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EARTHLY MATTERS: In Search of Crocodiles

By Rina Saeed Khan



“Sometimes we see the crocodiles in the water... they are quite harmless. But the snakes, they are dangerous! I got bitten once and had to be rushed to the doctor in Sanghar,” says Amina Junejo, who lives near the Chotiari reservoir in interior Sindh. She is not sure what kind of snake it was — a recent WWF-Pakistan survey of this area recorded 28 different species of reptiles and amphibians. Amongst

them are cobras, pythons and marsh crocodiles.

It was discovered by the survey that several reptile species are illegally exported in high numbers (hundreds per year). Larger species such as the marsh crocodile is also persecuted in Sanghar district. The local people sell the crocodiles for their skin — a practice that is now declining thanks to an international ban on the trade of crocodile skin.

Having seen too many episodes of the late crocodile hunter on TV (may he rest in peace), I had always wanted to see a crocodile in the wild, but it was not to be. The closest I came to was a lake where they are supposed to feed (no sign of one, however!).

The Chotiari wetlands complex, as it is known, is not only home to the marsh crocodile, but is one of the most biologically diverse places that I have visited in Pakistan. Chotiari is located in a desert, bordered by both sand dunes and a forest. It is situated in the Thar desert around 30 km from Sanghar.

The Chotiari reservoir was actually created out of a natural depression along the left bank of the

the
truth is

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Nara Canal. Its construction began in 1994 and was completed in 2003. The purpose behind the construction of the reservoir, which is spread over 18,000 hectares, was to store rainwater and flood water from the nearby Indus River (during the monsoons) to use in times of drought.

The reservoir area is made up of a number of large and small freshwater and brackish lakes which are a source of fish for the local fishing communities and a home for crocodiles, otters and fresh water turtles. The lakes are also a feeding and nesting ground for a variety of resident and migratory birds.

Amina Junejo's large family compound is located right on the banks of the Chotiari reservoir. We were invited into the thatched huts by her mother for tea. As we sat on a charpoy admiring the beautiful rilis (embroidered bedcovers made from colourful pieces of cloth), made by the women in her family, she told us about her life in this remote corner of Sindh where there is no electricity or piped water or even proper roads. Her people are not fishermen but own a number of livestock.

They are completely dependent on their natural resources for their survival. They get water from the nearby reservoir for their livestock and free fodder and fuel wood from the grazing lands adjacent to the reservoir. The family home is made from Khipa, a bush that grows naturally in the desert near by. Thanks to their large herd of livestock, her family could afford to send her to school and she herself is a teacher. She says they are content living off the land — even their clothes are washed by caustic soda dug out from a nearby lake and the salt they use in their cooking also comes from yet another lake!

Amina's mother is not happy with the construction of the Chotiari reservoir, however, since she says that a large amount of their family's land was submerged by the reservoir, and they still have not received any compensation. The Chotiari reservoir, whose custodian is the Sindh Irrigation and Development Authority (SIDA), is certainly a controversial project.

The local people say that the construction of the reservoir with its long embankments and dykes built to convert the different lakes into a single reservoir has disturbed the natural flow of water into the lakes and spoiled the water quality in some of the lakes.

“The reservoir is a disaster — they have upset the natural ecology of the lakes and used poor quality of materials in the embankments. They have wasted so much money over the years because of all the delays in construction. The reservoir has displaced many communities who still have not been compensated for the loss of their lands!” complains a staff member at a local NGO. The reservoir was also supposed to increase the production of fish in the area but that has not occurred due to an uneven supply of water into the reservoir. Either there is too little water or there is too much water in the reservoir.

When the water level goes down in the reservoir, the fish production also declines. The fishermen communities living around the reservoir, represented by the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, an NGO that has become partner with the Indus for All Programme which is trying to improve both conservation activities and livelihoods in the area.

For the first year of its activities, the programme has focused on completing ecological surveys and socio-economic studies and forming community based organisations in the area. They also hope to install bio gas and solar energy and improve access to fresh water and sanitation. In June, the programme hopes to open up a vocational centre, with the community providing women's embroidery.

The Chotiari reservoir has great potential for tourism. More motor boats should be provided on the lake and desert safaris can easily be arranged. The programme recommends that the whole site be declared a Protected



Area, with specific areas reserved for the conservation of crocodiles and other vulnerable animals like hog deer. Although there are many threats to this ecosystem, the problems are not insurmountable — with proper planning and implementation, Chotiari could become a world famous biodiversity hotspot.



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