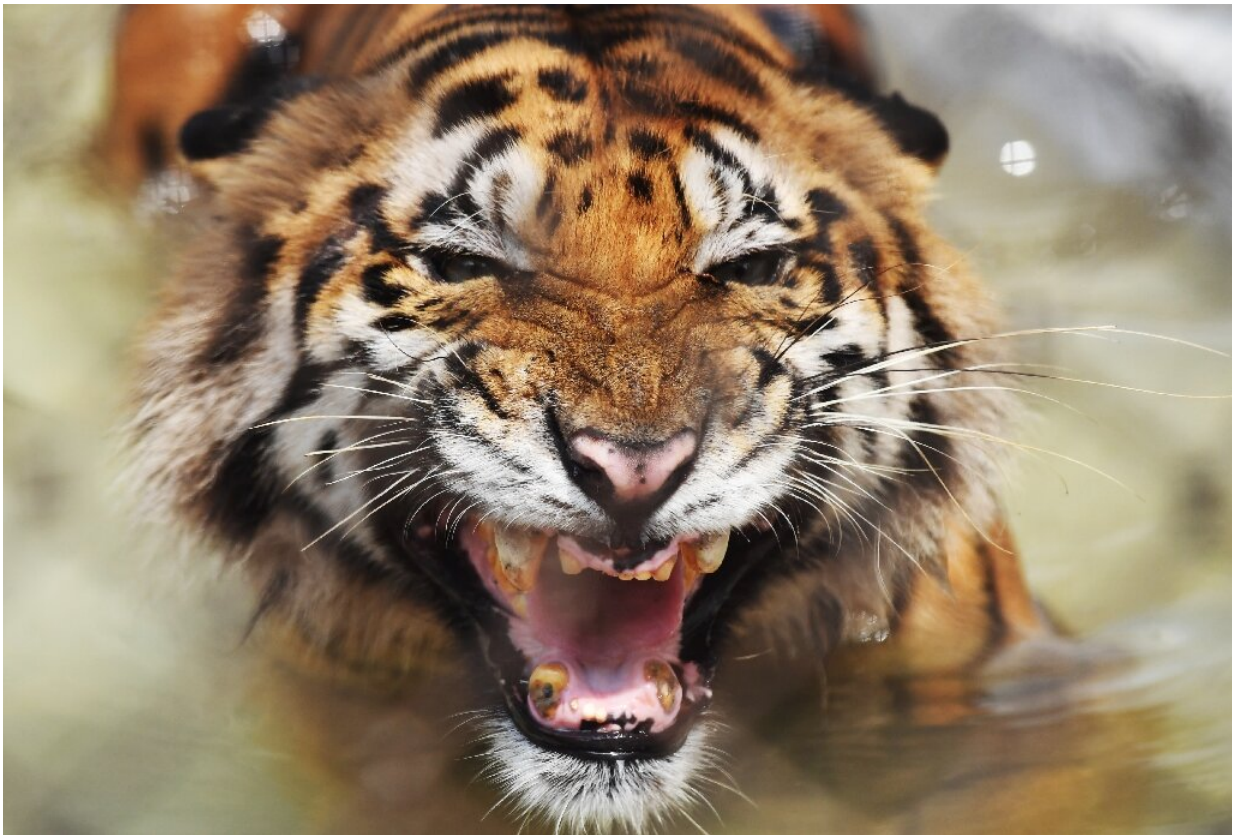


Bangladesh tiger population rises after poaching crackdown

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The Sundarbans is one of the world's last remaining wild habitats for the big cats

The number of wild tigers in Bangladesh's Sundarbans area has increased for the first time in 15 years after a major crackdown against poachers in the world's largest mangrove forest, officials said Wednesday.

A [tiger](#) census report released by the forestry department showed that the number of the famed big cats in the Bangladeshi parts of the mangroves has increased to 114 from 106 four years ago.

Alarm bells were raised in 2015 when a census found that only 106 tigers were living in the forest, less than a quarter of the 440-strong population in 2004.

"It marks an eight-percent increase in tiger population. It is a great success," the minister for forestry Shahab Uddin said as he revealed the census report.

"The (tiger) population trend is positive, which indicates our current conservation strategies and programmes are effectively working," chief forest conservation official Shafiul Alam told reporters.

The authorities conducted the census on 1,656 square kilometres (640 square miles) of forest last year and used camera traps to count the tiger numbers.

The Sundarbans, which also straddle parts of eastern India, is home to some rare animals including Irrawaddy dolphins and Bengal tigers, both declared endangered because of poaching and loss of habitat.

Since the 2015 findings, authorities have undertaken a series of measures to boost the number of Bengal tigers in the forest—one of the world's last remaining wild habitats for the big cats.

As part of the measures, the size of the wildlife sanctuary in the forest was more than doubled while an elite security force launched a major crackdown against pirates-turned-poachers active in the forest's network of rivers and canals.

Previously the wildlife sanctuary was limited to 23 percent of the [forest cover](#), and villagers and tourists had unrestricted access to the rest of the mangrove forest.

A gun buyback scheme saw nearly 200 pirates surrender their weapons and ammunition to police in exchange for cash, legal aid and mobile phones.

Dozens of other pirates were shot dead as part of the crackdown. In one of the worst gunfights, police killed six poachers in August 2015 at a forest canal and found the skins of three adult Bengal tigers.

Police have claimed the surrender scheme has virtually eradicated the lawlessness once rife in the mangroves.

"Poaching is one of the key reasons for the decline of tiger population," Alam said, adding the authorities have already launched a "smart" patrolling project in the [forest](#) to reduce the number of tiger poaching cases to zero.

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