



Workers carrying logs after cutting trees in the reserve forest in Majher Char under Patuakhali's Rangabali upazila. Due to unabated illegal logging, the forest is on the verge of disappearing.

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MAJHER CHAR IN PATUAKHALI 'Political backing' fuels forest encroachment

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, Patuakhali

The reserve forest in Majher Char under Patuakhali's Rangabali upazila is depleting rapidly due to illegal logging.

Allegedly, a local influential individual with political backing has been expanding his fish enclosures by encroaching on forest land through tree felling under the cover of darkness since 2020.

During a recent visit, this correspondent found clear evidence of deforestation, including tree stumps and aerial roots hastily covered with soil or hidden within loose branches and debris.

According to locals, Jewel Sikder has been occupying deforested land in the area to expand his fish enclosure. Initially, he operated under the political shelter of the Awami League, and even after the party's ouster last year, he has continued his activities under the banner of the BNP.

Recently, he has constructed dams, dug drainage canals, and

installed culverts within the forest to facilitate water flow to his fish enclosure, locals said.

The local BNP leaders, however, claimed that Jewel had no affiliation with the party.

The reserve forest acts as a natural shield against storms and tidal surges, protecting the coastal region. If it disappears completely, the area will be left defenceless against such

natural disasters, and wildlife will suffer due to habitat loss, said Zakir Hossain, a local fish trader, urging urgent action to stop the illegal logging and land grabbing.

Contacted, Jewel Sikder refuted the allegations, claiming he was cultivating fish on land either legally recorded in his name or leased by him. He alleged that a group with

malicious intent was making false accusations to harm his reputation.

The Majher Char Reserve Forest falls under the jurisdiction of Kankunipara Forest Camp of Rangabali Forest Range.

Narayan Chandra Majumder, in-charge of the camp, said officials had found evidence of forest grabbing during a site visit following complaints.

A drainage canal was discovered inside the forest, and the fish enclosure had been expanded across a 100-metre stretch of illegally occupied land. The matter has been reported to higher authorities, he said.

Md Shafiqul Islam, divisional forest officer in Patuakhali, said an inquiry has been launched, and the assistant conservator of forest has been directed to investigate. If the allegations are proven, legal action will be taken, he added. Rangabali Upazila Nirbahi Officer Md Iqbal Hasan said he was aware of the situation and that higher authorities would be informed for necessary action.

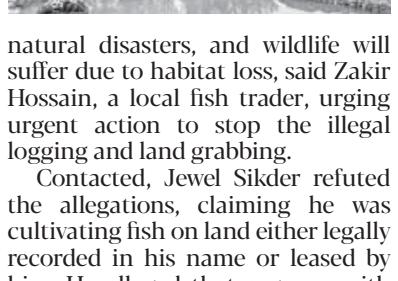


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