

POLYTHENE POLLUTION

Restrictions must be totally enforced

Environmentalists say the penalty must be raised to put pressure on the dishonest businessmen who have resorted to manufacturing and marketing of illegal polythene bags due to the loopholes in monitoring.

PROBIR KUMAR SARKER

The use of polythene bags is increasing in Dhaka and elsewhere, despite the government's ban on the environmentally hazardous item, as most people and businesses have started to use it extensively again.

Even though the ban came in January 2002, the government could hardly find a competitive alternative for the people as well as the environment over the years.

The absolute ban was imposed on manufacture, import, marketing, sale, demonstration for sale, stock, distribution, commercial carriage or commercial use of the item.

In January 2010, the Department of Environment (DoE) allowed partially the use of polythene under certain conditions that three categories of polybags could be manufactured -- to transport fish fries, preserve mushrooms, and packaging of food items.

The conditions state that these polybags of certain measurement could not be used in local markets and businesses must take approval of the DoE before manufacturing them.

The initiative has failed to bring

any significant change in the overall scenario thanks to the high price of alternative bags and packaging made of jute and paper, and the lack of frequent monitoring by the authorities.

Even though the use of jute packaging was made mandatory in 2010, its use is still insignificant due to the cost.

The extent of pollution in the city and at other parts of the country due to the dumped polythene bags and other non-biodegradable items apparently shows that the rules are not properly followed.

It draws concern as these polythene items are not usually decompose in earth, create obstacles in the flow of water in drains, canals and rivers. In addition, heavy smoke is created and spread in environment as the marginalised poor people burn plastic often as fuel to cook.

Not only for shopping bags and packaging purpose, polythene and plastic bags are widely used as sacks for rice, wheat, cement and fertiliser, too.

At present, the availability of plastic bags in the markets and shops has outnumbered those made of jute, paper and net as the



cost of producing polybags is much less and profit is higher in comparison.

Alongside the dishonest businessmen, who basically tend to make profits, people do not seem interested in using alternatives to polybags considering the higher price of jute or paper bags.

Besides shopping, people are regularly gathering their daily waste in these polybags and handing over those to the cleaners. Meanwhile, the tendency of dumping such waste-filled bags here and there is clogging the drains and dangerously polluting waterbodies at different places.

Prospect of jute goods brightened up domestically after the government passed the law making use of jute compulsory for packaging prod-

ucts like grains, cement, fertiliser and sugar.

The law has already come into effect with the jute and textiles ministry asking public sector agencies to use jute instead of polythene for packaging seeds, fertiliser and foods.

But, the sellers at the grocery shops and kitchen markets usually provide polythene bags to carry products, while the wholesalers prefer polythene and synthetic sacks.

Officials at the DoE said only they cannot stop such a vast business when the people of all need to be made aware of its adverse impact on health and environment.

"If they show their back to the polythene bags, the manufacturers would be discouraged and thus its

production would come down," said Quazi Sarwar Imtiaz Hashmi, DoE director (planning), who also leads drives against illegal polythene production and marketing.

"We launch regular drives against polythene despite our shortage in manpower," he said.

The waste recycling industry, too, can help cut down pollution caused by polythene. The polythene-related items collected from the dumping stations, drains, waterbodies and streets can be used at the plants making plastic products or even in producing oil.

Meanwhile, the government could subsidise jute bags to reduce its price in a bid to encourage people.

Factories making polybags illegally are fined a maximum of Tk

50,000 while penalty for sale, marketing, stock of polybags is much less.

The DoE has only two magistrates for the whole country for different enforcement drives against polythene manufacturers, black smoke emitting vehicles and brickfields, industrial polluters and others.

This lack of necessary manpower, certainly, pulls down the number of DoE's mobile court operations against polythene when its use is on the rise. As per law, the DoE may employ up to seven magistrates.

According to chemical experts, the manufacturing process of apparently harmless polythene is unsafe and it takes centuries to decompose. The substances emitted during the production can cause cancer to factory workers and damage their kidneys, nervous and immune systems.

Most of the polythene manufacturing units are based in Old Dhaka.

Environmentalists say the penalty must be raised to put pressure on the dishonest businessmen who have resorted to manufacturing and marketing of illegal polythene bags due to the loopholes in monitoring.

Meanwhile, the law enforcers may also come forward against the illegal manufacturers of polybags and its marketing.

The government certainly bears the highest responsibility to curb use of polythene and plastic either by the help of stricter law enforcement or by promoting reasonable alternatives.

The writer is a journalist.

ECOLOGICALLY CRITICAL AREAS

Strict guidelines can help conservation

It would be more practical to employ our traditional knowledge to conserve biodiversity. Community involvement in decision making process is much critical. A very important thing we need is our policy level endeavor to implement effective action plans.

MOHAMMAD HELAL UDDIN

Since the inception of civilization mankind has been living within predatory relationship with the nature. The tendency to exert uncongenial influence on ecosystem has resulted in deforestation, loss of biodiversity, land degradation, coastal erosion, environmental pollution and rapid increase of GHGs. The notion, however, has recently been changed with the introduction of new concept -- Sustainable Development, which has now become a central concern all over the world.

By the end of the past century a series of international conferences issued urgent calls for global concern to address the matter. The United Nation Environment Programme (UNEP) and World Meteorological Organization (WMO) established the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change. In June 1992, "The Earth Summit" was held in Rio-de-Janeiro in Brazil. Bangladesh also adapted an action plan namely, National Environment Management Action Plan (NEMAP). Following this action plan some areas have been declared as Ecologically Critical Areas (ECAs).

