

WITHOUT A BANGLADESH WILDLIFE SERVICE, OUR WILDLIFE HAS NO FUTURE



Often misunderstood as the “Mechhobagh,” the endangered fishing cat is a vital nocturnal wetland species deserving protection rather than prejudice. PHOTO: STAR



The Burmese red serow, a rare goat-antelope locally known as “bon chhago,” in Baraiyadhala National Park in Chattogram’s Mirsharai upazila. PHOTO: KAMRUL HASAN

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On March 3, as the world marked World Wildlife Day, Bangladesh was reminded of a structural question: can biodiversity survive under a revenue-oriented forest governance model? This article examines why institutional reform—not sentiment—is now essential.

A STRUCTURAL GOVERNANCE PROBLEM, NOT A SENTIMENTAL ONE

Bangladesh is not facing a sentimental conservation crisis. It is facing a structural governance problem.

For decades, our forests have been administered under a model historically shaped by revenue forestry—timber extraction, plantation establishment, and regulated cutting cycles. That model made sense in colonial and

reports submitted to the Convention on Biological Diversity recognise forest degradation and biodiversity decline. Global assessments by the Food and Agriculture Organization distinguish between natural forest loss and plantation expansion—a distinction that matters deeply for wildlife. Increasing plantation cover does not necessarily mean increasing habitat quality.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts and central Sal forests, natural forest mosaics have been replaced in many areas by plantations. Peer-reviewed research across South Asia consistently shows that wildlife diversity is lower in monoculture plantations than in native forests.

ENCROACHMENT, CONVERSION, AND GOVERNANCE



A crocodile caught by locals in Manikganj Sadar upazila was handed over to the Forest Department on November 8, 2025. PHOTO: STAR

forest landscapes are inhabited or used by indigenous and forest-dependent communities. International evidence demonstrates that secure tenure rights and participatory management reduce deforestation and conflict. Conservation cannot succeed without social legitimacy.

Transparency through measurable indicators. Annual wildlife population audits, publicly available forest cover change data, and open reporting systems would strengthen public trust and institutional credibility.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM REQUIRES POLITICAL WILL

Creating a new institution is not a magic solution. Bureaucratic expansion without political will can produce fragmentation. A Bangladesh Wildlife Service would succeed only if insulated from patronage politics and granted genuine enforcement autonomy. Institutional reform must be accompanied by cultural reform.

FORESTS AS ECOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

There is also a broader philosophical shift required. Forests are not merely carbon stocks or timber reserves. They are flood buffers, cyclone shields, climate regulators, and biodiversity reservoirs. Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. Mangroves reduce cyclone impact. Sal forests stabilise soil and regulate microclimates. Biodiversity supports pollination, pest control, and agricultural resilience.

Ecology teaches us about trophic cascades: when apex predators decline, entire food webs destabilise. Remove top carnivores, herbivore dynamics shift, vegetation structure changes, and erosion intensifies. Wildlife conservation is not sentimental tiger photography; it is system stability engineering.

A STRUCTURAL CORRECTION, NOT AN ADMINISTRATIVE LUXURY

Bangladesh does not lack environmental laws. It lacks institutional alignment with ecological reality.

If forest governance remains structurally oriented towards revenue generation, wildlife will continue to decline quietly—even while plantation statistics improve. Climate vulnerability, habitat fragmentation, and human-wildlife conflict are converging pressures. Reform delayed today may make restoration impossible tomorrow.

A Bangladesh Wildlife Service is not an administrative luxury. It is a structural correction.

If we are serious about ecological security, the question is no longer whether we can afford to create a Wildlife Service. The question is whether we can afford not to.

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Human–elephant conflict has intensified as habitats shrink and corridors disappear. PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh should consider establishing a Bangladesh Wildlife Service (BWS)—a statutory, specialised body focused exclusively on biodiversity conservation.

early post-colonial periods when wood supply and state revenue were dominant goals. But ecology does not operate on ledger books. A forest is not a timber warehouse. It is a living system of soil fungi, insects, shrubs, seed dispersers, predators, wetlands, and hydrological networks. Remove enough of that web, and what remains may look green on satellite images but function poorly as an ecosystem.

The issue is not dedication. It is design.

THE DUAL MANDATE DILEMMA

Bangladesh’s Forest Department, under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, carries a dual mandate: to conserve biodiversity while also generating forest revenue. These objectives can often conflict with one another.

