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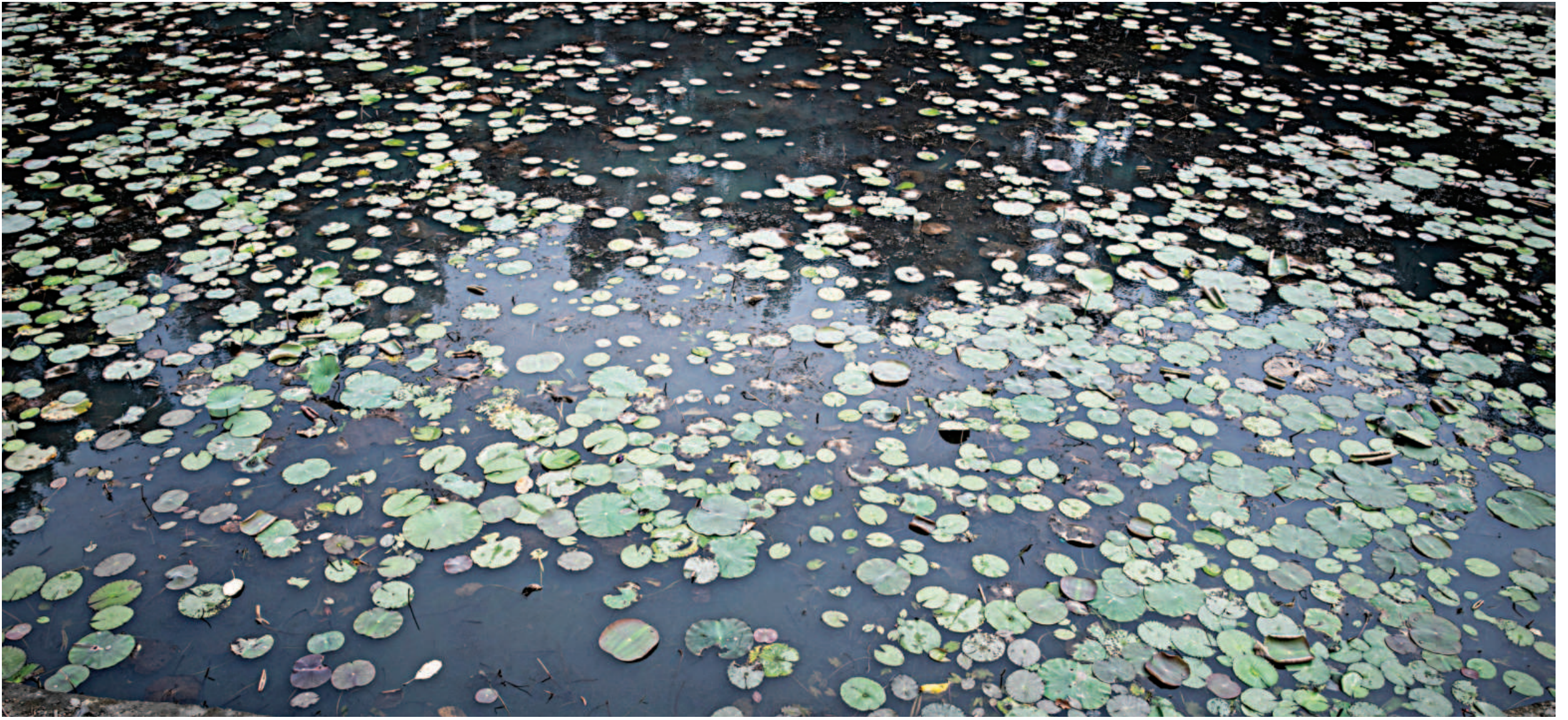
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Botanical Gardens of Dhaka: Are they truly the urban oasis they used to be?

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Our visit to the botanical garden presented a disappointing picture to us. Plastic bottles and packets of chips and cigarettes littered the garden. An artificial pond that was built to enhance the beauty of the place was left unclean, fallen leaves floated in the water, and there was no sign of fish that were

supposed to be there. Music was blaring from a speaker even though there had been a strict restriction on such activities. Despite all of its downsides, the National Botanical Garden remains abuzz with visitors both on weekdays and weekends.

Md Zahiur Rahman, who is in his fifties, was seen walking at the Garden. When we approached him, he seemed short of breath

and was in a hush. Zahiur shared, "I am a carton manufacturer and my office is adjacent to the garden. Every day, I take a 45-minute walk here and this has been my routine for a while now."

"Unlike other places in Dhaka, the small changes in nature are quite visible here. This garden is a theatre for us where the seasons play out

and the need for conservation efforts.

Mohammad Mujibur Rahman, caretaker of the garden, mentioned that there are 54 gardeners, 20 Ansars, and 6 security guards employed at the National Botanical Garden. Still, now and then, we hear news of security concerns and thieves stealing birds from tree

As a hub of education, research, and conservation, the National Botanical Garden holds immense potential to contribute to our understanding of plant species and their roles in our ecosystems. The current state of the garden should be a reminder for us to protect and cherish it for the sake of generations to come.

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their dramas. It is truly refreshing," shared Zahiur, who told us how the small changes in nature often go unnoticed by the casual visitors.

He added, "I see schoolchildren sometimes coming here for educational tours. But I think we should encourage the younger generation more. Presently, they are born with a smartphone in their hand, which is undoubtedly harmful to their health. Perhaps botanical gardens will teach them patience and curiosity – virtues this younger generation lacks."

According to recent statistics, the National Botanical Garden houses an astounding array of over 226 rare plant species, making it a treasure trove for botanists, researchers, and nature enthusiasts alike. So, the garden plays a vital role in educating the public about environmental conservation and plant biology.

Interactive displays, guided tours, and educational programmes can make it an ideal destination for students and nature lovers, facilitating a deeper understanding of the importance of biodiversity

branches.

The garden's layout is thoughtfully designed to highlight different plant families, ranging from majestic trees and delicate orchids to aquatic plants and a myriad of flowering species. The pond and water bodies within the garden offer a peaceful retreat – especially to our feathered friends.

A freelance photographer and a passionate birder named Litu was approaching us with his heavy bag of camera gear. A regular visitor at the park, Litu keeps a careful eye on the birds here. According to him, in the last three years, the number of birds has increased but they are still at risk of losing their homes.

"The authority sometimes cut off bushes and shrubs to beautify the garden and ward off mosquitos. However, they should think about the birds living there, who have built their nests. Bird photography is undoubtedly a positive habit and authorities should take steps so that more birds find their homes here and we find our subjects," noted Litu, as he walked away with his camera.

REVIVING DHAKA'S LUNGS FOR A GREENER FUTURE

The National Botanical Garden, known for its vast collection of flora, lacks modern amenities and comprehensive management. Similarly, the Baldah Garden, despite its historic value, suffers from neglect and inadequate public awareness. But these gardens are still alive and trying to survive.

According to recent studies, Dhaka has, again and again, topped the list of cities worldwide with the worst air quality. So, how can our city breathe if we destroy both of its lungs?

With targeted improvements focusing on infrastructure, public engagement, and sustainable practices, the National Botanical Garden and Baldah Garden can be transformed into urban oases that not only provide respite from the monotony of urban life, but also serve as educational and cultural hubs for the residents of Dhaka.

By Ayman Anika
Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed