

Report on
World Heritage:
Making Regional
Heritage Global
Focus on the Future

17-20 January 2023

Sundarbans
National Park



Organised by:

Wildlife Institute of India – Category 2 Centre (WII-C2C) on World
Natural Heritage Management and Training for Asia and the Pacific
Region, under the auspices of UNESCO



भारतीय वन्यजीव संस्थान
Wildlife Institute of India



Wildlife Institute of India Category 2 Centre
World Natural Heritage Management and
Training for Asia and the Pacific Region
Under the auspices of UNESCO

Summary

From the 17th-20th of January, 2023, the Wildlife Institute of India – Category 2 Centre (WII-C2C) on World Natural Heritage Management and Training for Asia and the Pacific Region, under the auspices of UNESCO organized a 2-day meeting “**World Heritage: Making Regional Heritage Global -Focus on the Future**” at the World Heritage Site of Sundarbans National Park in West Bengal, India. The meeting was attended by senior administrative and Forest Department representatives of the states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Karnataka. Dr. Gautam Talukdar, Faculty In-Charge, WII-C2C; Dr. Bhumes Singh Bhadouria, Technical Officer, WII-C2C; and Sh. Niraj Kakati, Technical Officer, WII-C2C presented to the attendees on the World Heritage Convention, the role & experience of WII-C2C and its capabilities before opening the meeting to comments and clarifications sought by the attendees. The attendees further deliberated on strategies for developing and promoting the convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (commonly known as the World Heritage Convention) with a particular focus on possible collaborations with respect to Natural and Mixed World Heritage Sites. The advantages of being listed as a World Heritage Site and the prospective challenges of the same were discussed in detail with multiple ways forward which were documented as part of the outcomes.



Itinerary

The meeting was held from Tuesday, the 17th of January to Friday, the 20th of January. The attendees boarded the cruise ship, MV Parahamsa, at Millennium Park Jetty in Kolkata on the evening of the 17th of January and it sailed on the Hooghly till Falta before anchoring for the night. Through the 18th of January as the ship sailed from Falta to Dubanki, the presentations, discussions and deliberations were held in the ship's on-board conference room before lunch before the attendees further continued their discussion on the top deck of the ship post lunch. In the evening, a cultural performance of classical dance by the troupe Gaudiya Nritya Bharati under the leadership of Dr. Mahua Mukherjee and Pt. Amitabha Mukherjee formed a conclusion to the day's heritage driven discourse.

The next day, as part of the field tour component, the West Bengal Forest Department organized a trip to a part of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve for the meeting participants through two boats allocated for the occasion, MV Debraj and MV Bharat Laxmi. The Indian portion of the Sundarbans is located on the southern fringe of West Bengal, bordered by Bangladesh in the east, the Hooghly river in the west and the Bay of Bengal in the south, comprising with the Bangladesh portion, the world's largest coastal wetland. It was declared a Natural World Heritage Site in 1989 and the delta is the world's only swamp habitat where tigers live. The Sundarban Tiger Reserve has a total Reserved Forest Area of 2585 square kilometres of which 1330 sq. km. is notified as Sundarban National Park. The mangroves of Sundarban protect the heavily inhabited inland portions from cyclonic storms arising from the Bay of Bengal and from erosion from its tides. It is a natural fish nursery which sustains millions of people through livelihood options and food in the form of activities like fishing and collection of honey.