Plantation forestry—often monocultures of fast-growing species such as acacia, eucalyptus, teak, or rubber—may increase canopy cover statistically, but they rarely replicate the structural complexity of natural forests. A monoculture plantation does not replace a mixed evergreen forest ecologically.

Official assessments already acknowledge this challenge. National

VULNERABILITIES

Encroachment compounds the problem. Investigative reports by Transparency International Bangladesh and national newspapers have documented illegal occupation and conversion of forest lands. Forest governance remains vulnerable to political pressure, land speculation, and opaque transfers. When forest land becomes negotiable, wildlife habitat becomes disposable.

The Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, illustrate the tension between development and conservation. Industrial activities, shipping routes carrying hazardous cargo, pollution, and climate stress intersect in this fragile mangrove ecosystem. The 2014 oil spill exposed vulnerabilities in regulatory preparedness and emergency response. The mangrove forest protects millions from cyclones, yet it remains under pressure from competing economic priorities.

WILDLIFE DECLINE IS MEASURABLE

Wildlife indicators reflect this systemic strain. Bangladesh once hosted thriving populations of large mammals such as tigers, leopards, and elephants. Today, the Bengal tiger population in

the Sundarbans remains small and vulnerable. Human–elephant conflict in Sherpur–Jamalpur, Cox’s Bazar, and the Hill Tracts has intensified as habitat shrinks and corridors disappear. Numerous species are now nationally threatened according to the IUCN Red List of Bangladesh.

This is not simply failure. It is a mismatch between ecological complexity and institutional structure.

WHY WILDLIFE GOVERNANCE REQUIRES SPECIALISATION

Wildlife conservation requires specialised ecosystem management: maintaining habitat connectivity, securing genetic corridors, regulating invasive species, balancing predator–prey dynamics, integrating wetlands, and mitigating human–wildlife conflict. These tasks demand ecological expertise, long-term monitoring, and landscape-level planning. They cannot be secondary functions under a timber-oriented administrative model.

Globally, countries facing similar pressures have evolved their institutional structures. India operates separate wildlife wings within its forest system and maintains dedicated wildlife research institutions. The United States separates its Fish and Wildlife Service from the Forest Service. Kenya established the Kenya Wildlife Service as a specialised agency focused on wildlife protection and protected area management. The lesson is clear: biodiversity governance requires institutional specialisation.

Bangladesh should consider establishing a Bangladesh Wildlife Service (BWS)—a statutory, specialised body focused exclusively on biodiversity conservation.

WHAT A BANGLADESH WILDLIFE SERVICE SHOULD DO

Such a service would require several foundational pillars.

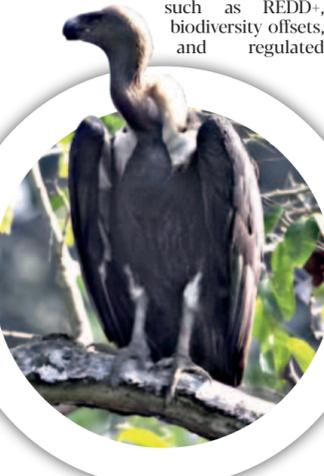
Legal clarity and enforcement authority. The Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act 2012 exists, but enforcement remains uneven. A wildlife service should have dedicated investigative capacity to address wildlife trafficking, coordinate with customs and border forces, and prosecute wildlife crime effectively.

Science-based ecological planning. Wildlife corridors—such as those

linking Teknaf with the Hill Tracts—require landscape-scale GIS mapping, long-term population monitoring, and habitat restoration strategies. Conservation must move beyond isolated protected areas towards connected ecosystems.

Land transparency and accountability. Digitised forest boundary demarcation using satellite verification should be mandatory. Publicly accessible forest land registries would reduce opacity and limit arbitrary conversion. Independent land audits, potentially coordinated with anti-corruption authorities, could strengthen accountability.

Financial independence. If conservation agencies rely on timber income, incentives become distorted. A Wildlife Service should be funded through national budget allocations, climate finance mechanisms such as REDD+, biodiversity offsets, and regulated



Vultures are declining silently. PHOTO: MD REZAUL KARIM CHOWDHURY

eco-tourism revenue—ring-fenced exclusively for conservation.

Specialised recruitment. Wildlife biology, conservation genetics, landscape ecology, and community conflict mitigation are professional disciplines. Recruitment systems must prioritise ecological science, not solely silviculture or timber management. Community integration. Many