

Fighting so many odds over the course of history, man has become his own greatest enemy. Paradoxically, man who seeks harmony in everything he creates — music, art, architecture — is destroying his own habitat and, not to mention, its prime element trees or forest in their collective form. In our part of the world swelling population, along with the related demands of agriculture and industry, is devouring forest resources at an alarming rate without replenishment. The single most aspect of nature under great threat is now the land's green cover. Bangladesh in response to the global concern over the destruction of green cover has also launched campaign to conserve its greenery. With the National Tree Plantation fortnight and the week-long Plant fair just over, The Daily Star takes the opportunity to focus on trees in particular and on environment in general.

Tree Helps Us Live, Gives Us Life

by Ziaul Karim

To arrest the problem of depletion of green cover one needs to think not only globally but also take other elements of nature into consideration. The world in all its variety and interdependence is nothing but a complete and simultaneous whole. One may draw parallel between musical composition and nature — slightest change in both

annually — indicates a sharp decline in the availability of per capita arable land. The per capita arable land which stood at 0.14 hectares in 1970 is likely to plummet to 0.05 hectares by 2005. The ever increasing marginalisation of the land poor in the rural areas is driv-

ing a large number of them into urban centres which is contributing to the adverse environmental impacts of unplanned urbanization. Mushrooming of slums with concomitant problems of inadequate water supply and waste disposal systems creating

no-productivity. On the other hand, natural resources are gradually exhausted. The productivity of our fertile wetlands is also on decline mainly because of intensive cultivation. With the decline of the fertility irreversible ecological degradation is

tion of land, erosion of top soil, creeping salinity, rapid extraction of groundwater, declining soil fertility, waterlogging, increasing sediment load on river beds and, above all, destruction of forest resource. A detail account of all the aspects is not possible in the space of a single article and which is not our intention either. Our emphasis is only on the thing that different aspects of nature should not be treated separately because even it seems they do exist separately but they are a part of the whole —

of wetlands and its unique ability to support a multitude of species in their natural environment.

II

In Bangladesh the village wood lots which cover 10 per cent of the country's total forest area are supplying 90 per cent of the requirements of rural fuelwood. Lack of commercial energy supply in the countryside forces the rural poor to rely heavily on forest resources for fuel. The demand for fuelwood is expected to reach 11.55 million cubic metres by the year 2013 with population running up to 152 million. Loss of forest is causing land erosion here and leading to the heavy sedimentation of rivers and degradation of land. Land erosion is acute particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The 'slash and burn' cultivation process followed by the people in Hill tracts has depleted some one million hectares of forest. The soil erosion caused by this cultivation method is continuously depositing silt in river beds, on arable land and in the 67,000 hectare Kaptai Lake. The other major causes of forest or green cover destruction are logging and clearing of forest itself for agricultural and habitation purposes.

