



Leave the forest alone!

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It is unfortunate that despite all the warnings from environmentalists regarding the dangers of loss of forest cover in the context of our planet's existence, tree cutting even in protected areas continue unabated. This suicidal activity is highlighted by a report in this paper: residents of a remote village in Bandarban's Lama upazila, have appealed to the authorities to protect the nearby forest, where unnamed "criminals" are cutting trees indiscriminately and with apparent impunity. The forest is known as a Village Common Forest (VCF) which collectively benefits the communities living nearby who use the forest's natural resources as sources of food and water. The community benefits from the forest and the forest benefits by being preserved by the community.

Unfortunately such sustainable practices are often threatened by the greed of the influential and powerful. This particular case indicates that local administration officials have played a dubious role by turning a blind eye to those individuals engaged in this crime. Although the villagers have protested several times against this, the tree felling and bamboo cutting have gone on.

Written complaints have been given to the Union Parishad Chairman and Upazila chairman with no result. Already 6,000 bamboos and 40 big trees have been cut down. Why are the local officials so reluctant to take action against individuals who are violating the law and more importantly, threatening the livelihoods of families as well as causing irreparable harm to the common forest? Elephants used to fell the trees are destroying the water sources of these people. Why would local authorities allow the main source of water to be jeopardised?

The Kalu Mro Para incident is a microcosm of the unabated denuding of forest areas that continue all over the country. So far almost 1.6 lakh acres of forest land has been handed over to different government agencies and establishments, making recreation centres, guest houses, offices, cottages or used for development projects (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change). This contradicts with its SDG goal to stop deforestation by 2020 and have 20 percent of the landmass as forests by 2030.

According to the UP chairman the forest area where the trees and bamboo were felled is not part of the VCF and the felling is being done with permission of the person in charge of these affairs. It is the concerned ministry's responsibility to immediately investigate this incident and see if trees of the VCF were cut down. Even if they weren't part of the community forest, the felling of trees in this manner cannot be justified when we have already lost so much of our forest cover. The government must recognise the crucial need to conserve these precious natural resources and not allow them to be destroyed in the name of development or by criminals connected with the powerful. Our survival depends on the sincerity of such efforts.

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