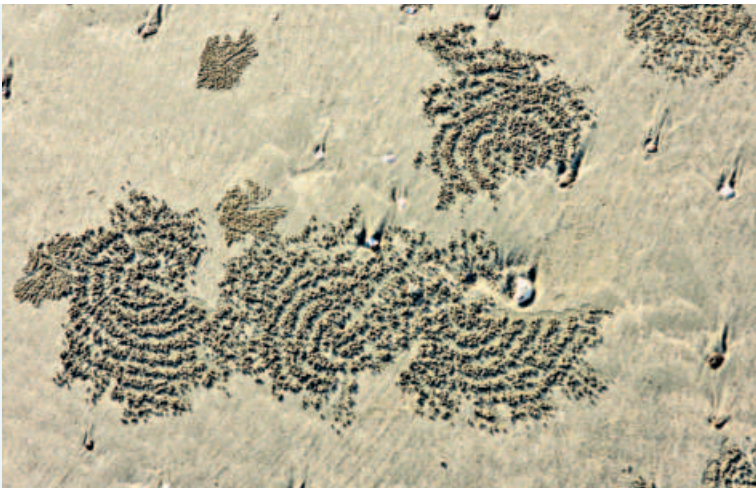




A beautiful lagoon has formed inside the middle island of the Cheradia islands, where birds take refuge.



Artworks of sand bubbler or soldier crabs.



Raha Forest, mainly formed of Lumnitzera racemosa dwarf mangrove trees, occurs only at the southern stony tip of the main island. This is a unique feature of the island.

SAINT MARTIN’S ISLAND IS DYING

Can we still save it?

REZA KHAN

Saint Martin's Island — often romanticised as Bangladesh's "coral island" — is today a fragile, degraded ecosystem pushed to the edge by decades of governmental neglect, unregulated development, and unchecked tourism. Contrary to widespread belief, the island is not naturally a coral island, but rather a coral-bearing ecosystem whose unique geology and biodiversity once made it a national jewel. That ecological asset is now severely degraded, much of it the result of preventable impacts.

A PARADISE LOST THROUGH YEARS OF MISMANAGEMENT

When I first visited the island in 1980, Saint Martin's had barely 3,000 residents, a single dilapidated cyclone shelter, and only a few hundred winter visitors. Today, the population has swelled to nearly 12,000, with hundreds of thousands of tourists arriving each season — an influx the island was never ecologically equipped to manage.

Despite a long-standing ban on construction, government offices, hotels, chalets, and private houses continue to mushroom illegally. Freshwater ponds, mangrove patches, native groves, lagoons, and sandstone boulder fields have been bulldozed or looted. Centuries-old coral rocks — some taller than a person — have been removed for construction, leaving the shoreline exposed to erosion and storm surges.

Overfishing has nearly emptied the surrounding waters, forcing restaurants and resorts to import fish from the mainland during peak season. Uncontrolled mass tourism has turned the island into a dumping ground for plastic and polythene waste, with little meaningful government clean-up or enforcement.

The result is a landscape where the natural defences that once protected the island are now dismantled, replaced by chaotic, profit-driven development that serves neither residents nor the environment.

A FAILURE TO MANAGE THE ISLAND'S MOST BASIC NEEDS

The island sits on an impenetrable shell-shaped bedrock, which traps rainwater underground — a fragile hydrological system that once sustained both people and wildlife. But with thousands of homes and an explosion of tourist facilities using toilets and washrooms, human waste now has nowhere to go. Sewage cannot seep into the sea; instead, it infiltrates shallow groundwater sources used for drinking, cooking, and bathing.

Unprocessed wastewater, agricultural chemicals, and insecticides are accumulating in the soil — a looming public-health disaster that the government has yet to address with any seriousness.

Meanwhile, erosion, saltwater intrusion, and rising high-tide levels have destroyed croplands, flooded homes,

and overwhelmed freshwater sources. Many areas that once supported natural vegetation can no longer grow crops at all.

For years, the island has needed real management, full-time conservation staff, enforcement, and planning. Instead, it has received fragmented policies, weak enforcement, short-term fixes, and political interference that prioritises tourism revenue over ecological survival.

A RARE POSITIVE STEP: THE NINE-MONTH VISITOR BAN

Despite decades of mismanagement, the government — specifically the Environmental Adviser — took a bold and commendable step in 2025 by imposing a nine-month ban on tourist entry from February to October. This decision, although long overdue, allowed the island's battered ecosystems a chance to breathe. And the results were visible:

Flourishing vegetation

Keora or screw pine (Pandanus), Raha Bon or Lumnitzera racemosa, Baen or Avicennia marina, Premna odorata, Bola or Hibiscus tiliaceus, Pipul or Thespesia populnea, Nishinda or Vitex trifolia, and other native plant species have rebounded noticeably in villages, fallows, open fields, and old coral-boulder zones.

Renewed life on the beaches

Tiny beach crabs — bubbler and soldier crabs — have returned, reshaping the sand with their intricate beadwork as the tide recedes. Their artwork was quite visible, as many tourist-empty beaches had excessive accumulations of shells, corals, and flotsam. Crabs were at home there too, while birds were busy munching on some of them.

Marine revival

On November 22, 2025, an Olive Ridley turtle nested earlier than usual — a hopeful sign that reduced human disturbance has improved beach conditions. One Ridley mother laid 115 eggs in a nest. These eggs were removed by environmental workers and deposited in artificial turtle nests at hatcheries within the premises of the Environment Department. Once hatched, all hatchlings will be released back to the sea after 60 to 100 days of laying.

