

scats, milk fish, mudskippers, mullets, cat fish, perches, etc. "Around 200 flamingos have recently arrived in the Godrej owned mangroves during their annual migratory visit," says Dr Maya Mahajan, associate manager of the S P Godrej Mangrove Project. She adds, "There are 14 different species of mangroves and also different species of birds, fish, reptiles and mammals like mongoose and jackals in these mangroves."

Helping hands

Sharachar, a nature club, formed by students of Bombay Veterinary College, had organised a nature trail in the mangroves. Gautam Joglekar, secretary of Sharachar says, "I learned a lot of new things about mangroves during this trail. Mangroves are the preferred habitat for many migratory birds. The most common among these are kingfishers, herons, storks, sea eagles, kites, sand pipers, curlews, terns, ducks etc. The flamingos flock to the exposed mud flats during the low tides. They use the mangrove environs as breeding and feeding grounds." The conservation of mangroves also saves the marine diversity which is fast diminishing, due to unchecked commercial exploitation of the flora and fauna, he adds.

Inspired by their recent visit, the students have decided to spread awareness of the importance of these precious habitats among fellow students. Soon after their exams are through they will organise lectures, presentations and maybe another nature trail as well.

Such initiatives are only growing in number and need to be promoted in colleges and schools.

Vivek Kulkarni, a member of BNHS, says, "The city can avoid large scale destruction caused by natural calamities by harnessing technology and spending a lot of money. Instead, simply by restoring and maintaining the mangroves, the city will be saved with natural means." He makes a poignant observation, "The survival of the mangroves is necessary for the survival of Mumbai."

Kill the mangroves, lose the city

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As the Arabian Sea poured into our city in July 2005, shocked Mumbaikars wondered what had gone wrong. Was it the fault of the crumbling drains and the ubiquitous plastic bags that such large scale destruction of life and property had taken place? Could it be possible that building over wastelands, as the mangroves are mistakenly called, had led to such a serious calamity?

Even as the civic authorities scrambled to ban plastic and better drains are put in place, studies, tests and world-wide surveys proved that mangroves have always been the best possible defence against floods and tsunamis. And still, the wanton hacking away of mangroves continues.

Mangrove basics

Mangroves are the extension of tropical rainforests towards the sea and are found only in tropics and sub tropical lands. According to Rushikesh Chavan, conservation officer, Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), mangroves act as a barrier against tsunamis, floods and cyclones. "They are specially adapted to withstand salinity, wave action, and can grow in poor soil. They purify water by absorbing impurities and harmful heavy metals and absorb pollutants from the air," he says. He also adds that mangroves protect the land from erosion, acting as buffers between the land and the sea. Not only this, the mangroves are a treasure trove of medicines too. According to Debi Goenka, a well known environmentalist, "Plants found in the mangroves have medicinal values. For instance, Meswak toothpaste is a product from the mangroves. Studies have also found that the sap of one particular species of mangroves has wound-healing properties."

Mangroves in our neighbourhood

Our suburbs are home to some of the most protected mangroves. In the Mulund-Powai belt, one can find mangroves along the Eastern Express Highway. The mangroves in Bhandup and Kanjur Marg are on government land. The mangrove swamp in Vikhroli, which is spread over a sprawling 1,750 acres, probably the best protected in the city, belongs to the Godrej Charitable Trust, which has done a good job in safeguarding them.

A 10 metre high watch tower and several security guards are constantly on alert here. Since 1985, the Soonabai Prijosha Godrej Marine Ecology Centre has been playing a major role in creating awareness about the importance of mangroves. They have set up an interpretation centre that offers visitors a lot of information about the flora and fauna here.

Home is where the mangrove is

Mangroves are also the breeding ground and nursery for several species of fish. Some common species are -