Project Update: January 2014

On 20th September 2013, the Environmental Foundation Limited (EFL) in collaboration with the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) collared a wild fishing cat with a GPS/GSM collar. This was the first time a fishing cat had been collared with a collar of this type in the country.

Initially, we had planned on releasing the cat in the Bellanwilla-Attidiya Sanctuary. After a field visit to the area we found lots of evidence that there were resident fishing cats in the area (i.e. pug marks) (img.1). Speaking to locals, we learned that fishing cats were often seen walking along the canal bund late in the evenings and that there was even one large male that would sit at the edge of the canal in front of the Attidiya ranger station.

Unfortunately, when the site was later visited to select a suitable location to set up the trap cage, the rangers informed us that that part of the marsh was being cleared like the section that had already been cleared near the Bellanwilla Temple. Meeting with officials at the Sri Lanka Land Reclamation and Development Corporation (SLLRDC) and representatives from the World Bank, we were advised not to set traps in the Attidiya Marsh since heavy machinery would be at work there November-December 2013. The SLRDC said that there were plans to clear large areas of the marsh and widen the canal systems. Thus, it was obvious that the area was not suitable for a translocated cat and we now had to look elsewhere for a study site.

Due to the sudden change of plans while already having a fishing cat waiting to be relocated, after careful consideration, and after gathering evidence of fishing cats in the area (img.2), we changed our study site to the Sri Jayawardenapura Sanctuary. We informed Dr Tharaka Prasad and Mr Samarakoon of the decision we had made, and also assured them that we would inform the Research Committee at the next meeting in December about the changes to the study site due to these dire circumstances. Parts of this marsh had already been studied in a fishing cat camera trap survey conducted by Dr Eric Wikramanayake and his team with the support of the Smithsonian Institution in 2004. During this camera trap survey, the team found significant evidence of fishing cats in the urban marshes of Colombo.

Now almost 3 months after his release, our data shows that the cat is moving freely around the area but has not settled down, which allows us to speculate that the relocated male is being displaced by resident cats in the area. However, this sample size of one is obviously too small to draw conclusions from, and we cannot be certain of this until we have collared resident cats, as well as collared and released other translocated cats, in order to compare the movement patterns between the two. The collared cat also seems to be using the narrow corridors of habitat to move from one patch of marsh to another. When moving through urban areas (i.e. residential areas, and other areas with a lot of human activity) we assume that the cat uses the large concrete culvets, drainage systems and canals that criss-cross our urban landscape. The use of these man-made human habitats seem to be an important part of the ability to get from one location to the next in such busy areas.

The team is currently travelling to the sites where the fishing cat's GPS locations were taken,

and at each of these locations the site's habitat will be documented and photographed, to understand why and how the cat moved through each area.

What we plan on doing next is to capture and collar a resident cat from the Sri Jayewardanapura Sanctuary so that we could compare its movement patterns and home range with those of the translocated collared cat. We will also repeat this process (collaring any available fishing cats in need of translocation, as well as collaring resident fishing cats) every 6 months throughout the course of the study period, in order to get a large enough sample size for unbiased and accurate data.