

We don't need zoos, only safe places for wild animals

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At the beginning of December, a lioness named Daisy slipped out of her cage at Mirpur National Zoo for a few hours, sparking panic and a rushed evacuation. Soon, zoo staff sedated the frightened animal when they spotted her, using an anaesthetic gun. Finally, she was coaxed back into her cage within the night. The zoo director, Dr Rafiqul Islam, hinted at foul play and launched an investigation after finding both iron gates and locks of the cage mysteriously open. Addressing how unlocked gates could have precipitated a far worse disaster had more animals escaped, an investigation committee has been set up

more sorrowful story. Dr Mohammad Ali Reza Khan, an eminent wildlife conservationist, explains that these signs point not to a sudden crisis but to prolonged deprivation. Chronic malnutrition, lack of proper veterinary attention, hard concrete flooring, and the absence of natural ground surfaces can cause long-term pain, restricted movement, and deformities in captive big cats. Over time, such conditions strip animals of strength, mobility, and dignity.

This case has opened our eyes to a cruel mismatch between law and practice. Bangladesh's 2019 Animal Welfare Act mandates humane care and enrichment for captive creatures,



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FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

to look into the breach. But the damage was long done. Daisy's escape has once again exposed decades of neglect behind those bars.

What the picture did not show

Even as early news swept over us, making many believe a rampaging predator was loose among the citizens, the truth remained largely unknown. Images of the emaciated lioness—ribs jutting, coat patchy, eyes dull—told a far

yet enforcement appears to be nearly nonexistent. Over several years, Mirpur Zoo's problems have been raised repeatedly by environmentalists and experts. Investigations have long catalogued the zoo's chronic neglect: underfunded feeding, inadequate veterinary care, tiny barren cages, and decaying facilities that reflect weak planning and reform efforts. Viewed this way, Daisy's escape looked less like rebellion and more like an animal's



Lioness Daisy escaped her enclosure at Mirpur National Zoo on December 5 and roamed the grounds for over two and a half hours before being tranquillised—revealing not a predator on the loose, but a frail, exhausted animal struggling to survive.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

desperate search for basic care.

The outdated model of animal captivation

Daisy's suffering is not an isolated lapse but a symptom of a deeply flawed system that treats wild animals as display objects rather than living beings. Zoos in Bangladesh evolved without a clear conservation mandate, gradually shifting towards revenue-driven exhibition while losing transparency and accountability. Animals were acquired, transferred, or replaced with little public record, and institutional memory itself became difficult to trace. As Dr Khan puts it, "There is no publicly verifiable inventory or historical record of animals in our zoos. Even their own institutional history cannot be found, leaving accountability virtually impossible."

Rubaiya Ahmad, an animal advocate and founder of Obhoyarmonno-Bangladesh Animal Welfare Foundation, warns that responsibility for captive animals in Bangladesh is fragmented—for example, Mirpur Zoo falls under the Livestock Department, while a safari park would be governed by wildlife authorities. Major welfare blind spots and legal contradictions result from this split. "Animals are not there for our entertainment," she stresses, adding

that captivity can be justified only when it forms part of a genuine conservation effort to breed and reintroduce endangered species, not to satisfy a visitor economy.

Learning from a rescue revolution

Not all zoos are beyond reform. In Islamabad, public pressure and a court ruling closed Marghazar Zoo and transformed its grounds into the Margalla Wildlife Rescue Centre, which now treats injured bears, orphaned pangolins, and even a malnourished tiger cub, before relocating those that can be rewilded. Elsewhere, high-profile failures have forced closures or legal action. The "Tiger King" exotic-cat park in the United States was ordered out of its current operators amid revelations of abuse and litigation. In Britain, the South Lakes Safari Zoo was branded by investigators as one of the worst examples of neglect. It closed after inspectors found animals missing, starving, or kept in wholly inadequate conditions.

These examples show two things: captivity can be reimagined as rescue and rehabilitation, and sustained public scrutiny can force institutions to choose care over display. For Bangladesh, reform must begin with structural

change. Dr Khan stresses that oversight cannot remain internal: "Zoos must be run and overseen by qualified zoological experts and relevant specialists, with transparent, verifiable records of every animal and clear institutional accountability; recurring irregularities at every step must be stopped."

Regular independent audits and an external oversight commission should inspect procurement, transfers, and staffing to prevent the "step-by-step irregularities" he describes. Political or personal, project-driven appointments must be ended, training and clinical capacity expanded, and sanctioning mechanisms put in place so failures are not simply forgotten. These measures would create real accountability and halt recurring governance failures.

From sanctuaries in Africa to wildlife reserves in Singapore, animals long confined have thrived once freed from chains. After all, wild animals already have a voice: in their eyes and bodies, they speak of suffering, and owing them respect and freedom is the least we can do.

Seeing Daisy stumble from her enclosure and recalling Katabon's mass deaths forces a clear conclusion: captivity in any form—in market stalls, pet hubs, or national zoos—must end. We cannot justify keeping wild or domestic animals behind bars for spectacle, profit, or pastime. Authorities should phase out displays, stop new imports, and redirect resources into rehabilitation, reputable sanctuaries, and scientifically managed rewilding where possible. This is a matter of moral responsibility, not convenience. If we truly value life, we should change our policy to stop treating animals as entertainment and restore their welfare and dignity.

