

Crisis in the planet of the apes

Gibbon population drops by 90pc in two decades; deforestation behind the decline, finds study

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Gibbons are endangered worldwide, and it just so happens that Bangladesh is no exception to the norm.

According to Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Division in Sylhet, gibbon habitats are present in different regions of Sylhet and Chattogram.

However, the number of gibbons, classified as small apes, has decreased by almost 90 percent just within the last two decades. Although Lawachhara National Park has been considered a safe haven for gibbons, presently, 40 gibbons are struggling for survival there.

This information came up in a study led by Habibun Nahar, associate professor of zoology at Jagannath University.

It's difficult to get an exact estimate

of gibbons. Nahar mentioned that according to a 1970 study, there were 3,000 gibbons in the country. However, current estimates say there are about 468 gibbons in 135 groups across Bangladesh, and of them, 268 are in Sylhet.

According to an International Union for Conservation of Nature survey from 2018, gibbons are about 60 to 90 centimetres in length, and weigh six to nine kilos. Although male and female gibbons are almost identical in size, there are significant differences in their skin texture and colour. The average lifespan of gibbons is 25 years.

Researchers have found that at present, the highest number of gibbon habitats are in Sylhet, and in the region, Rajkandi Reserve Forest of Moulvibazar hosts the highest number of the species.

The data came up in a study

conducted by a team of wildlife researchers, Hasan Al Razi Choyan, Tanvir Ahmed and Sabit Hasan from Bangladesh and Ariz Zaradat from United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), who were led by Habibun Nahar, and Sabir bin Muzaffar of UAEU.

The study, conducted with the support of the forest department and funded by US Fish and Wildlife Service, was published in the Journal of Diversity. It was conducted in 22 forests in Sylhet and Chattogram from March 2019 to February 2020.

Sabit Hasan, one of the team members, said, "Deforestation is the main reason behind the decline in gibbon habitats. This issue leads to their food crisis and makes them vulnerable to poaching."

Hassan al-Razi, the project's manager and researcher, said, "Although the number of gibbons in

some forests may seem relatively good, it's not all good news. All forests where gibbons are found are fragmented islands, isolated from one another."

Because of this, gibbons of one forest lose contact with the others, leading to genetic distancing. This is threatening their kind, since low genetic diversity can lead to the animals' extinction during adversities like outbreak of a disease or climate change, he said.

Team member Tanvir Ahmed said it's crucial to take firm initiatives to

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KEY REASONS

- Deforestation
- Habitat loss
- Food crisis
- Low genetic diversity

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase research
- Focus on building closer tie amid existent population
- Initiative to protect forests
- Setting up ape sanctuaries

NUMBER OF GIBBONS

- 122
- 91
- 40
- 2
- 5
- 9

FORESTS (in Sylhet)

- Rajkandi Reserve Forest
- Patharia Reserve Forest
- Lawachhara National Park
- Sagarnal Forest
- Rema-Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary
- Satchhari National Park

HEALTH GUIDELINES AT CTG

Few following, none monitoring

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Chattogram

On the second day of the new 11-point health guidelines, people were seen roaming port city roads and riding public vehicles without adhering to the new regulations.

While visiting different roads on Thursday and yesterday, this correspondent saw many people roaming around without facemasks. Meanwhile, no one from the authorities were also found monitoring the areas to enforce the instructions.

This correspondent came across a youth, around 22 years of age, who got on a human haulier without wearing a facemask in Bahaddarhat area yesterday. Asked, he said although he had a mask on the first day of the new guidelines, he took it off after seeing almost no one else wearing it.

Mentioning that he's vaccinated, the youth also said he's less afraid to not wear one as there's no one from the authorities to hold him against it.

But not everyone is comfortable with the situation.

We're seeing more people on main thoroughfares wearing facemasks, but it should be ensured for everyone in every lane.

DR MAHFUZUR RAHMAN
convener of Public Health Rights Protection Committee, Chattogram

Jamal Hossain, a schoolteacher from Raja Pukur Lane, said, "This is not safe for us. The government must find ways to enforce the guidelines."

Meanwhile, the infection rate in Chattogram keeps rising everyday, with yesterday's positive cases hitting 14.52 percent yesterday. A total of 296 cases were detected against 2038 samples tested yesterday, said Dr Elias Chowdhury, civil surgeon of Chattogram. The rate was 10 percent on Thursday, 12.4 percent on Wednesday and 9 percent on Tuesday, he said.

Contacted, Dr Mahfuzur Rahman, convener of Public Health Rights Protection Committee, Chattogram, said, "We're seeing more people on main thoroughfares wearing facemasks, but it should be ensured for everyone in every lane," he said. "We urge the government to involve community leaders in this regard."

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A decade of nothing

Built in 2012, Khulna's Bastuhara-Boyra Housing Market yet to open



DIPANKAR ROY, Khulna

The Bastuhara-Boyra Housing Market was constructed 10 long years ago. But even after all this time, the Khulna City Corporation (KCC) owned market is yet to launch.