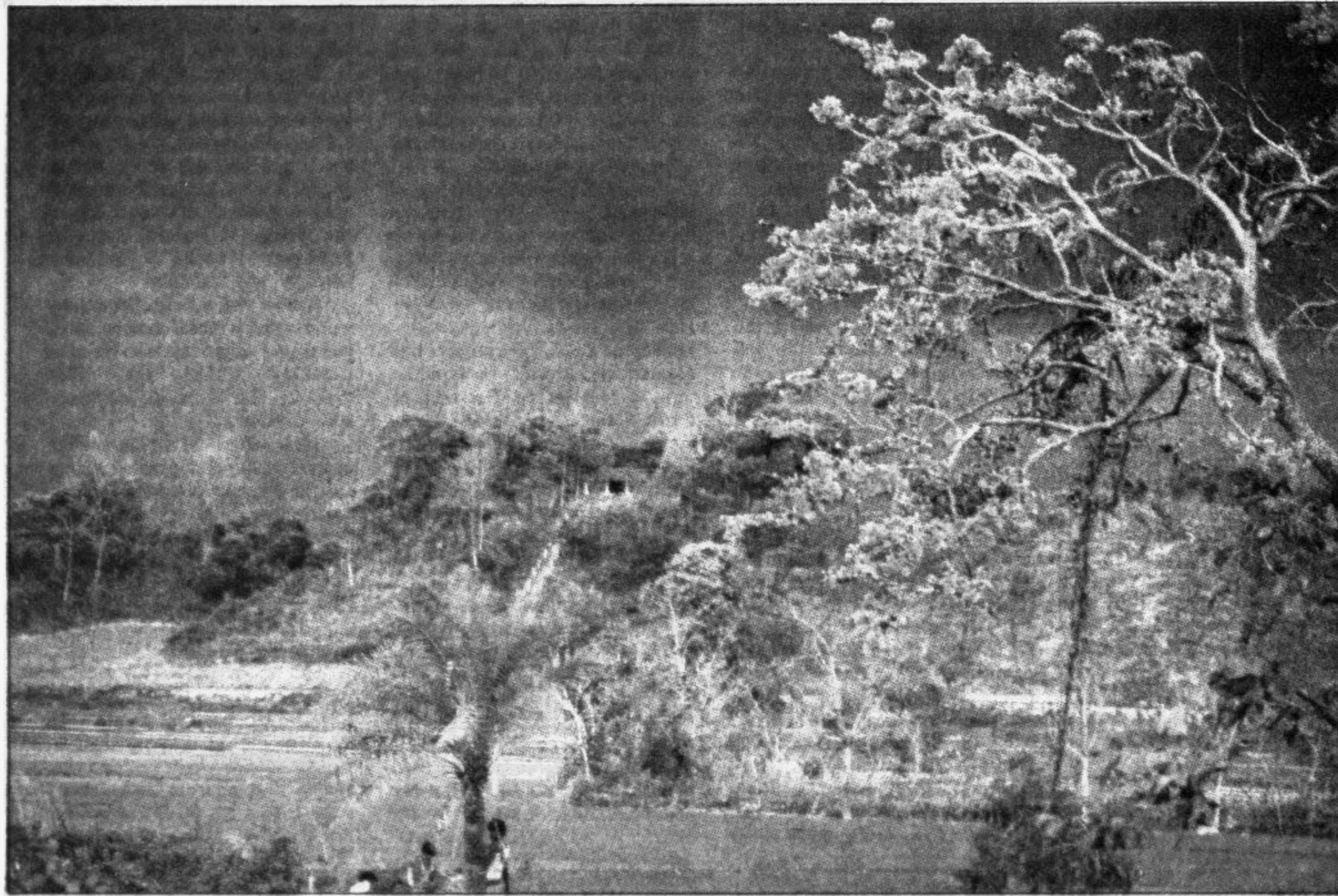
Painting a complete picture of country's green cover or, for that matter, its decline is hard because no detailed and coordinated study has been done yet. But the alarm has already begun to ring. Global warming, process of desertification, flooding, shortage of water, drying of river are only signs of an impending disaster.

III

In many myths and folktales tree has been understood as divine and as the nucleus of life. Tree is the vertical centre of the nature — binding together the heavens and the earth — in one form of notion. The other notion says, tree, at the horizontal centre of the earth, is the source of life. When tree links heaven with earth it is called the tree of knowledge and it is tree of life when it provides food. These myths are the testament of the importance attached to trees by the non-literate man of antiquity. The myth-making man realised the place of tree in his life as a result of their close and intense living with nature. The modern man, on the other hand, is far removed from nature. This loss of connection with nature and dependence on technology have made the modern man insensitive towards nature. Miracles of technology brought him everything home and also leading him to become alienated from everything. The modern man has become, as a result, alone.

What primitive man understood about nature we have to hear from scientists today. The damage we have done to nature in the course of our progress is only recently being felt. The global threat to the environment is pointing to our erroneous notion that we, humans, are superior, above and independent of all other life.

