

# Oil spill alarm in Indian mangroves

## St Martin's Island At Risk, Activists Fear For Future Of Turtles & Dolphins

Subhro Niyogi &  
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**Kolkata:** Marine scientists, wildlife activists and forest officers from Indian Sunderbans have gone on alert following the oil spill in Bangladesh. With the Sunderbans comprising a contiguous eco-system that spans across the two countries, there is anxiety over the spill's effects on Indian mangroves.

"Will the spill seep into Indian Sunderbans?" is what everyone is pondering about. Though it seems unlikely that the oil will reach Indian shores given the nature of the Sunderbans coastline and the quantum of spill, marine scientists and hydrologists don't rule out the possibility. If the spill does trickle into Indian territory, Mechua and Baghamara at the edge of Bay of Bengal will be at risk.

"Oil spills can travel great distances, depending on the direction of wind and waves. The littoral drift or longshore current that is towards the west will cause the spill to the edge and enter the creeks in Bangladesh Sunderbans. Though 350,000 litre of furnace oil can cause a lot of damage, it isn't large enough to actually flow into the Indian part of Sunderbans. The best bet is to con-



**ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE:** In this December 9 photo, oil from a Bangladeshi tanker is seen on the Shela river in Mongla. The tanker carrying around 357,000 litres of oil collided with another vessel and partly sank, threatening a dolphin sanctuary that is home to about eight species

trol the spill at the earliest," said Sugata Hazra from the department of oceanography at Jadavpur University, who has been researching on the hydrology of the Sunderbans for several years now.

According to him, what is directly at risk is St Martin's Island, a coral reef area where the ecology is extremely sensitive and disasters like the oil spill can wreak havoc. "Turtles turning to St Martin's Island for

nesting will be vulnerable as will be a huge fish stock, including hilsa," Hazra warned.

Biswajit Roy Chowdhury, state wildlife advisory board member, is also worried about Olive Ridley turtles that migrate around this time and the fate of Gangetic and Irrawaddy dolphins that the mangroves are home to.

"They (Olive Ridleys) start migrating from Pacific Ocean and take the eastern

coast of Indian Ocean to reach Bay of Bengal and move into the Sunderbans. The oil spill can affect this migration. A study must be undertaken to monitor the Ridleys and record their arrival this year," said Roy Chowdhury.

Will the spill cause an ecological disaster in the world's largest mangrove? Apart from Olive Ridleys, the mangroves are home to the biggest tiger population.

The mangrove delta also

sustains crocodiles, dolphins, migratory birds, otters and a large variety of fish.

"We haven't got any reports of the oil spill reaching Indian Sunderbans yet. The staff has been alerted to monitor the situation. Since the Sunderbans is a single ecosystem, we must take precautions," said Pradeep Vyas, additional principal chief conservator of forests, West Bengal.

Not just forest department guards, even Border Security Force and Coast Guard have been asked to keep a watch, particularly along Harinbanga River and Raimangal where Indian Sunderbans seamlessly merges into Bangladesh.

Till a few years ago, even the Indian Sunderbans were vulnerable to oil spill with oil tankers plying on routes that skirted the tiger reserve. But foresters woke up to the risk in time and after explaining the apprehension to the government, both in the state and at the Centre, got the routes shifted to a safe distance.

"The oil spill in Bangladesh will affect the oxygen content in water there and hamper fish stock. This will hurt the livelihoods of fishermen. Mangrove trees will also get affected," said Vyas.

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# Oil spill in Sunderbans threatens rare dolphins

## Oil Slick Unlikely To Reach Indian Shores: Experts

**Rakhi Chakrabarty & Krishnendu Mukherjee** | TNN

**Kolkata:** An oil spill from a crashed tanker, stretching about 80 km along Shela river in the Sunderbans region of Bangladesh, is threatening a sanctuary of rare dolphins and is already being called an ecological catastrophe.

This could be the largest oil spill in the Sunderbans, a Unesco world heritage site and home to largest number of Bengal tigers.

While marine scientists and foresters in India went on an immediate alert, it is unlikely that the oil will reach Indian shores given the nature of the Sunderbans coastline and the quantum of spill. However, experts don't rule out the possibility.

The tanker, carrying about 3.5 lakh litres, capsized early on Tuesday after another vessel collided with it in blinding fog. Forest officials in Bangladesh say the oil spill is spreading at least 20 km every day in a river that is home to the endangered Ganges dolphin and Irrawaddy dolphin (vulnerable).

The worst fears of environmentalists have come true. Bangladesh's chief conservator of forest Yunus Ali, who has spent the last two

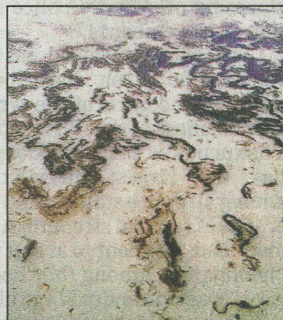


(Top) The tanker that was carrying 3.5 lakh litres of oil lies half-submerged in Shela river. The oil spill (right) is spreading 20 km every day

days at the oil-spill site, made an ominous observation: "Though it is too early to say anything, I must confess that I could not spot any fish or dolphins in the area."

Environmentalists had repeatedly warned that the brackish water route through Sunderbans violates ecological norms. It was a no-go zone for vessels till about three years ago. From Mongla port, vessels plied through Ghoshiakhali canal, bypassing the Sunderbans. However, this route was closed due to heavy silting and inadequate dredging, said Monirul Khan, zoology professor at Bangladesh's Jahangirnagar University.

In 2011, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Au-



thority opened up a "temporary" route through Shela river despite strong protest from environmentalists and even Bangladesh forest officials. Vessels between Kolkata and Mongla port, too, used this route, said a source. Initially, about 20 oil tankers plied each day. By 2013, 150-250 tankers were move through the Sunderbans daily, said the source.

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