

Threat to last stronghold of Asian Finfoot

Title

The Sundarbans of Bangladesh holds one of the last populations of the Endangered Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personatus* and is considered as a safe stronghold of this highly threatened species. Conservationists are now concerned about the future of this bird in the Sundarbans, where a coal-based power plant has been given the green light to go ahead. The proposed 1,320 Megawatt power plant is going to be built 14km away from the Sundarbans at Rampal.

"Our recent work on Masked Finfoot further confirms that the Sundarbans supports a very important population of this species and possibly the largest in the world. With the ongoing habitat destruction in other countries within its range, Sundarbans is likely to be the only site where we will find this secretive species in a few decades time, however, if we lose the Sundarbans due to this power plant then the future of this species is in peril", said Sayam Chowdhury, Principal Investigator of the Sundarbans Finfoot Research Project.



The Sundarbans is not only important for Masked Finfoot, tigers and dolphins but also for many other species such as Mangrove Pitta, Brown-winged Kingfisher and White-rumped Vulture. The coal-fired power plant will undoubtedly have a devastating and irreparable impact on the Sundarbans, its wildlife, ecosystem and forest dependent local community. The population of Masked Finfoot is less than 1000 individuals and Sundarbans is the only place where this species is now being studied to better understand its ecology.

Renowned Bangladeshi wildlife expert Dr Reza Khan said "there are many alternatives to

generate power, but the world's biggest mangrove forest - the Sundarbans has no alternative and we must protect the last refuge of the Bengal Tiger and many others".

Dr Robert Sheldon, Head of International Species Recovery at the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) said "Masked Finfoot has been uplisted to Endangered owing to the sharp decline throughout its range due to the destruction and increasing disturbance to rivers in lowland riverine forests, hunting and collection of eggs and chicks. Since Bangladesh provides one of the last remaining habitats of the finfoot, the county has an international responsibility for the continued existence of the species."