no response. Was this the moment we would rue that deliberate decision, for the sake of mobility, to leave the back-up camera behind – just this once? Now the flotilla of boats we had passed on the sea was arriving, people were spilling

out, shouting and laughing, and children were running and playing in the sand. Now they were coming along the beach from left and right in their hundreds, with less need for torches because the sky was brightening fast. We were ten minutes from sunrise and the camera wasn't working. Alan's last resort was to expose the circuit board, an array of fuse-like connections hidden on a plate beneath the camera body where its various filming speeds are controlled. He took out several pieces, cleaned them and put them back. The camera burst into life. Not a moment to lose. The sun was peeping over the skyline, the band was playing and the powerful, rhythmic dance was underway. Alan discarded his tripod and went in among them, hand-holding his camera. Centre stage belonged to the drummer who glared defiantly at the lens as he pounded out the rhythm that honoured Dakshin Rai, Bonobibi's Muslim consort, who ruled over all the Sundarbans.

It was potent stuff. Around the band, people lay in the surf offering prayers, fruit and rice to keep their men safe from tigers. Garlands of flowers floated in the gently-swelling waters that broke over the sand, littering the beach with a colourful sway of petals and leaves. And to Bonobibi herself, went the plea:

*O Mother
Thou who lives in the forest,
Thou, the very incarnation of the forest,
I am the meanest son of yours.
I am totally ignorant.
Mother, do not leave me.
Mother, you kept me safe inside your womb
For ten months and ten days.
Mother, replace me there again,
O Mother, pay heed to my words.*

And then it was over. The band broke up and its half-stoned members trudged off to the boat that would take them away from Dubla for another year. We were back at Hiron Point by early evening after a little detour to film a large saltwater crocodile, another man-eater, which had been seen floating offshore just round the coast. We heard nothing more of the Dubla man-eating tiger and decided, perhaps a little cynically, that our guard had invented the story because he hadn't liked the idea of spending the night in that dilapidated shed. But then neither had we, and the comfort and safety of Hiron Point was, after all, only three-quarters of an hour away.

Khulna was always our starting point to reach Hiron Point by boat, the only way down through the mangroves. Getting to Khulna from Dhaka was the more

interesting stage of the journey. There were three ways and we experienced them all. We travelled first class on the *Rocket* paddle steamer, an entertaining 24-hour experience that appears to be known to no-one in the world except Michael Palin, who ended his memorable television journey along the Himalayas on board, and our neighbours Barbara and John Dalton, who live less than 100 metres from us in Bristol and who undertook the journey long before we met them. The quick way is to fly from Dhaka to Jessore and complete the journey to Khulna with a 40-km taxi ride, an efficient system for business people with nothing on their minds but to arrive, work and depart as quickly as possible. The most interesting journey was the one that involved being driven all the way from Dhaka by minibus, taking the whole day, crossing rivers on crowded ferries and getting a wonderful feel for the countryside and its people. We did this journey at different times of the year, on well-constructed, all-weather roads raised above the surrounding land to protect them from flooding.

In the pouring rain of the wet season, the land on either side of the road was under a metre of water. Beyond the lush green of roadside vegetation, irrigated fish farming was in full swing. Egrets, cormorants, herons and kingfishers took advantage of this concentrated supply of food. They perched on picturesque and ingeniously-constructed bamboo frames operated by one or two men walking along a central bamboo. As the men moved away from the centre, their weight tipping the bamboo downwards, a net was lifted clear of the water level on the opposite side. Near-naked children and their colourfully-dressed mothers scooped out the fish, competing with the birds that jumped in and grabbed what they could before the laughing, stick-wielding children ran in from the sides. When the fish had been removed, the frame-walkers transferred their weight back across the turning point and the net was again lowered beneath the sparkling surface. A gentle flow of water was maintained through the net by the opening of sluice gates that allowed fish to pass from one section to another as they were ready to be caught and eaten.

Other sections of land were kept deliberately shallow so that paddy fields could be maintained during an extended growing season. We would eat the most wonderful meals of rice and fish by the side of the road, washed down with cool, refreshing coconut milk that we drank straight from the punctured nut. There was something reassuring about drinking this juice, knowing that it was pure and safe and would not lead to tummy upsets later in the day.

To stand at the same roadside spot towards the end of the dry season, when there had been no rain for months, was incredible. There were no nets, no children having the time of their lives collecting fish and beating off avian competitors with big sticks. Just hard-baked, dusty ground strewn with the withered yellow grass that once stood so lush and green. There were no people visibly occupied in the desolate heat of the day. Instead, intriguing columns of

smoke rose from the parched plains at neatly spaced intervals. Bricks were being baked in underground kilns. In this labour-intensive, unmechanised world, perfectly-formed clay bricks would be brought to the surface and transported to the roadside. Here, armies of women smashed them with hammers, reducing them to hardcore to repair old roads and lay the foundations of new ones. Nearby, whole bricks were stacked high. They were ready to build the walls of homes that would be overlaid with the leaves of the golpata palm, cut under the threat of man-eating tigers and brought up from the Sundarbans on the few rivers that flowed at this time of year.