What we would like to emphasise regarding environmental degradation and tree in particular is that the plants or the green unit of nature can alone reduce the global threat to environment. Covering mother earth with trees would be saving her from imminent catastrophe. Let us act together with conviction for the environment. Perhaps, by now, tree has reminded us, 'divided we fall, united we stand'.



The vibrant Nature, because of trees.

cases destroy the harmony. What we do in one area affects the other. It is difficult to deal with one problem without inadvertently causing other problems. The problems we are facing today are rooted in our insensitivity towards interdependence. Our

ing a large number of them into urban centres which is contributing to the adverse environmental impacts of unplanned urbanization. Mushrooming of slums with concomitant problems of inadequate water supply and waste disposal systems creating

likely to occur. Because intensive cultivation leads to the genetic erosion of indigenous strains of rice and other crops as well as animal, fish and bird species. For a country where 78 per cent people live in rural areas and are

— Photo: Dr Noazesh Ahmed

sible in the space of a single article and which is not our intention either. Our emphasis is only on the thing that different aspects of nature should not be treated separately because even it seems they do exist separately but they are a part of the whole —



Whither lives in human settlements? — Star photo

history of progress is a history of gradual movement from dependence into alienation from others and also from nature surrounding us.

The man we have seen full of bright prospect in Renaissance, in the Age of Reason or Enlightenment he has grown to a superman reaching for the skies only. With the eighteenth century industrialisation man had not just bought fortune, he also sowed the seeds of his own decline. Now the entire community of life is in serious danger. Most ominously, all of the biogeochemical system essential for life on the planet, the habitats essential for the survival of diverse species, and even the atmosphere and the oceans are now disturbed and threatened on a planetary scale. Scientists say that for most of the last 600 million years no more than 10 species died out each year whereas now mainly because of the destruction of plants, species are dying at the rate of 70 a day. If things continue as they are, humankind might wipe out its own species from the planet.

We now would like to throw light on how the expanding human activities, in our part of the world, are killing man's partner in the process of respiration, hence the closest of all to him, in the nature. Apart from taking part in the breathing cycle, plants in general stabilize rainfall and climate, store and purify water and protect soil and fertility.

As the population swells, man, to meet its ever growing demands, massacre the plants and thereby depriving himself from the blessings of the green cover and enhancing environmental degradation. The available land in Bangladesh is now 14.29 million hectares. Of which, 9.56 million hectares are being used for the pure purpose of cultivation. The present rate of population growth — 2.1 per cent

health hazards and posing a threat to the environment, of course, destroying the green cover in the process. The overburdening population is demanding the land and pushing the productivity of the land to the point of

mostly poor and dependent on their local eco-system for survival, any environmental degradation is a severe blow to the core of their existence. The environmental problems in our country is manifold: gradual degrada-

Earth. So, if any step is taken without the consideration of others, that is highly likely to lead to a catastrophe. One such ill-conceived step is the idea to bring wetlands under boro cultivation ignoring the multiple uses



The plant fair held at the Dhanmandi Club ground June 21-28.

— Star photo



In Praise of Trees

by Dr. Noazesh Ahmed

PLANT is the first life to hear the sun's summons from the dark womb of earth. Life without plants is impossible. Plants are the form of life on which all other living beings depend — the earth's basic foodstuff. In praise of trees, Rabindranath Tagore salutes and bows to them:

O, profound,
Silent tree, by restraining valour
With patience, you revealed creative
Power in its peaceful form.

Why so much praise for the tree? Because the tree is the life-founder. Trees can reduce the heat of summer day, quiet a highway noise, feed hungry, provide shelter from the wind and give warmth in the winter. And the forests are the sanctuaries not only of wildlife, but life as a whole, humans included.

Primeval forests have a peculiar and unique value that transcends economics. Men can replant trees, and they have done so by billions. But they can never re-create one of these forests. Walking through a replanted forest has all the mystique of walking through a sugarcane field or maize field. The trees grow straight and true, all the same age, all the same size. Herbs and undergrowth are minimal.