Vegetation recovery on Cheradia

The southern two islands of the Cheradia cluster, usually overcrowded by tourists and noise, have shown the strongest ecological recovery due to the extended quiet period. There has been excessive

growth of native plants in the three disjunct islands jointly called Cheradia or Sera Dwip, representing the south-easternmost corner of the country.

These positive outcomes prove a simple truth: when humans step back, Saint Martin's heals itself.

The challenge now is whether the government will use this momentum to implement real, permanent protection — or allow the island to slide back towards irreversible damage.

PERSISTENT PROBLEMS: SIGNS OF CONTINUED NEGLIGENCE

Despite the ban, illegal construction still continues. Bright lights from shoreline resorts continue to disorient turtle hatchlings. The island's exploding stray dog population threatens nesting turtles, digs up eggs, and disrupts wildlife. Rubbish continues to pile up, despite cosmetic or half-hearted clean-up attempts.

These failures highlight a deeper issue: Saint Martin's still lacks a functioning management system. The island needs full-time conservation personnel, trained wildlife wardens, real enforcement authority, and science-based regulations — not seasonal restrictions and symbolic declarations.

WHAT MUST BE DONE IMMEDIATELY

The survival of Saint Martin's now depends on urgent, science-backed, enforceable action:

Environmental management

- Daily, mandatory trash collection and proper disposal following national and international protocols
- Ban all motorised vehicles, buggies, and motorcycles on beaches and near coral-bearing rock zones
- Prohibit boats from anchoring outside designated areas
- Impose a permanent ban on concrete construction, except essential jetties, cyclone shelters, and harbours
- Mandatory use of solar power and rainwater harvesting
- A mini desalination or mobile desalination plant must be established for supplying freshwater to the residents and the limited visitors
- All organic waste and sewage outputs must be treated and composted as fertilisers to be used by the islanders for manuring crop and vegetable fields
- Construct a proper harbour for fishing boat landing and for anchoring local boats — effectively a "cyclone shelter" for boats
- A wildlife/biodiversity volunteer force should be established by involving local

school and madrasah students, as well as unemployed youth, to work as vigilantes supporting environmental and wildlife managers

- Shopkeepers and villagers need to be trained in the judicious use of water, electricity, and in sorting trash into proper containers
- There must be strict prohibition on the utilisation of all forms of stones on the island and in the nearshore area
- Visitors must not be allowed to carry any object or article of Saint Martin's origin, and no shop should be permitted to sell items made of shells or corals
- Villagers need to be trained in making handicrafts and curios from limited quantities of dead shells and flotsam collected from designated beaches under strict control. These can be sold in specially marked stalls to be manned by local men or women. All products must bear a Saint Martin's seal of approval issued by the Environment Department
- To prevent wave surges and saline-water intrusion, a thick wall of Keora forest must be created along the island's boundary, with an inner layer of Nishinda (Vitex trifolia) plantation

- The government must not plant any exotic plant species outside private compounds. The Environment Department must immediately remove the coconut and Acacia saplings it has planted in the central of the three Cheradia islands
- All existing lagoon mouths should be excavated so that both tides can reach the furthest ends of each lagoon. There must not be any construction of buildings or other structures within the perimeters of the lagoon. This will prevent stagnant water from expelling foul odours and becoming breeding grounds for mosquitoes. It will also encourage good fish breeding, which in turn attracts birds

Wildlife protection

- Declare all three Cheradia islands a strict "No-Go Zone," except for researchers and authorised officials
- Ban all fishing within one kilometre of the island
- Remove or sterilise stray dogs; strictly regulate domestic dogs through registration, leashing, and vaccination
- Remove sandbags from turtle-nesting beaches and ensure 24/7 protection of turtle nests
- Ensure round-the-clock patrolling and wildlife monitoring by trained government staff

Sustainable tourism

- Enforce the 2,000-visitor daily limit as is currently done
- All residents, vendors, and researchers should have permanent passes to ensure movement to and from the island, Shahparir Dwip, or Teknaf
- All local boats must have Saint Martin's registration

- Continue the February–October closure annually — ideally from March to October. During this period, the poorer segment of islanders should be provided with subsidies, as is done for Hilsa fishers on the mainland

- Mandate QR-coded passes and approved tourist vessels only
- Ban night-time lights, noise, and beach activities
- Strictly prohibit harming or disturbing marine turtles, crabs, corals, birds, and other wildlife
- Ban polythene and aggressively limit single-use plastics
- For internal movement through designated brick-lined roads, solar-powered or battery-led three-wheelers may be permitted

THE TIME FOR HALF-MEASURES IS OVER

The people of Bangladesh — and future generations — deserve to inherit a living, breathing Saint Martin's Island, not a degraded skeleton of what it once was. While the nine-month visitor ban has produced measurable ecological benefits, it is not enough. Protecting this island requires political will, long-term planning, and a permanent, science-based management system backed by adequate funding and year-round enforcement.

Saint Martin's is not just a tourism spot. It is a national ecological heritage site. Its loss would be irreversible — and history will judge those who failed to act when action was still possible. The government must decide: Will it save Saint Martin's Island, or will it preside over its collapse? The window for saving this unique ecosystem is narrow — but it is still open.

Dr Reza Khan is a wildlife biologist and conservationist with over four decades of experience in wildlife research, zoo management, and biodiversity conservation in Bangladesh and the United Arab Emirates. He has worked extensively in wildlife rescue, sanctuary management, and community-based conservation initiatives.

Tourist facilities occupying the west beach of Saint Martin's Island, where marine turtles lay their eggs.