Beyond 'man-eater' narrative in the delta

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A Bengal tiger in the Sundarbans. File picture

The recent deaths of natural-resource harvesters in accidental human-tiger encounters in the Sundarbans have once again brought grief and anxiety.

Such tragedies leave families devastated, grappling with profound emotional and economic losses. They deserve public attention, along with informed and sensitive discourse in the public interest.

Unfortunately, these incidents are often accompanied by sensational coverage that presents only part of the context. Attention-grabbing headlines and framing can make the tiger, or any other animal involved, appear to be a "killer".

Between April 24 and September 2 this year, nine accidental tiger attacks were reported in Kultali block of South 24-Parganas district. Seven people were killed and two injured. One of the seven deceased was a woman. All the victims were harvesting resources in mangroves and creeks.

The Sundarbans' mangrove forests are prime tiger habitat and a nationally and globally recognised tiger conservation unit. The tigers involved in such incidents are not necessarily actively hunting people and, therefore, may hardly qualify as "killers".

The term "man-eater" is also frequently misused.

A tiger or any other wild carnivore can be declared a "man-eater" by the state's chief wildlife warden only when this has been irrefutably established after a thorough investigation, concluding that the animal is actively stalking, hunting and consuming humans.

Otherwise, attacks on humans, though tragic, are largely accidental. Casual speculation about the presence of a "man-eater" can trigger unwarranted panic and public unrest.

Public discourse following such incidents, therefore, needs nuance. Biased or sensational narratives, once created, can outlive the crisis.

Articles often describe such incidents as a tiger having "lunged out of nowhere". But there is nothing unusual about a tiger emerging from the mangroves in the Sundarbans — it is its natural habitat. A tiger lunging from the Howrah Bridge, by contrast, would truly be "out of nowhere".

It is important to recognise that a large part of the remaining Sundarbans mangroves is a protected landscape for present and future generations. It is the world's only mangrove habitat for the Bengal tiger, with an isolated population of about 100 tigers in India and 125 in Bangladesh.

The Sundarbans is home to millions of people whose lives are closely tied to its rivers, forests and natural resources. Living and working in such an environment inevitably carries risks, much like travelling on roads with speeding vehicles and potholes. Reducing these risks requires an understanding of the local ecology, respect for the terrain and responsible behaviour.

Tiger attacks are deeply painful events, but they should not be framed in terms of blame or hatred. Tigers are neither criminals nor natural enemies of humans and generally avoid people. However, they may attack lone people harvesting resources, particularly when they are crouched, resembling easy prey.

A tigress with cubs nearby may also charge in self-defence if she perceives a threat to her cubs. Dense mangrove vegetation that restricts visibility, narrow creeks, tidal patterns and people's dependence on forest resources can create circumstances in which accidental encounters occur.

At the same time, people entering the forests to harvest fish, crab or honey are not necessarily reckless. Many may have entered forested areas legitimately, driven by economic necessity. Their vulnerability deserves empathy, support and practical solutions.

One of the most effective long-term ways to reduce risks is to create safer, village-based livelihood opportunities for forest-dependent people and households. This is particularly important for men, as long-term data from the Sundarbans show that more than 90% of tiger-attack victims were male.

Regulated, experience-based tourism could offer another avenue in areas such as Kultali block. Wildlife-centric tourism initiatives in Rumbak village and Mushkoh Valley in Ladakh, Kibber and Chicham in Spiti, Periyar in Kerala and Kabini in Karnataka offer some examples.

Tourism based on local culture and festivals, boat safaris for birdwatching and wildlife sightings, traditional cuisine, agriculture, handicrafts and handloom could generate livelihoods. Such a model would need to be community-driven, equitable and locally grounded, ensuring that local people benefit from conservation while preserving the region's social fabric.

Technology can also help by streamlining ex-gratia and compensation processes, which can otherwise be lengthy, cumbersome and costly for financially vulnerable families.

App-based systems could speed up applications, verification, and the direct transfer of ex-gratia and compensation to beneficiaries' bank accounts. Odisha and Madhya Pradesh, for instance, have been using app- and online portal-based systems to streamline ex-gratia distribution.

Prevention is more important than response, although it remains challenging given the circumstances.

Hands-on training and sensitisation for legitimate resource harvesters, including Boat Licence Certificate (BLC) holders, are needed, with a focus on safer harvesting practices.

A better understanding of animal behaviour, recognising signs of tiger presence, working in groups, adopting safer postures, using safety equipment and knowing emergency procedures could help reduce the risk of accidental attacks while allowing people to continue their livelihoods.

The Sundarbans has long been a place where people and nature coexist under challenging conditions. As climate change, socio-economic pressures and ecological challenges intensify, it is increasingly important to pursue a form of mindful development that recognises the region's ecological services and the importance of human-tiger coexistence.

An important measure of our collective social and scientific wisdom will not be how effectively we demonise the wild, but how responsibly, humbly and wisely we learn to live alongside it.

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