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Who is robbing coastal communities of food sovereignty?

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The Ashtomashi Badh, or eight-month embankment, historically shaped the southwest coast of Bangladesh into an *ek fosholer desh*—a single-crop landscape—where peasants cultivated rice once a year using fresh water. Within these low-lying, embankment-protected deltaic areas, everyday life evolved around an integrated ecological system linking agriculture, fishing, and cattle rearing through shared grazing spaces. These grazing lands typically consisted of uncultivated *khajomi*, *charland*, and fallow paddy fields. Situated alongside rice fields, this grazing landscape sustained a form of embedded food sovereignty, combining large-scale rice cultivation with household-level cow milk production, and supporting the ideal of a largely "self-sufficient" rural household.

Before the climate-resilience adaptation regime took hold in the 1980s, everyday survival in the delta rested on a diversified subsistence economy. Households relied on domestic milk production and consumption, the cultivation of vegetables and rice, and fishing in shared waterbodies to meet their basic needs. These practices were guided by an agricultural ethic of subsistence embedded within relatively egalitarian social relations across the deltaic landscape. Household formation itself was closely tied to agricultural food sovereignty, providing a stable foundation for domestic nutrition and livelihood security.

From the 1970s and 1980s onwards, however, state and non-state actors increasingly framed the future of the delta through scientific and technical narratives that forecast widespread submergence under saline water. Over time, Bangladesh's southwest coast came to be designated as the country's "most vulnerable" region and a climate "hotspot", a dystopian framing that justified the introduction of large-scale sustainable development programmes. As this narrative gained traction, governing the climate hotspot in ways that could ensure long-term sustenance and survival emerged as a pressing political and policy challenge.

Within climate-resilience development frameworks, development brokers increasingly argued that saline-water intrusion into embankment-protected areas was inevitable, driven by recurring sea-level rise and embankment erosion. On this basis, they promoted a shift away from freshwater rice cultivation towards the expanded use of brackish-water species. During the 1980s and 1990s, major international donors actively prescribed and supported tiger-prawn aquaculture through a series of development projects in designated climate hotspots and highly vulnerable regions.



After saline-water intrusion, common grazing lands disappeared, leaving cattle without adequate pasture.

PHOTO: MD RAHAMATULLAH

These interventions particularly targeted low-lying deltaic communities portrayed as facing unavoidable saline intrusion due to climate change.

Consequently, from the late 1970s onwards, shrimp cultivation began to replace existing paddy fields across coastal Bangladesh. This transition was largely driven by local and external elites who possessed the financial capacity to invest in capital-intensive aquaculture operations. Under donor guidance, the Bangladesh government not only endorsed this shift but also provided administrative and institutional support to those establishing brackish-water aquaculture, promoting it as a sustainable and climate-resilient development pathway.

Yet the expansion of shrimp cultivation was neither smooth nor consensual. A substantial body of scholarship documents how land acquisition for shrimp farming frequently involved coercion and violence. Local villagers often resisted attempts by powerful actors to convert freshwater paddy lands into saline aquaculture zones, leading

to prolonged conflicts and bloodshed. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, violence became a defining feature of land grabbing for shrimp cultivation in the Bengal Delta.

Scholars have commonly identified the primary agents behind these forceful land appropriations as the so-called "shrimp mafia". This raises a critical question: what legitimised the violent transformation of fertile agricultural land into saline aquaculture ponds? The answer lies in the climate-adaptive regimes and climate-resilient livelihood models imposed during this period. A class of shrimp cultivators consolidated power in the delta under the justification of climate adaptation, aided by donor-backed development programmes and direct state support.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, deltaic communities have found themselves caught within what is widely described as a climate-adaptive regime—one that structurally reorganises land and livelihoods around export-oriented brackish-water aquaculture, primarily shellfish. Development brokers frame this "blue revolution" as a rational

response to climate change, arguing that saline intrusion into embankment-protected habitats, paddy fields, and grazing lands is unavoidable. In practice, this process has de-peasantised the area, concentrating land ownership, displacing subsistence-based livelihoods, and preparing coastal territories for integration into global supply chains.

Saline intrusion, promoted as a climate-resilience strategy, has had devastating consequences for both local agriculture and common grazing lands. As the commons disappeared, domestic cattle rearing and household-level cow milk production for local consumption sharply declined.

In saline-affected areas such as Munshiganj Union, weekly markets continue to operate, yet networks of local producers and consumers trading domestically produced cow's milk have virtually vanished. The limited domestic milk that is still produced often reflects declining quality, a visible indicator of the wider impacts of salinity on livestock and fodder.

Similarly, in village markets near forest adjacent zones, most vegetables are now

transported from the mature delta. Local vegetable growing lands, paddy fields, and grazing areas have been degraded by saline intrusion, leaving households without kitchen gardens or the capacity for large-scale cultivation. Soil degradation—driven by climate-adaptation pressures and routinely justified as an unavoidable response to climate change—has pushed food production out of local control. As a result, vegetable prices in the southwest coast are significantly higher than in the mature delta.

Across coastal Bangladesh, brackish-water aquaculture is steadily dismantling agro-based household economies and eroding food sovereignty. Communities are losing access to grazing lands, domestic milk production, and the social practices that once sustained household-making. What is presented as climate resilience has, in reality, transformed everyday survival into a struggle against dispossession.

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