Baikka Beel under Threat

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Perhaps many people will think this is not the right question to ask. You might ask: "Should we save wetlands?", or "Is it worthwhile to save them?" But those questions have already been answered. As a signatory to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, Bangladesh has already made an international commitment to ensure the wise use of its wetlands in general for the wellbeing of future generations. This includes, but is not limited to, protecting wetlands of international importance.

Even though millions of rural people for generations have depended on the *beels*, rivers, *haors* and other wetlands of Bangladesh for sources of food and income, at the policy level wetlands were misguidedly thought of as "wastelands". Wetlands are in fact highly productive environments that support the livelihoods of millions in this country and often the poorest. A study of Hail Haor, a large wetland in Moulvibazar District, found that in 2000 the value of goods and services the *haor* averaged Taka 37,000 per hectare or double the return from the alternative of a single crop of dry season (*boro*) paddy at that time. So even without any improvements in management, wetlands are very valuable for the fish, aquatic plants, crops, grazing opportunities, flood mitigation and recreation they provide.



Observation tower, Baikka Beel Sanctuary.

Over the last 20 years, just like everyone in this country I have seen wetlands drained or filled or silting up; seen embankments and roads marching across natural watercourses; seen more and more wetlands converted to agriculture, or fish ponds, or industry; held my nose because of polluted water around factories and towns; seen fewer water birds during winter surveys; and heard fishermen everywhere explain how their catches are a fraction of what they once were. These trends continue as very real threats to wetlands and their productivity.

To take one example close to Dhaka, in Kaliakoir in Gazipur District, the number of textile related industries has increased tremendously from 12 in 1999 to 166 at the end of 2005, bringing much needed jobs and export earnings. But this has come at a high price. Even if those industries followed best practices so many would affect the local environment. In reality, very few have the effluent treatment plants they are required to operate. It is estimated that these industries discharge 30 billion litres of effluent water annually in the Turag-Bangshi wetland system. In this area the MACH project (Management of Aquatic Ecosystems



Deforestation causes increased siltation in the remaining wetlands.



Dredging is one way to restore silted up wetlands.