There was one other way to get down to Hiron Point, and that was by helicopter. There was a helipad on the flat-roofed pilot rest house, keeping it accessible throughout the year in case of emergency. We would need to do some aerial filming at some point and, in Dhaka at the end of one filming trip, I approached the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who was my main Government contact. He thought it might be possible, though the Sundarbans was a politically and militarily sensitive area. He explained that the border with India ran down through the mangroves on the western side and that the border with Burma was not too far away in the east. Added to this, within the Sundarbans themselves there were still outlawed freedom fighters, hiding after the war of independence with Pakistan in 1971. A low-flying, hovering, back-tracking army helicopter might not send the most tactful signal to them. And besides, they were heavily armed.

We had, in fact, already met one of these outlawed people, a Major Zed who knew all about us from his network of contacts in Dhaka long before we got anywhere near the mangroves. He tracked us for weeks before making an approach, inviting us to lunch with him and his band of followers. On a little island deep in the Sundarbans, he was happy with our explanation of why we were there for so long. He had smiled when we told him that we might one day be filming from a government helicopter. After lunch with Major Zed, I left Alan and Tessa to their filming and set out on the long journey back to England. I had to get Alan's film processed, printed and logged. Then I would spend several days looking at it and wondering, in the increasing likelihood of us never filming a tiger, what sort of programme we might end up with.

When I returned to Bangladesh, clearance had been granted for our aerial filming, though it would have to be carried out from Dhaka, with us on board from the outset, rather than with the helicopter coming down to meet us at Hiron Point. I somehow felt that this was a ploy to guarantee that we would pay for the entire time that the helicopter was away from its army base in Dhaka, rather than paying just for the filming time once it arrived to pick us up after a 200 km flight. Filming from helicopters is always expensive, wherever you are in the world, so I had built a figure into the budget that would allow for a four-

hour return flight and three hours' filming. A seven-hour day that would cost £5,000. The money had to be paid in cash, in advance, and I was whisked off to a bank in an official car and then driven under armed escort to the military base to hand over the bundles of notes. When the formalities were complete, we arranged a date when Alan, Tessa and I would return to Dhaka, load our gear onto the helicopter and fly back down to Hiron Point.

Three weeks later we were back in the Dhaka Sheraton, welcomed with a broad wink by the doorman, no doubt one of Major Zed's contacts in the city. We were waiting for the weather to be just right for a long day in the air. It was, when it happened, a memorable flight, though lacking the intimacy of the people and the rhythms of their lives on the ground. A bonus was a helicopter pilot trained for war, one able to duck and weave, hover, fly backwards, sideways and almost upside down as Alan filmed from every conceivable angle. From the safety and comfort of the skies, despite the thought of Major Zed's sharpshooters, the mangroves looked far less intimidating than we knew them to be down at ground level.

One thing we did not know in the mid-1980s was that the rising tide of climate change was preparing to engulf the low-lying Sundarbans. Environmental changes in the Bay of Bengal will be complex, brought about by such things as increased Himalayan meltwater and the expansion of the sea as it warms up. Changes in coastal salinity will affect the distribution and behaviour of both animals and plants. Ten thousand square kilometres of mangrove forest will be severely threatened. The lives of millions of people will be disrupted. Several islands have already been washed away and more are set to follow, perhaps 20 in the next ten years. The pressure on people and wildlife will build for the next half century, after which satellite images may simply show the Bay of Bengal reaching 100 km further inland than it does today. In the absence of stabilising mangroves and their cargo of wildlife, including those 300 precious tigers, erosion will continue apace. Tigers will be forced deep into human territory. Despite winning a few bloody battles, they will eventually lose their war against people. But people will also lose. Villages and towns, no longer protected by the forest, will be exposed to cyclones driving up from the south with devastating effect. Even by 2020, a huge number of people will have been driven away from their drowning homes and fields. They will seek refuge in cities where they will live in vast slums. To combat poverty and infant mortality, they will continue to have large families. Many of their children will be forced into hard labour. They will work 12 hours a day, six days a week, to add a few meagre taka to the family pot.

Despite the prediction of our fellow traveller on the *Rocket* paddle steamer from Dhaka, we came through our two-year mangrove experience physically unscathed. But other people did lose their lives to tigers while we were there,

despite their devotion to Bonobibi and Dakshin Rai. Exactly how many people died is impossible to know. During our longest filming trip, a local figure of 40 deaths was double the official figure entered into a Forestry record book in Khulna.

A discrepancy of 20 deaths in just three months gives an idea of how difficult it is to keep track of what is really happening in this wild and beautiful forest: a forest that remains wild and beautiful, for the time being at least, because it is the forces of tiger and tide, not people and profit, that are the true masters of the Sundarbans.



Above: Mangroves grow further out to sea as their roots trap silt carried down by rivers, Sundarbans, Bangladesh (Author's collection)

Below: Hauling nets at low tide, coastal Sundarbans, Bangladesh (Author's collection)





Above: Drying fish for export is a major industry of the Sundarbans mangrove forest, Bangladesh (Author's collection)

Below left: An isolated boat is vulnerable to attack from man-eating tigers, particularly at low tide, Sundarbans, Bangladesh (Author's collection)

Below right: A floating sheep is a meal for scavenging jungle crows, Khulna, Bangladesh (Author's collection)