Walking through a natural forest is a transcendental experience. Giant umbrellas, centuries old and often over 100 feet tall, reach for heavens. Cut an old natural forest and more than aesthetics is lost. Birds, animals, insects, and plants that thrive in the richness simply go away or die. Destroy too much of their habitat and they become extinct. Natural trees, as a consequence, are very important part of man's environment. They have always supplied many of man's basic needs — material, aesthetic and spiritual. From the dawn of civilisation, trees have been very closely associated with man's biological and cultural environment.

Trees have so many interesting facts, figures and stories. Let us now mention some of them.

1) George Bernard Shaw says:

Except during the nine months before he draws his first breath, no man manages his affairs as well as a tree does.

2) President Theodore Roosevelt comments: A people without children would face a hopeless future; a country without trees is almost as hopeless.

3) There are more species of trees in three acres of a Malaysian rainforest (880 spp) than in all of the United States (850 species).

4) A E S Thames, a utility company in New England, has helped pay for the planting of 52 million trees in Guatemala — exactly the quantity needed to absorb the carbon-dioxide that is produced annually at its Uncoville, Conn. generating plant.

5) It takes one 100-foot-tall tree to provide the wood and paper products consumed annually by the average American.

6) A full grown deciduous tree can pull one ton of water from the soil each year.

7) Planting three trees around each American house would save 10 to 50 per cent of air-conditioning bills or as much as four billion dollars annually.

8) Trees are nature's air-conditioning units. In one year an average tree inhales 26 pounds of carbon-dioxide — the amount emitted by an automobile during an 11,300 mile trip — and exhales enough oxygen to keep a family of four breathing for a year.

9) A full grown mango tree offers 16 lakhs Indian rupees worth of contribution during its lifetime. These contributions come primarily from purification of carbon-dioxide, manufacturing oxygen, control of soil erosion, cooling effects, soil fertility, harbouring birds, animals and insects.

10) The most isolated tree in the world is Norwegian spruce growing in the wasteland of Campbell Island, Antarctica. Its nearest arboreal neighbour is in the Auckland Islands, 120 miles away.

11) Trees are the largest living things. The world's biggest specimen,

a California Sequoia (Red Wood) named General Sherman, stands 274.9 feet tall and measures 82.3 feet in circumference (about 6,000 tons). It grew from a seed that weighs only one six-thousandth of an ounce.

12) World's tallest tree, another California Sequoia, Harry Cole, measures 371 feet from the base to crown — the height of a 37-story building.

13) The fattest tree ever reported, a chestnut known as the Tree of One Hundred Horses, grew on Sicily's Mount Etna and measured 190 feet in circumference.

14) The longest-branched tree is a 550-year-old banyan near Gutibayalu, India, and its canopy covers 5.2 acres.

15) Trees are also the longest living things; a bristlecone pine named Methuselah is over 4,600 year old. Recently a tree older than this is discovered in China.

16) In 1,500,000 BC: Early man learns to make a fire with kindling.

17) In 120,000 BC: Man builds covered shelter with roof supported by wood beams.

18) In 50,000 — 30,000 BC: First rafts and boats are crafted from large logs.

19) In 3500 BC: The wheel is invented, and right with it comes the cart, both of wood.

20) In 105 AD: Paper is invented in China by Ts'ai Lun, an official of the imperial court, using bark of mulberry tree.

From the beginning of civilisation man has a deep relationship with trees. Like may sages in India and China, Gautama Buddha in about 5th century BC, lived six years under the Bodhi Tree — Asvattha, Ficus religiosa. From his experience and wisdom he left a valuable sermon on trees:

"The tree is a peculiar organism of unlimited kindness and benevolence that makes no demands for its sustenance and extends generously the products of its life activity; it affords protection to all beings, offering shade even to the axeman who destroys it."



If all roads in the city had trees!

— Star photo