ECA is an environmental protection zone, defined by the government of Bangladesh under the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act (BECA), 1995, where ecosystem is considered to be threatened to reach a critical state. 12 sites are currently classified as ECAs to control further damage to these areas including Hakaluki haor, Sonadia Island, St. Martin's Island, Teknaf Peninsula (including the Cox's Bazar Sea Beach), Tanguar haor, Marjat baor and outside of Sundarbans Reserved Forest to an extent of 10 km and counting.

Current situation of environmental degradation in Bangladesh is alarming. The annual deforestation

rate is estimated to be around 3.3 per cent. Along with this, current rate of species extinction as a result of anthropogenic activities has been estimated to be up to thousand times higher than the natural rate. Tidal wetlands constitute about 25 per cent of the land area of the country which are home ground for mangroves, lagoons, sand dunes and beaches and coral habitats. Degradation of wetlands has caused several problems including extinction and reduction of wildlife, extinction of many indigenous rice varieties, loss of soil nutrients and loss of water reservoirs. It, as well, increases in the occurrence of flooding and decline of occupations hence socio-economic development.

Cox's Bazar is one of the most catastrophe prone sites which has been declared as Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) since 1999. However, due to absence of proper guidelines, pollution is taking place at an increasing rate. Destroying coastal green, collecting oyster and coral, increased and uncontrolled access of tourists to the areas of rich biodiversity are causing severe



St Martin's Island

jeopardy to natural environment. Adjacent Teknaf peninsula provides breeding area for globally threatened species of marine turtles and serves as a key sanctuary for over 80 migratory species of birds. All forms of diversity are diminishing fast due to the destruction of their habitats. Deforestation is frequent on the peninsula where forest extraction is an important occupation for many of the settlers.

St. Martin Island has also reached at a very critical state. Construction of hotels and other facilities often leads to increased sewage pollution. Sewage and wastewater are polluting seas and lagoons thus damaging the flora and fauna of the site. Evidence suggests a variety of impacts resulting from development of shoreline infrastructures, dumping of waste in the water and ship grounding are destroying coral habitats.

A majority of people are critically dependent on the country's wetland systems as vital natural resources to sustain, primarily through agriculture and fishing. Tanguar Haor, one of the prime wetlands and ECAs, is responsible for the livelihood of more than 40,000 people. It is a unique wetland supporting 150 varieties of fishes, more than 100 local birds and around 200 species of wetland flora. Due to uncontrolled greed of leaseholders fish population is slowly diminishing and the ecological balance of the haor has been deteriorating.

To resist the hazards, proper and strict guidelines are obligatory in such



Sundarbans

PHOTO: STAR

a way that the natural resources are not compromised. Since the characteristics of nature and people's engagement with each site are different, very specific guidelines are needed to manage local demand for resources. For instance, in the area with reserve forest most residents are dependent on wood for fuel that can only be subsidised if alternative sources of energy become available.

There is need for an Ecotourism Management plan that will create a bioregional ecotourism for all relevant protected zones. The plan would be market-based and prepared through the cooperation of government, the private sector, and local communities. There is also an immediate need to conduct awareness programmes, surveys, and reforestation. Defining special zones for critical habitats is very urgent.

Complexities in rules and regulations need to be solved. Interrelation and cooperation among related agencies must be developed and increased. It has been observed that due to absence of a Master Plan and blurred definition of sea area in Cox's Bazar, implementation of ECA guidelines becomes almost impossible. Old-fashioned bottom-up bureaucracy is not yet supportive enough for knowledge-based conservation and management of biodiversity in Bangladesh.

Unsustainable agricultural practices and invasion by alien species are also accountable for jeopardizing crop diversity and out-competing our local species of flora of the ECAs. Improving productivity of local variety with genetic modification might be an alternative solution.

Government has so far tried to manage a few of the ECAs with appropriate arrangement. The Coastal and Wetland Biodiversity Management Project (CWBM) at Cox's Bazar and Hakaluki Haor a UNDP-GEF funded project implemented by the Department of Environment (DoE). The project is responsible for developing an effective management practice of ECAs. The ECA guidelines identify the following activities as prohibited -- felling or extracting -- trees of forest, hunting and poaching of wild animals, collection of snail, coral, turtle and other wild animals, establishment of industries that may pollute soil, water, air and create noise pollution, any activity that is likely to threaten the habitat of flora and fauna, any activity that is likely to destroy or alter the natural characteristics of soil and water, any activity that is likely to cause harm to fish and other aquatic life. IUCN Bangladesh, Hand to Embrace the Less Privileged (HELP), Nature Conservation Management (NACOM), etc are also working with vulnerable

communities in Cox's Bazar to increase local resilience to climate change impacts, promote conservation of biodiversity and diversify livelihood options. IUCN has also taken initiative for community based management of Tanguar Haor which can be a role model for ECA management.

It would be more practical to employ our traditional knowledge to conserve biodiversity. Community involvement in decision making process is much critical. A very important thing we need is our policy level endeavor to implement effective action plans to conserve biodiversity. Rules-regulations should be formulated and be updated with the core concept of conservation and sustainable use of the components of biodiversity. Complexities within rules and legislations are needed to solve immediately. To implement guidelines effectively Department of Environment (DoE) is needed to be strengthened enough with adequate work force and other facilities. National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAP) 2004 is required to be more comprehensive and focused.

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