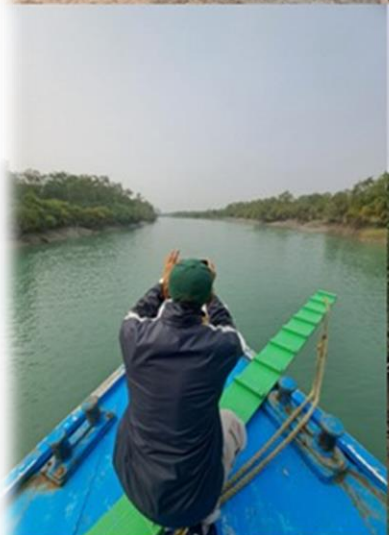
The participants first had the opportunity to visit the Forest Department island station of Dubanki, where the various measures to protect and restore the mangroves of the Sundarbans were discussed. A canopy walk through the prominent mangrove species of the Sundarbans and the chital re-introduction programme formed the highlight of this stop. As the boats cruised the inner channels around Sajnekhali Wildlife Reserve, the participants were privileged to glimpse the wonderful wildlife of Sundarbans including the estuarine crocodile, the king cobra, wild pig, and spectacular bird fauna of the Sundarbans like the black capped kingfisher, the collared kingfisher and the whimbrel. The boats then stopped at the Forest Department island post of Netidhopani where a memorial to the Sundarbans addition in the World Heritage List has been constructed. Here the meeting participants were also introduced to a cultural cornerstone of life in the Sundarbans, the primary deity of the Sundarbans, Bono Bibi and her associated mythology. The goddess is revered by all those who live at the edges of the Sundarbans and prayed to for protection by those who enter the forest for their livelihood. The visitors also saw a live demonstration of how the world-famous honey of the Sundarbans is collected by the local honey collectors and of the masks worn by them at the back of their heads. A detailed interaction with Joint Forest Management Committeemembers from neighbouring villages and local youth working as guides in a well-regarded guide training programme run by the Forest Department followed. This marked the end of the field trip component as the attendees returned to the cruise ship, MV Parahamsa and sailed on their way back to its jetty in Kolkata.











Discussion Summary

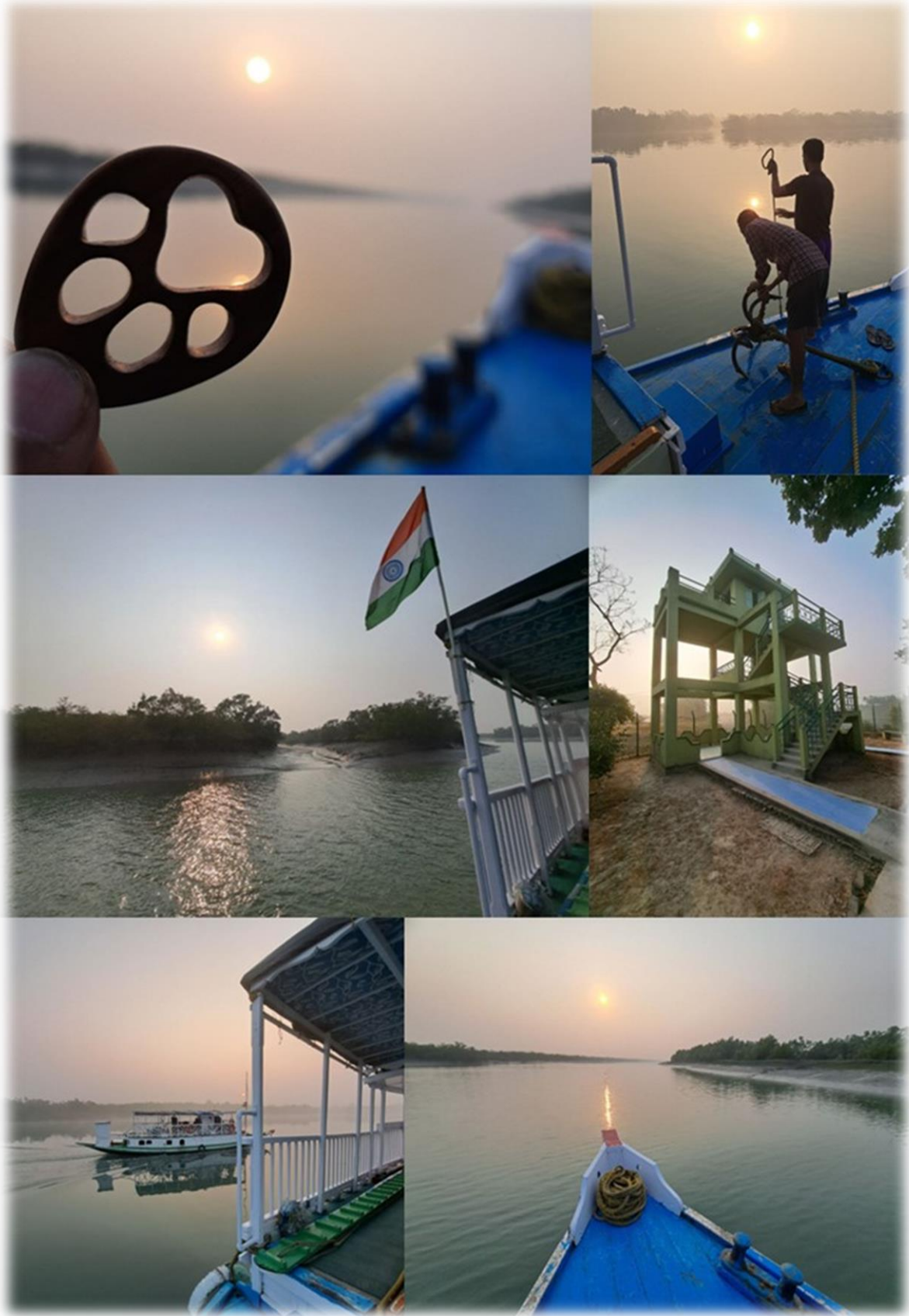
The meeting on the 18th of January, 2023 began with an inaugural address by Dr. Gautam Talukdar, Faculty In-Charge, WII-C2C welcoming the meeting attendees and outlining the items which would come up for discussion during the day. Sh. Rajesh Kumar, APCCF & Director, Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve, then spoke to the attendees about what makes Sundarbans a unique habitat in the world worthy of World Heritage status, the importance of the World Heritage designation and the need for training of forest staff, awareness/outreach, monitoring of OUVs and nomination of new sites which could be fulfilled through collaboration. Dr Samir Sinha, CWLW, Uttarakhand FD took the dais next stressing on the need to further promote the World Heritage designation as a pride, reflecting on his involvement in the WII-C2C from its very inception. He mentioned that since the World Heritage tag opens the nominated site to international scrutiny, it is important to weigh the benefits & challenges of the tag through questions like what value does the WH tag bring and why would it matter to the local community. Sh. Onkar Chand Sharma, Principal Secretary (Forests), Himachal Pradesh then addressed the attendees about the importance of making local communities' needs and concerns central to the decision-making drawing on his experiences in the senior administration of Kinnaur and in the role of Divisional Commissioner in Mandi Division when the World Heritage designation was achieved by the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh. A documentary produced by the West Bengal Forest Department on the magical beauty of the Sundarbans was then screened for the meeting attendees.

