

# Sunderbans is now drowning in plastic

Unregulated inflow of relief materials has resulted in a new crisis in the fragile ecosystem

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Unregulated inflow of relief to the Sunderbans has resulted in a new crisis in the cyclone-battered region: plastic waste. Several NGOs, experts, and even officials of the District Police and the Forest Department have pointed out that the plastic accumulating on the isolated islands of the fragile ecosystem are cause for great concern.

Ecologist Diya Banerjee has been pointing out the issue from as early as June, days after Cyclone Yaas inundated large parts of the Sunderbans in the last week of May 2021.

“What we are seeing is tonnes of plastic in the remote areas of the Sunderbans, like Gosaba, Mousuni, Bali, Patharpratima and Kullali. People residing in these areas are not responsible in any way for the huge plastic



**Upsetting the balance:** Plastic waste in the Sunderbans has resulted in a new crisis in the region. ■SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

waste; it is outsiders who are introducing and bringing a large quantity of plastics, completely oblivious and ignorant to its long-term impact on the region,” Ms. Banerjee said. She added that a

local NGO Mahajibon had recovered about 300 kg of plastic waste from the Gosaba block days after Cyclone Yaas.

While it is difficult to estimate the total amount of

plastic waste that is arriving in about 50 inhabited islands of the Sunderbans spread across thousands of square kilometres, Sourav Mukherjee of the Kolkata Society for Cultural Heritage has estimated about 56 tonnes of plastic in the Gosaba block alone. “We have calculated the amount on the basis of how much packaged relief material was received by families, how many times, in the past few weeks,” Mr. Mukherjee said.

## Long-term impact

Not only conservationists, even police officers have raised concerns over the huge dumping of plastic waste. Arijit Basu, Additional Superintendent of Police, Baruipur Police District of South 24 Parganas, had put up a post on social media a few weeks ago, pointing out that relief workers brought plastic water bottles, which

were being disposed everywhere. The police officer urged locals and NGOs to organise cleanliness drives to remove plastic from the Sunderbans.

Tuhin Ghosh, Director of the School of Oceanographic Studies, Jadavpur University, said that plastics would have a long-term ecological impact on the Sunderbans ecosystem.

“The presence of plastic in saline water will increase the toxicity of water gradually and also there will be eutrophication of water. Because of the presence of plastics in the water, there will be an increase in microplastics, which will slowly enter the food system,” Professor Ghosh said.

He said that the Sunderbans were connected to the sea and the increase of plastic in the region could lead to plastic waste entering the ocean.