



# INSIDE LAWACHARA

## Beauty thrives amid mounting threats

Market, roads and rising crowds raise fresh conservation concerns

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At dawn, when the mist hangs low over the canopy and the first call of the gibbon echoes through the trees, Lawachara feels untouched by the world beyond its borders. Filtered sunlight falls on damp forest trails, butterflies drift between fig and chapalish leaves, and for a moment the hum of the city seems impossibly far away.

Yet this fragile calm masks a growing tension. Lawachara is one of Bangladesh's most accessible tropical rainforests, drawing thousands who seek respite in its greenery. But accessibility comes at a cost.

The question now is whether Lawachara can balance tourism with true conservation. Without stricter enforcement of speed limits, clear land demarcation and sustainable visitor management, this "piece of paradise" risks losing the very wilderness that makes it extraordinary.

For now, the forest still stands, breathing, whispering and waiting, its fate tied to how carefully we choose to tread beneath its trees.

Located in Kamalganj upazila of Moulvibazar, about 200 kilometres northeast of Dhaka and just 8 kilometres from Srimangal, the park was declared a reserve forest in 1917 and officially became a national park in 1996. Once known as West Bhanugach Reserve Forest, it remains part of the greater Bhanugach forest area.

Second only to the Sundarbans in ecological significance, Lawachara hosts around 460 species. Within its 1,250 hectares live 167 species of trees, 26 species of mammals, 29 reptiles, six amphibians, 246 birds and more than 160 species of butterflies.

Among its most iconic residents is the critically endangered western hoolock gibbon, locally known as the uluk, one of the country's last remaining ape species. Capped langurs, slow lorises, barking deer, fishing cats, hornbills, pythons and cobras also inhabit the forest.

The canopy is diverse, with fig, chapalish, teak, amla, bahera and kadam trees dominating the landscape. A once famous African teak tree, locally dubbed the "chlorophyll tree", collapsed during a storm in 2005, adding to the park's folklore.

Researcher Sabit Hasan said, "In my latest survey, 48 primates from 13 gibbon families were found in the Lawachara forest. However, there is room for more apes to thrive in Lawachara. Proper habitat management initiatives for apes in this semi-evergreen habitat are essential."

He said the population density of apes in

placing increasing pressure on the sanctuary.

Railways, roads and power lines pass through the forest, fragmenting habitat and creating daily risks for wildlife. Campaigns have been conducted on the issue, but vehicles continue to run at previous speeds. Wild animals are often crushed under vehicle wheels.

Swapan Deb Sajal, director of the Wildlife Service Foundation, a voluntary organisation for the conservation and rescue of wild animals, said many people are concerned about the death of wildlife in Lawachara. "The speed limit of 20 kilometres is not being observed on the road. If it had been accepted, many animals would have been saved," he said.

Although the boundary of the Lawachara reserved forest has not been fully marked, much of the park's land has been encroached upon over the past 29 years.

On October 24, 2017, the boundary demarcation process began in Lawachara National Park in the presence of the then former Assistant Conservator of Forests of the Wildlife Department, Tabibur Rahman. However, the process was later stopped



for unknown reasons.

Lawachara Range Officer of the Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Department Nazmul Haque said it is not possible to determine the boundaries due to the lack of a survey. "Since the boundaries of the area being vacated are not defined, I cannot even drive a stake in it," he said.

Visitor management has also been inconsistent. Recently, car parking was banned at the entrance of the park, but was later reintroduced.

Matin Mia, in charge of the ticket counter at the national park, said since the Forest Department banned car parking, the sale of vehicle parking tickets was stopped, but it was later reintroduced.

Shamsul Haque, general secretary of Lawachara People's Forum, said the arrival of numerous tourists and vehicles every day, along with the resulting noise and smoke, is hindering the reproduction, movement and search for food



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of wildlife.

However, he questioned the decision-making process. "This decision should not have been taken in a hurry. As a former member of the Lawachara National Park Co-Management Committee, I think that if the decision had been taken after discussing with all the stakeholders, it would have been more effective and acceptable. Everyone could have benefited from it," he said.

A market has been operating inside the national park for almost a decade. Environmentalists and forest officials say it has become a major threat to the forest. The natural environment of the wildlife and forest area is being disrupted due to the crowd of tourists, noise from vehicles and commercial activities.

Local environmentalists and forest officials said the market was held inside the forest with the permission of the Forest Department.

A former member of the park's co-management committee said the shops were built around 2014 and that most were constructed irregularly. They would not have been built if the Divisional Forest officer of the time had not given approval. In most cases, these shops were allotted by the powerful, he said.

Swapan Deb Sajal, director of the Bangladesh Wildlife Care Foundation, said so many tourists come because of permission from the Forest Department that wildlife runs away in fear.

According to the Forest Department, 222 wildlife were rescued in Srimangal in 2024, of which 104 were dead. Along with the Forest Department, the Bangladesh Wildlife Care Foundation and Stand for Our Endangered Wildlife play an important role in rescue work.

A forest officer of the Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Department, who did not want to be named, said setting up shops inside the reserved forest was not right and is destroying the natural environment of the forest and wildlife.

Saju Marchiang, publication secretary of the Khasi Social Council, said Lawachara National Park is already under threat. Over time, the forest is

decreasing, tourists are increasing and commercial activities are expanding. Having a market inside the forest for a decade is not acceptable at all, he said.

Hatim Ali, a resident of Lawachara Punji, said he set up a shop in Punji in 1964 and later had to change location several times. Currently, he has been asked to sit outside in front of the gate.

He claimed his shop was set up by the Forest Department and is legal, and alleged that other shops have been taken over by influential people.

Sohel Shyam, founder of Stand for Our Endangered Wildlife, said plastic waste is spreading throughout the forest because of these shops. If the shops remain open for a few more days, the forest and wildlife will be filled with plastic, putting them in serious danger, he said.

Abul Kalam, divisional conservator of forests of the Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Department, confirmed that car parking was stopped in Lawachara by order of the ministry.

He said that after a meeting in the ministry on September 14, various instructions were issued for Lawachara and Sathkhira forests. A total of eight instructions were issued for the protection of the environment and wildlife of Lawachara, and stopping parking was one of them. The main purpose was to protect wildlife and reduce tourists, he said, adding that parking was later reintroduced after considering various issues.

Nurul Mohaimin Milton, general secretary of the Moulvibazar unit of the Bangladesh Environmental Journalists Association, said active wildlife rescue efforts, awareness campaigns and research initiatives are generating data and public interest, both essential for long-term protection.

The involvement of local communities, researchers and voluntary organisations reflects broader recognition that preserving Lawachara is a shared responsibility, he added.

"If coordinated action continues, combining stricter enforcement, scientific management and community dialogue, Lawachara can evolve into a model where tourism and conservation coexist. With sustained commitment, this rainforest sanctuary may not only endure but emerge stronger, ensuring that its gibbons continue to call and its canopy continues to shelter life for generations to come," he added.



Lawachara is higher than in other forests.

Shyamal Debbarma, who is involved in several studies on primate species and also works as a tour guide, said despite many problems in Lawachara, the beauty of the forest continues to attract people.

That attraction, conservationists warn, is