Post a tea-break, the meeting moved to its next phase with Dr. Gautam Talukdar setting the context by elaborating on WII-C2C's mandate and functions with follow-up questions from attendees on other Category 2 Centres (C2Cs) around the world and the instruction methods of training courses conducted by WII-C2C. Next Mr. Niraj Kakati, Technical Officer, WII-C2C gave the attendees an overview of the World Heritage System, the nomination process, India's role in the World Heritage Committee as per its recent election to the same and current World Heritage Sites in India.

Post lunch, the meeting shifted to a different venue with delegates requested to provide their perspectives on the World Heritage Convention, its impacts, and potential collaborations to develop the same with specialized centres, forest, and other government departments. Sh. R Balaji, Director, HRD, TCS & Curatorial, Geological Survey of India began the discussion bringing up the GSI's efforts towards designating National Geological monument and geo-relics, making such information publicly available and the challenges of multiple ownership of such locations. Sh. Prashant Singh Baghel, Jt. Director (Planning), Madhya Pradesh Tourism Board then shared his extensive experiences of preparing guidelines for Eco Sensitive Zones (ESZs), a pioneering effort and how a nodal agency which brings together all official stakeholders can help ease the process. Sh. Ajoy Kumar Das, CCF & FD, Sundarban Tiger Reserve, West Bengal Forest Department then outlined the specific characteristics of the Indian Sundarbans, its management successes and how an upcoming Indo-Bangladesh meeting on the Sundarbans

