

# You can't put a price on a forest

On December 28, 2017, Prothom Alo reported that Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) wanted to acquire 191 acres of reserved forest land in Maheshkhali, Cox's Bazar for construction of an unrefined fuel terminal. The forest department initially calculated the economic compensation for the reserved forest at Tk 277 crore on the basis of the cost of timber and loss of biodiversity this would cause. Later, the amount was revised to Tk 47 crore. Finally, BPC proposed that it would pay a total of Tk 4 crore 36 lakhs for the land. The plan to construct an oil terminal has raised concerns among environmentalists and activists as has the haggling by BPC over the cost of something that cannot be judged only monetarily. Dr Abdullah Harun Chowdhury of the Environmental Science Discipline of Khulna University talks to Moyukh Mahtab of The Daily Star about the ecological damage such a project may cause, the logic behind economic assessment of reserved forests, and the alternatives that may be pursued.

What sort of impact might the construction of an oil terminal have on the reserved forest and its surrounding areas?

Firstly, we must understand that this is a reserved forest. Our environmental laws are outdated, and taking advantage of the loopholes and deficiencies in the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995, this sort of work is taking place in different areas. But generally, all over the world, it is completely illegal to create oil terminals or reservoirs or whatever through deforestation of reserved forests. In the developed countries, such facilities are not built close to such forests, let alone inside them. We have been building such projects around forest areas for quite a while, and now we see steps to decimate the reserved forest areas as well. So, what will happen is that the environment, flora and fauna of the area will be completely destroyed. These are not things we can revive.

The Maheshkhali reserved forest is home to the endangered Maya deer, boa (*ajagar*), *bagdash*, and many species of reptiles and birds—none of this will survive. When the forest will be gone, we might see new plantations being made. Other species may eventually adapt to the new environment, but the environment and ecosystem will be completely altered. What usually happens in cases of deforestation is that to show rapid forestation, some species of fast-growing trees are planted. These end up having further adverse effects on the ecosystem of the areas. The undergrowth, shrubs and herbs of the forest, which are mainly the primary food sources and habitats for animals, do not grow back. As a result, the entire area will undergo a change.

Further, if the project is implemented, human habitations will be developed surrounding it. The area will turn into a peri-urban one eventually. Human settlements will spread towards Chakaria. Already, there is barely any trace left of the Sundarbans near Chakaria. The effects of deforestation will extend to the main forest near Cox's Bazar as well. So, the habitation of animals and birds near and far from the site will become vulnerable. Our remaining reserved forests, in Maheshkhali, Cox's Bazar, etc. are already vulnerable—for example, elephants today find it difficult to source food. This will further worsen. The pollution will also affect the marine resources in the surrounding sea, what we now call our Blue Economy. So, our government's Blue Economy targets will be affected, meaning we will end up being economically hurt as well.

Take the example of the Madhupur Sal Forest. It shows what happens when permission for industries is given in such areas. In Madhupur, people have cut down most Sal trees. People see trees have been planted, but they do not understand what sort of trees should be there and what is actually there now. They do not realise what animals once lived there and why it's a problem that the ecosystem has changed.

What is the current state of the Maheshkhali reserved forest?

Well, the forest we have now is



A mangrove forest in Maheshkhali.

PHOTO: SHUBHARTHI BARUA/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

already in danger. Many people illegally cut trees for lumber—so it doesn't have the ideal condition required for reserved forests. On top of that, if you set up further projects, there is a chance of the whole forest going extinct. There was an economic assessment done for the compensation for buying the land for the project. What is the process of this assessment and how can you put an economic value on a forest?



Dr Abdullah Harun Chowdhury

For calculating compensations, the value of the timber product is assessed. But, in truth, the practice of putting a price on a reserved forest is not accepted anywhere in the world.

What happens is, we completely

forget the bigger picture for short-term gains. What is the cost of a tiger? Would you be able to produce a tiger with money if they go extinct? So, you cannot value with money or recoup the loss of animal species or an ecosystem. There should be no question of economic assessments for forests like this.

The Forest Ministry tried to justify its action by saying that the forest is being given to another government ministry for the development of the country.

In effect, everything is owned by the government. I might own the land I live in, but according to law, it is only registered in my name. The owner is still the government. The same goes for the money I have; in the end, it belongs to the government. Definitely the project is a government project. But that does not justify building an oil terminal by destroying a forest when we can simply take the project elsewhere. No one has the right to destroy something which cannot be rebuilt even with compensation.

What is the legal standing of such a project on reserved forest land?

As I said earlier, there are loopholes in our laws. A reserved forest is supposed to be a restricted area where you cannot undertake projects that will cause harm to it. But the organisations that carry out the assessments for monetary gains, ignore the ethics. They conduct the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and Environmental Management Plans (EMP) and risks assessments, but won't take the responsibility for the subsequent

environmental impact. There are places where economic assessments should not be done in the first place. You cannot assess the economic cost of filling up the Kaptai Lake for resettlement of people.

What about the role of the Forest Ministry in this regard?

In government ministries, there is pressure from other ministries. The officials who do the reports, fieldwork, etc. are put under pressure. Due to the socio-economic context of Bangladesh, they cannot rise above this undue pressure. Until we have

political goodwill regarding these issues, until the economic and political clout of the industrialists are tackled, just blaming the ministry will not help. The officials of the ministries need to worry about their job. They have to give in to the pressure because of their job.

What kind of precedent might this create if the oil terminal is constructed?

