

The Daily Star

Conservation delayed is conservation missed

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A man walks along a bank of the Padma River in Dohar, an area on the outskirts of Dhaka, on August 12, 2016. Photo: AFP

In the middle of the devastating coronavirus crisis, we have come across some good news about the environment. China's polluted air is getting better as industries are now closed; Venice's canals now have cleaner water as tourists have stopped going there; and the ever-increasing greenhouse gas emissions causing global warming may now see a significant drop after a long time. All these not only show how much we have changed our environment, but also how quickly nature can bounce back, if we stop disturbing it.

Compared with the rest of the world, the overall condition of Bangladesh's nature and biodiversity is not good. Last year, a United Nations (UN) report estimated that 12.5 percent of the world's eight million plant-animal species are now facing extinction. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), this biodiversity crisis is much higher in Bangladesh, since 24 percent of our 1,619 animal species might disappear from the country soon. Similarly, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the world

lost about 1.4 percent of its forests during 2000-2015, whereas Bangladesh lost 2.6 percent forest tree cover over the same period.

On the ground level, many government agencies, UN bodies, and international and national NGOs have been implementing many conservation projects, with donors' as well as public money, to halt our biodiversity loss. Like any development project, the success, failure and sustainability of these environmental initiatives vary. But these relentless efforts with local communities—from the mangroves to the *haors*, from the hills to the floodplains—are highly praiseworthy.

On the policy and legislative level, however, Bangladesh is far from dynamic. In 1998, for example, the government drafted a Biodiversity and Community Knowledge Protection Act, which never got approved. A related piece of legislation, the Bangladesh Biodiversity Act, was mentioned in the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) in 2004. It, however, took us another 13 years to get that law passed. A National Biodiversity Policy was also detailed in the NBSAP—16 years on, it is yet to be adopted. A government rule to manage Bangladesh's protected areas (PA Rule) was first thought of during the "Nishorgo Support Project" (2004-2009), whereas a rule to govern ecologically critical areas (ECAs) of the country (ECA Rule) was first drafted in 2010. These two rules were relatively quicker to come into force, in 2017 and 2016, respectively.

The National Conservation Strategy (NCS) is a classic example of delay till date. In light of the World Conservation Strategy of 1980, the government of Bangladesh drafted the NCS—for an overarching conservation guidance—a few times till 1993, when it was placed before the Cabinet. Later on, the NCS was updated a few more times, but was never approved by the government. More than 22 years after the first proper draft, Bangladesh Forest Department (BFD) started updating and finalising the Bangladesh NCS in light of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework. That attempt was started on November 5, 2015 with technical support from IUCN and funding from the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF). Four years on, the Bangladesh NCS is yet to be completed and approved by the government.

So, what is the implication of such delays? Indeed, this is a waste of valuable time, money, and expertise. But, most importantly, a policy or a legal instrument loses its relevance due to these delays. It also misses the opportunity to make conservation effective. We have seen this in the case of the PA Rule and the ECA Rule, for example. If passed earlier, the PA Rule could result in better institutionalised co-management of the protected areas under the "Climate Resilient Ecosystems and Livelihoods" (CREL, 2013-2018) project, by involving the forest-dependent communities and the BFD.

Similarly, the ECA Rules could not harness the opportunity to establish a strong governance system in the ECAs around the country. This is because the main phase of the "Community-Based Adaptation in ECA Project" (2011-2015) of the Department of Environment ended well before that rule was approved. And the Bangladesh NCS, in its 40-year history, is becoming obsolete once again.

Recently, the government assigned the Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS) and Integra Consulting to conduct a strategic environmental assessment by June 2021 for the south-west region of Bangladesh, including the Sundarbans. The assessment will explore the current and future environmental and socio-economic impacts of development at the landscape level in this region. With this, we now have a real opportunity before us to change our "culture of delay" in nature conservation.

Since July 2014, the UNESCO's World Heritage Committee (WHC) had been requesting Bangladesh to conduct a strategic environmental assessment for the region surrounding the Sundarbans. This got a big push in 2016, when the WHC and IUCN conducted a joint mission to the Sundarbans World Heritage Sites. After checking the mangrove's condition, the mission made many vital recommendations including relocating the Rampal power-plant elsewhere. The WHC-IUCN mission also suggested conducting a comprehensive strategic environmental assessment, which was included in the WHC's meeting decision in July 2017. It, however, took Bangladesh five and a half years to start that assessment.

Like past conservation policies, strategies and legal instruments, Bangladesh cannot afford undue delay in completing the planned assessment. Once opened, the Padma Bridge will change the socio-economic landscape of the south-west region of Bangladesh. At the same time, it could drastically change the environmental landscape of this region in an unimaginable manner, especially since this region has the Sundarbans.

The on-going strategic environmental assessment is, therefore, no longer important for us simply because the UNESCO-WHC wants us to do it. It is extremely crucial for the overall environmental sustainability of the climate-vulnerable, biodiversity-rich south-west region of the country.

Now the question is: will Bangladesh be able to complete the assessment on time and design a regional development plan accordingly? Or will it continue to overlook the urgency of strategic nature conservation like before?

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