can open the possibilities of transboundary co-operation in its management. Next, Sh. Nishant Mandhotra, DFO, WL Chamba, Great Himalayan National Park spoke of his experiences of managing a World Heritage Site and of his efforts to make the local population more aware of the prestige of the designation by celebrating the anniversary of the inscription through a Dharohar Utsav (Heritage Festival). In his turn, Sh. Vijay Ranjan Singh, APCCF, Karnataka Forest Department highlighted the importance of conveying the importance of World Heritage designation to elected representatives at every level so that the same may be transferred to their constituencies as a whole. As per him, awareness of the World Heritage designation and its associated requirements needs to be increased through centralized meetings of management (like territorial DFOs) of all the regions, sub-regions under which serial sites like those of the Western Ghats are nominated. Dr. Samir Sinha, CWLW, Uttarakhand Forest Department stressed on the importance of framing and appropriate choice of words when discussing matters of World Heritage to a broader audience. As per his suggestions, negative words like 'threat' should not be associated with fundamental activities like pilgrim tourism if support is to be garnered for World Heritage designation. As the discussion concluded, there was general agreement on the need for the World Heritage tag and associated agencies to have an image makeover in terms of better awareness generation and positive associations. The need to incorporate heritage management as a separate and specific requirement in every management plan and to have scheduled regular interactions with all levels of concerned stakeholders on matters of heritage was also found to be very significant.





The Way Forward

Drawing on the discussions conducted over the span of the meeting, these were the main points which need to be followed through on:

- ◆ An umbrella MoU with WII-C2C on geological sites may be considered by GSI to help both their objectives.
- ◆ A national list of natural heritage sites (on the lines of the draft Geoheritage Sites and Geo-Relics by GSI) would be an important one to develop.
- ◆ Nodal organizations need to be identified which bring together various government branches on matters of heritage management, which typically has many stakeholders but no clearly assigned responsibilities. This may include WII-C2C, MPTB and other such entities.
- ◆ World Heritage designations are very important in the perspective of the long term protection of a site hence activities on the following counts are needed with specialized bodies: (i) nomination of new sites (ii) monitoring of OUVs (iii) training of forest staff (4) awareness/outreach
- ◆ Potential transboundary World Heritage Sites boost visibility greatly at an international level and this requires (i) awareness generation and capacity building (ii) linking with tourism department on how to promote WH status better.
- ◆ An annual festival celebrating World Heritage nomination on the lines “Dharohar Utsav” at GHNP will help promote the World Heritage aspect to the local community at all WH sites within India to better engage them.
- ◆ Elected representatives are a very important constituency and need to be specifically pitched to in matters of heritage management.
- ◆ Framing and word-choice of World Heritage status reports have a significant bearing on their acceptance and it is better reframed as collaboration with positive and regular communication a must.
- ◆ Image makeover needed for WH certification not as a problem, but as a benefit.
- ◆ An annual high-level meeting of Secretaries, Ministry Representatives and CWLWs may be considered to discuss WH matters.
- ◆ Addition of heritage in management plan code 8 PAs as a separate section will be an important step towards mainstreaming heritage.
- ◆ World Heritage status needs to be projected as a better economic opportunity to locals, not as a restriction. A high-profile festival celebrating WH attended by CM/PM may boost its acceptance.

The full list of attendees of the meeting is as below:

S.No.	Name	Designation
1	Sh. Onkar Chand Sharma, IAS	Principal Secretary (Forests), HP
2	Sh. Nishant Mandhotra, IFS	DFO, WL Chamba, GHNP
3	Sh. Rajesh Kumar, IFS	APCCF & Director, Sundarban Biosphere Reserve, WB FD
4	Sh. Ajoy Kumar Das, IFS	CCF & FD, Sundarban Tiger Reserve, WB FD
5	Sh. S. Jones Justin, IFS	Deputy FD, Sundarban Tiger Reserve
6	Sh. Prashant Singh Baghel	Jt. Director (Planning), MPTB
7	Sh. Vijay Ranjan Singh, IFS	APCCF, Karnataka FD
8	Sh. R Balaji	Director, HRD, TCS & Curatorial, GSI
9	Dr. Samir Sinha, IFS	CWLW, Uttarakhand FD
10	Dr. Gautam Talukdar	Faculty In-Charge, WII-C2C
11	Dr. Bhumesh Singh Bhadouria	Technical Officer, WII-C2C
12	Sh. Niraj Kakati	Technical Officer, WII-C2C
13	Sh. Anuranjan Roy	World Heritage Assistant, WII-C2C
14	Sm. Pallabi Chakraborty	World Heritage Assistant, WII-C2C