If the permission goes through, then in the near future, all reserved forests are open to these projects. These will go in the same way as our Sal forests,

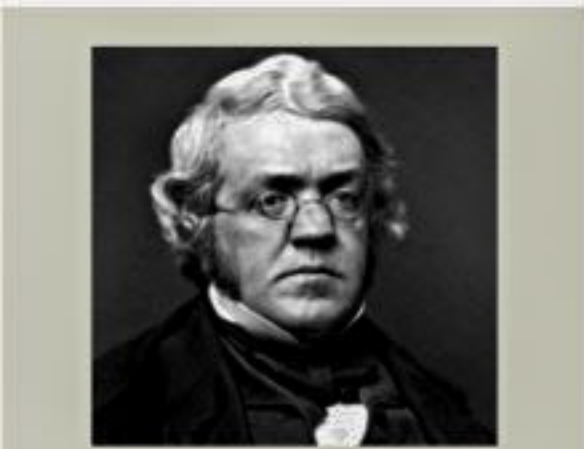
50 percent of which have already been encroached by habitation and industries. There used to be peacocks in these Sal forests once. Now, one would be lucky to even get a glimpse of a common bird. Once you give permission in one place, the same will happen in another place, in another reserved forest. You cannot stop that.

What are the alternatives?

We are not anti-development. We want industrialisation in areas where the environment will not be harmed. This terminal can be constructed somewhere else. New *chars* are cropping up. We can use those also. In many countries, this is actually being done. Out forest land is barely one-third of the ideal a country should have. We cannot destroy these too.

Let me end with a final example. Last December, I was conducting research in the deep sea. We went out into the Swatch of No Ground many times from Hiron Point. The Swatch of No Ground used to be a hotspot for many species of fish and even dolphins. But this time, we could only see one or two dolphins. Barely 20 years ago, near Nilkamal, where the world heritage site monument is located, there used to be at least 5-6 jellyfish per sq metre. In the channels, especially the main Pashur river channel, one could see jellyfish everywhere. However, this time, we could not find even one jellyfish. We can already see impacts of our unplanned industrialisation on the ecosystem and the biodiversity of these areas. The food system is being changed. The industry effluents are supposed to be treated in an artificial lagoon and then disposed in a way that does not harm the environment. This is not being done. Out laws and monitoring mechanisms are not adequate. A common reaction by people is: who cares about jellyfish when people are dying? But we must remember that jellyfish is a part of the ecosystem. These are related and these affect us too.

## QUOTABLE Quote



WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

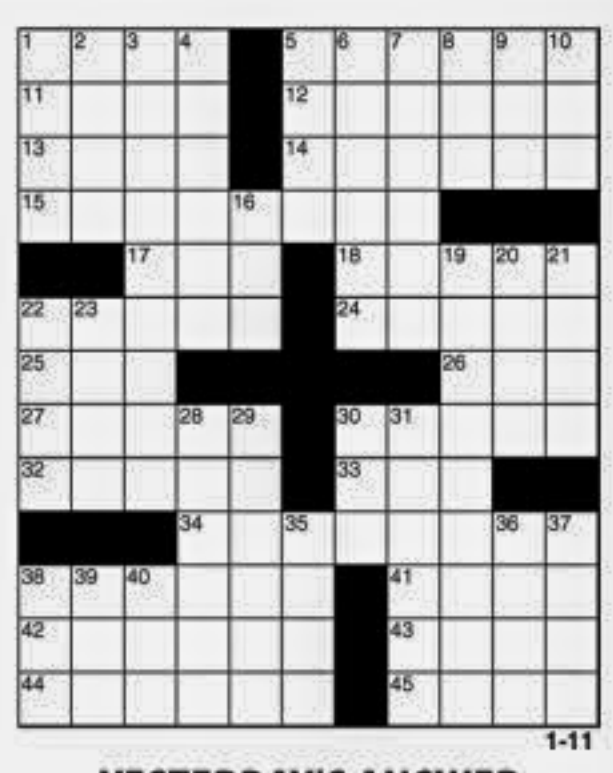
British novelist and author (July 18, 1811-December 24, 1863)

*The wicked are wicked, no doubt, and they go astray and they fall, and they come by their deserts; but who can tell the mischief which the very virtuous do?*

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Litmus reddener
  - 5 Toward midnight
  - 11 Solitary
  - 12 European peninsula
  - 13 Makes a choice
  - 14 Fired
  - 15 Pirate costume feature
  - 17 Squabble
  - 18 Pecks and pounds
  - 22 Sample
  - 24 Boom type
  - 25 Mamie's mate
  - 26 Brewed drink
  - 27 Small-scale
  - 30 Turn outward
  - 32 Door sign
  - 33 Broadcast
  - 34 "Jeremy" band
  - 38 Happened to
  - 41 Musical Horne
  - 42 Relaxed
  - 43 Play parts
  - 44 Café fixtures
  - 45 Proofing note

- DOWN**
- 1 Lotion additive
  - 2 Duplicate
  - 3 Cross
  - 4 Tyrant
  - 5 Shopper's aid
  - 6 Old counter
  - 7 Rave music
  - 8 Tick off
  - 9 "Sprechen - Deutsch?"
  - 10 Owned
  - 16 Really impress
  - 19 Throw in
  - 20 Layer
  - 21 Sing like Ella
  - 22 Clock reading
  - 23 Related
  - 28 Undo, in a way
  - 29 Threat end
  - 30 Corn unit
  - 31 Country homes
  - 35 Pub quaffs
  - 36 Price to play
  - 37 Schooner part
  - 38 Slugger's need
  - 39 Sched. guess
  - 40 Winter mo.



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