

Guards of the green bastions

A STAFF REPORTER

The story of Shyamsundar Singh, abducted and tortured to death by poachers and the sight of his weeping widow cast a sombre spell on the evening.

The third Green Guard Award, held in the city on Thursday, once again recognised the silent but significant contribution of foresters who face all odds to protect forests and wildlife.

Singh, 46, a forest guard at Bhitarkanika National Park, Orissa, was on a routine patrol on February 8, 2003, when he reached the Babubali island, where two illegal mechanised boats had been seized earlier in the day. The poachers were after the endangered

Olive Ridley turtles, that visit the park during this period every year.

Knowing that the poachers would not abandon their boats, Singh ventured into the forest to confront them. Despite being accompanied by two guards and being a well-built man himself, he was overpowered. Next day, his body came floating to the shore.

"The courage of these silent saviours remains unsung. These awards are our way of saluting them," said Raja Chatterjee, secretary, The Jungles (an NGO), which instituted these awards.

Singh posthumously received the award for 'Exceptional Individual Performance' for the year 2002-2003. The other recipients shortlisted from 53 national parks were Prakash Damodar Salelkar, range forest officer, Mollem National Park, Goa, also awarded for individual performance, and three national parks that were selected for 'Exceptional Team Performance'.

Salelkar, 45, arrested a manager and a supervisor of a private property, adjoining the park, in a swift operation on September, 2003, when he discovered that they were electrocuting bisons and burying them in their area.

"I have been offered lakhs by them, but I am deter-

mined to get them convicted," said an emotional Salelkar.

The Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park, Tamil Nadu, received the team performance award for its 'Anti-Poaching Operation'.

Wildlife warden V. Nagathan, who was present with his entire team, is facing contempt of court for stopping mining of coral reefs in his area.

Mining coral reefs, rich calcium reserves for industries, harms the ecological balance. Corals are "protected" by the law since they are living. But reefs do not fall in this category, as they are not living.



Shyamsundar Singh's widow at the awards ceremony.

Picture by Pradip Sanyal