

CYCLONE YAAS - SOME NEWS FROM OUR MANGRO PROJECT

Some of you might have heard that Cyclone Yaas was due to hit Odisha at Bhitarkanika, Kendrapara, during the morning of 26 May, 2021. This is obviously news of some concern, since it is the heart of our Mangrove Regeneration Project, MANGRO, and we have worked in the area for many years. It is unlikely that we will have anything more than general news for a few days because of the probability of power lines and transmitters being put out of action. However, we are reassured that the best possible preparation has been made by the government and villagers.

Since the dreadful super-cyclone of 1999, which saw the loss of so many lives in this area, the government has put in place a very effective Disaster Preparedness Plan. There is an early warning system and most of the coastal communities have cyclone shelters run by volunteers and Red Cross Committees. Many of our project participants are actively involved with this work, and we know that almost everyone in the area took shelter in good time. In the run-up to this cyclone, the government has announced that it has a significant number of teams on stand-by fully equipped to restore powerlines and clear fallen trees.



Police officers get a wounded woman to safety in Kendrapara, Odisha [Courtesy: Odisha Police]

As reported in the Indian press, the people in our project area are convinced that the mangrove will help protect them from the worst of the storm:



How mangroves act as a barrier

Odisha is endowed with a reserve of a mangrove forest area of 231 square kilometer with a major chunk lying in Bhitarkanika. It stands second only to Sundarbans in West Bengal. Bhitarkanika in Kendrapara is a rich storehouse of mangrove genes. Researchers have come across 11 of the 70 mangrove species, which were at elevated threat of extinction in the world, in the national park.

Mangroves play a crucial role in protecting human and animal communities from massive storms. Mangrove roots can break up the force of a storm surge, soaking up some of its energy and protecting people living on coasts from cyclone damage. The aerial roots of mangrove forests retain sediments and stabilise the soil in the areas between high tide and low tide (intertidal areas) by reducing erosion during storms and floods. The roots, trunk and canopy of the mangroves can dissipate storm surges and waves. Climate change has resulted in a spike in frequency and intensity of cyclonic storms.

Locals are exuding optimism that the rich mangrove forest cover along the wetland sites of the park would again turn into a saviour for them.

"Everybody here is confined indoors either in homes or cyclone shelters. The forest cover around protected us with minimal damage in past cyclones. We pray forest withstands the onslaught this time also," said Ganesh Chandra Gudia who lives in Talchua village beside the Bhitarkanika National Park in Kendrapara district. The national park withstood the onslaught of cyclone Amphan that had barrelled through coastal Odisha in May last year.

"The coastal woodland has the capacity to withstand wind speed up to 120 kilometre per hour. We are scared but hopeful that nature will arrest the stormy onslaught," Nrusingha Behera, a resident of Nalitapatia village said.

These two men were speaking from villages which are part of our Mangrove Regeneration Project where we have been encouraging communities to replant and protect their mangrove forest. And these villages are included in our proposed Kitchen Garden Project for up to 1,200 local women. Our aim with this was to help people increase their income and improve their family's diet to mitigate against the worst economic impacts of the Covid crisis which has seen so many wage-labourers in the area lose their income. This project is due to start in June, and will run for two years, so it is doubly timely, just when families are recovering from the impact of the cyclone as well.

There won't be much cyclone news for some time, but we have had reports of extensive flooding yesterday, with some houses lost, some embankments breached and roads washed away. Many trees have been blown down, but like the villagers quoted above, we hope that the mangrove forest and our extensive mangrove plantations come into their own to help protect local communities. We expect that damage done will be within the means of local communities and local government departments to deal with. They all have much experience.

Just one last note, to illustrate how unexpected some of the concerns might be, here is a quote from another report:

"The only problem, however, is straying of crocodiles to nearby villages and water bodies in case of excess flood," said the DFO (District Forest Officer) and added that two special teams have been put on alert to keep an eye on it as Bhitarkanika has more than 1,700 crocodiles. He said around 6,000 deer and as many wild boars are also there in Bhitarkanika for which all 60 staff in the division have been asked to remain alert.