This means while a lot of space is being eaten up by the establishment, it actually brings no benefit to the residents of the city's Bastuhara-Mujgunni area, who have to travel three to four kilometres to visit the nearest kitchen market.

Meanwhile, at least four illegal floating markets have sprung up in the vicinity of the market.

KCC authorities said it cannot open the market as it has become a centre of political "power-play", alongside lack of interested shopkeepers and the unauthorised roadside markets in the area.

According to city corporation sources, the market construction was completed in April 2012. It has enough space to accommodate 74 shops, including 40 for vegetables, 14 for groceries, 10 for fish, and five for chicken and other meat. The market has three different sheds for these shops.

One year later in April 2013, around 400 interested traders applied for shop space.

But according to locals and traders, authorities did not really do anything after receiving the applications, which gradually stymied the market's

momentum as traders' interest waned.

The market is surrounded by Mujgunni, Bastuhara, Goalkhali, Boyra Housing and Naval Colony areas. But rather than residents of the locations being benefitted from the market, they are forced to go to Chittrali, Daulatpur and Boikali markets, which are some three to four kilometres away.

Aslam Pervez, a resident of Mujgunni residential area, said, "It would've been nice for us if the market remained open permanently. But now we have to go to these distant markets, braving a lot of difficulties."

"KCC should re-call application from traders, remove the illegal shops and floating markets of the area and set up the actual planned market with proper facilities as soon as possible," he added.

Abdur Rauf, a shopkeeper interested in renting a shop space there, said, "We bought the form for shop allotment, but despite informing the local councillor several times, we have gotten nothing."

"As a result," Rauf said, "we are setting up shop outside the market. If the market was opened with proper facilities, our sales would definitely increase. The area's people would be benefitted as well."

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PATUAKHALI MEDICAL COLLEGE

Covid testing lab still not operational

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

The RT-PCR lab at Patuakhali Medical College Hospital has not started operation even after two years, due to lack of necessary equipment and workforce.

Currently, only a banner hung in front of hospital gates informs people that there should be a lab at the premises. For RT-PCR testing, the samples must be sent to Barishal or Dhaka, and the whole testing process takes seven to 10 days.

The government had taken the initiative to set up the lab in Patuakhali to identify those infected with Covid-19 in a short time. But presently, only antigen tests are being carried out in the district.

If the lab is set up, around 16 lakh Patuakhali residents and 12 lakh dwellers of neighbouring Barguna will be benefitted. Although Covid-19 testing and fatalities have been stable in Patuakhali, the detection rate is increasing yet again. Meanwhile, residents are worried about the Omicron variant.

Mushfiqur Rahman Tuhin, a Patuakhali resident, said, "We have been demanding an RT-PCR lab in Patuakhali since the pandemic's beginning, but the facility is still on paper."

Mostafizur Rahman, acting principal of Patuakhali Medical College, said the lab room is ready, but to start operation eight medical technologists, four data-entry operators, four office assistants and four cleaners are required.

Equipment is also needed for testing. Authorities informed the ministry concerned about this matter two years back, but got no response, he said.

Abandoned staff quarter turns into crime spot

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

The abandoned staff quarters of the Deputy Post Master General's Office in Tangail has turned into a den for criminals and drug abusers, ruining the environment of the area.

The dilapidated condition of the buildings is also preventing staffers of the office from using the facilities at a cheaper rate.

Locals said as soon as night falls, a bunch of suspicious figures flock to the staff quarter's abandoned buildings and emit a lot of disturbing noises.

The quarters and the government office are situated together inside the same complex.

Although they have informed the office authorities about the matter on several occasions, the issue still remains to be solved, locals alleged.

According to the officials, the Deputy Post Master General's Office was constructed beside the former Dhaka Road at Biswas Betka area in the town on 1984. Three additional buildings were later constructed at the back as the staff quarters.

However, over the years, the buildings became worn-down and inhabitable, at which point the residents started leaving one by one.

It has been two decades since the buildings have remained in this abandoned condition, said local Pappu Ahmed, taking advantage of which miscreants have turned them into a crime den.

Several locals told this correspondent that although the office authorities have fenced the boundary walls of the quarters a couple of

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BANGABANDHU BRIDGE

Crash causes long tailback

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

A long tailback was created on the east and west link roads of Bangabandhu bridge in Tangail and Sirajganj yesterday morning, following a road accident on the bridge.

A passenger bus hit an ambulance near pillar 26 around 6:45am, injuring the ambulance driver and suspending vehicular movement on the Dhaka-bound lane, said police.

After the accident, toll collection was suspended from 7:05am to 8:00am for carrying out rescue operation and removing the wreckage, Shafiqul Islam, OC of Bangabandhu Bridge East Police Station, told The Daily Star.

Traffic became normal after a few hours.



Well aware of the risks involved in jumping from the anchoring ropes of a cargo vessel, this daresome duo couldn't stop themselves from fancying a dip into the Bhairab, that too in the middle of winter. This photo was taken recently from Khulna Ghat-5 area.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN