

Safeguarding Bangladesh's Wetland Wealth for Future Generations

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Bangladesh, a riverine country, is covered by numerous wetlands such as rivers, beels, haors, and baors. These wetlands play a crucial role in maintaining environmental balance, supporting biodiversity, fostering agriculture, promoting fisheries, and contributing to tourism. The Haor basin region is particularly significant as it serves as the primary source of natural freshwater fish in the country. Notable examples of rich biodiversity are found in the Haor region and the Sundarbans. Apart from this, Ariyal Beel and Chalanbeel are important wetlands of the country.

However, the country boasts a total of 373 wetlands spread across Sylhet, Sunamganj, Habiganj, Moulvibazar, Brahmanbaria, Kishoreganj, and Netrakona, encompassing a vast area of 858 thousand 460 hectares. These wetlands hold significant importance, with the renowned Sundarbans being a standout example. Beyond its globally acclaimed biodiversity, the Sundarbans acts as a guardian, offering protection against natural calamities, particularly cyclones. Bangladesh is small but rich in biodiversity, underlining the necessity for sustainable wetland management to ensure its prosperity.

Tanguar Haor, a natural freshwater wetland situated in the Tahirpur and Dharmapasha upazilas of Sunamganj district in the Sylhet Division, holds remarkable conservation significance. This seasonal habitat accommodates up to 60 thousand migratory waterfowl, numerous resident birds, over 140 fish species, and serves as the last refuge for swamp forests. However, the rich floral and faunal diversity of Tanguar Haor faces severe threats due to the unsustainable utilization of resources.

Despite its renowned natural beauty and diverse biodiversity, Tanguar Haor confronts challenges that endanger its various species of birds, aquatic plants, fish, reptiles, and amphibians. Encompassing an area of 10 thousand hectares, the Tanguar Haor basin not only supports this unique ecosystem but also sustains approximately 60 thousand people through its resources. In acknowledgment of its ecological importance, the Government of Bangladesh designated the Tanguar Haor Basin as an 'Ecologically Critical Area' in 1999, emphasizing the need to monitor its environmental quality.

The pivotal role of Tanguar Haor in biodiversity and food security is evident. Recognizing its significance, Tanguar Haor was declared the second 'Ramsar site' in Bangladesh in 2000, following the Sundarbans. Beyond providing habitats for fish and animals, wetlands like Tanguar Haor serve as natural water treatment process, contributing to the preservation of the natural balance of the subsurface.

Bangladesh joined the Ramsar Convention in 1992 after it was established in 1975. 171 countries have signed this convention since then. The Ramsar Authority reports that since 1900, 64 percent of the world's wetlands have been destroyed, having a negative impact on both the biodiversity that depends on these ecosystems and the livelihoods of humans. Wetlands are important for maintaining biodiversity because they provide homes for threatened and endangered animal, plant, and insect species. Though they are important, since the 18th century, almost 85% of the world's wetlands have disappeared, decreasing three times faster than forests. This sudden loss emphasizes how urgently coordinated international efforts to protect these delicate settings are needed.

In Bangladesh many wetland regions have been depleted as a result of the fast urbanization that has taken place across the nation, and there is a significant amount of swamp filling in metropolitan areas. The transformation of wetland areas into residential and commercial infrastructure poses a threat to the continued existence of these areas. The Sundarbans are shrinking in size, tourism is on the rise in Tanguar and other wetland areas, and the activities of indiscriminate visitors are all contributing to soil and water contamination. These factors collectively contribute to the degradation of soil and water quality.

The United Nations has designated the decade 2021-2030 as the Ecosystem Restoration Decade, it is imperative that wetland conservation actions be carried out in collaboration. In order to improve water quality, minimize pollution, prevent and manage invasive alien species, exploit freshwater species in a sustainable manner, and protect the interconnectedness of freshwater systems, we need to encourage sustainable water management policies and practices that address the drivers of wetland degradation.

The government of Bangladesh is making a concerted effort to protect and revitalize wetland ecosystems for the sake of both the present and the future. As part of this effort, the government is aligning National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to preserve biodiversity. This commitment is strengthened by the implementation of key strategic

plans, such as the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan 2022-2041, the National Adaptation Plan 2023-2050, and the Delta Plan 2100. These plans all emphasize the significance of wetland conservation and the usage of ecosystems in a sustainable manner.

Several different development initiatives and programs have been initiated by the government with a goal of assuring the preservation and restoration of ecosystems that are found in wetland areas. With the aim of improving the economic circumstances of the local population, the government devised a comprehensive management plan known as the Tanguar Haor Management Plan (THMP). This plan envisioned the best utilization of the natural resources that were available to the area. It is crucial that the local population should be aware of the importance of protecting natural resources and biodiversity, which will ultimately safeguard it from being degraded and overexploited. The Sundarbans, Tanguar Haor, Hakaluki Haor, Marjat Baor, Buriganga, Shitalakshya, Turag, Balu, and Gulshan Lake are among the twelve ecologically sensitive sites that have been classified by the Department of Environment. According to the Environment Conservation Act of 1995, it is illegal to build industries that pollute the environment and activities that are damaging to fish and other aquatic life in these areas.

It is recommended that the implementation of the plan be sped up because the government has developed a master plan for the development of the Haor region that spans twenty years, from 2012 to 2032. The plan includes the conservation of biodiversity. Accelerating the implementation of these plans is essential for the sustainable management of wetland areas in Bangladesh, which are essential for agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and the general biodiversity of the country.

Wetlands, like the Sundarbans and Tanguar Haor, are very important for keeping the climate balanced, protecting biodiversity, and helping farming and fishing. We need to accelerate the implementation of conservation plans, ensuring the continued prosperity of these vital ecosystems. The illegal activities threatening wetland areas are being addressed through legislation, highlighting the nation's determination to protect its environmental treasures. Bangladesh is in a good situation to grow along with its wetland ecosystems if comprehensive plans are put into action more quickly and the community is involved more. These measures not only protect the natural heritage of the country, but it also sets the stage for a sustainable and prosperous future for everyone.

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