

# Scuba Diving Institute in Bangladesh: A New Dimension of Ecotourism

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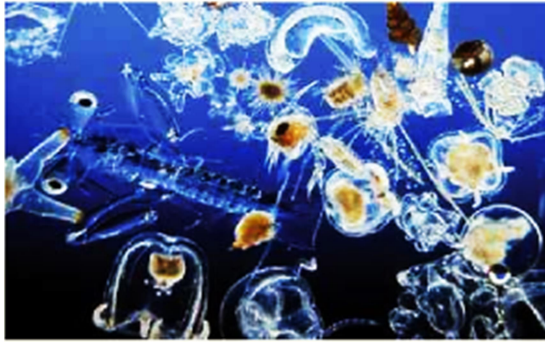
## Blue Economy

The definition of Blue Economy, according to the World Bank, is the "Sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystems." It implies having an economic growth plan that utilizes ocean resources while also maintaining a sustainable approach to the marine environment. For many decades, Bangladesh has utilized resources from its rivers, lakes and oceans. But as human behavior changes because of the lack of natural resources, it is now vital to explore the concept of the Blue Economy. From the multisectoral use of marine sectors, the two already developed areas that contribute to Bangladesh's economic development are fisheries and tourism. With some advancement, we can flourish these sectors without any doubt. But for the sustainable development of marine

living resources, the most critical factor is using environmentally friendly fishing methods and protecting the microorganisms like planktons and the conservation of coral reefs. Keeping this in mind, the ecotourism in the fisheries hotspots should also get priorities to promote the blue economy.

## Planktons and their Necessity

It is imperative to conserve the tiniest microscopic living things in the ocean for a Blue Economy Strategy to succeed. These tiny creatures are the foundation of the entire marine ecosystem and food chain. They are called planktons or primary producers. They are often microscopic or less than one inch in length, but they could also be larger species like crustaceans and jellyfish. Planktons use sunlight, nutrients, carbon dioxide, and water to produce oxygen and nutrients for other organisms



through photosynthesis. With 71% of the Earth covered by the ocean, phytoplankton produces up to 50% of the oxygen we breathe. Without planktons, there would be few living organisms on this planet. Planktonic organisms are food to a vast range of animals from barnacles, sea squirts, large fish and whales, for example, the whale shark that only feeds on planktons. Another critical aspect of the entire ecosystem is corals; they are an essential part of the process. Many corals, such as soft corals and gorgonians, depend exclusively on phytoplankton as their primary food. So as you see, without these tiny organisms, many species would not survive on this planet.

### **Coral Conservation**

There is no doubt that the world we live in today and the habits we humans have developed are not conducive to the coexistence of the environment and ourselves. Conservation of marine life is essential to the survival of our future generation because everything is interlinked to each other. Not many realize that the world oceans and lakes which occupy about 75% of the Earth's surface are the primary sources for the sustainability of all living creatures on this planet. Therefore, it is essential to safeguard this vital aspect of survival. Corals, like planktons, are also the foundations of all of our aquatic life. Corals rely on planktons to survive, and all marine life relies on corals for their survival. Surprisingly, even in this day and age, many people believe that corals are just a piece of rock. But that is



far from the truth. Corals are living organisms living in colonies, which provide food and shelter for most of the marine ecosystem. Corals also protect coastal erosions and create barriers to protect us from tides and waves.

### **Coral Bleaching**

If the coral system collapses, all marine life will perish. This includes all the fishes, the ecosystem related to the fishery and the economy itself. In the photo, the coral on the left is a colorful, healthy red coral. The one on the right shows the gradual death of the same coral, which has turned white. This is also called coral bleaching. When this happens, the fish cannot survive because the ecosystem dies with the death of the coral. When a coral reef is healthy, there is always much fish, but the opposite is the case when the corals die.





## Significance of St. Martins Island



St. Martins needs to be protected not only because of tourism but also because of its rich diversity of marine life. Promoting and protecting this tiny island may not seem to be a big deal, but the process will create new thinking within the community of Bangladesh. St. Martins is the only coral island we have so far. It has a very diverse marine life such as; 68 species of corals, 234 species of fishes, five species of dolphins, 151 species of algae, 191 species of molluscs, 40 species of crabs, etc. St. Martins is also the breeding ground for sea turtles. All these are essential to the survival of the fragile ecosystem in the region. However, many of these animals are now on the verge of extinction.

As explained before, corals are a vital part of the marine ecosystem. Without planktons and corals, the lifeline of the ocean and marine life will perish. For

years, traditionally, our local economy flourished on fishing revenues. There is absolutely no doubt that the amount and variety of fish we harvested only a decade ago have reduced significantly compared to the past. These biodiversities are slowly being lost due to manufactured pollution, non-sustainable overfishing, unregulated construction, tourism activities, and the destruction of coral reefs. Another aspect to consider is the enormous potential growth of the local economy.

Marine ecotourism is a new concept within generation Z. This generation Z, who are now entering the workforce, are more conscious about protecting the environment and are faster to adapt to sustainable development concepts. Bangladesh has the world's longest unbroken beach. The unexplored marine life and the untouched underwater world can be a massive attraction to the dive

industry. Diving generates revenue from the sport and generates and develops a slew of other associated industries in the region. So, we must take a much closer look to protect St. Martins more sustainably.

### **Ecotourism: Prospect of Scuba Diving**



The Bay of Bengal is the world's hotbed of tropical cyclones and is also vulnerable to climate change. So, regular study on marine life is significant for their sustainable development. Recreational scuba diving not only opens up a lot of sectors for economic growth but, at the same time, promotes the sustainability and preservation of marine life. Scuba diving is a tool for scientific research based on visual observation of the underwater world. Scientific divers are trained to maintain safe scuba diving practices while using various equipment to survey and sample marine life and the physical environment. A professional, safe and international diving institute based on the Professional Association of Dive Instructors (PADI) or Technical Diving International (TDI)-SCUBA Diving International (SDI) requirements can be established in Bangladesh as a maritime nation. The institute might envision incorporating a "Centre for excellence" for all underwater developments, including job creation and training for future generations.

This theme is based on five levels:

- > Economic development of the diving sector
- > Promote and develop all the underwater sectors
- > Promote marine environment protection

- > Establish an underwater education school consisting of recreational scuba diving, commercial diving, marine environmental studies, and marine economic development programs

- > Create platforms to introduce commercial business opportunities in the underwater sector

Once a well-planned international diving curriculum from PADI and TDI-SDI is in place, the impact on the local fishery, tourism, local economy, geopolitics and international financing prospects will be noticeable. The other important aspect of this diving institute would be to encourage students and professors to do more research on the marine environment in the coastal areas of Bangladesh. It is also possible to attract international funding's for these research projects.

However, all of these diving operations in Bangladesh must be regulated by proper international diving agencies such as PADI, TDI-SDI etc. It will reduce the risk of accident as any diving accident involving a foreigner will trigger an immediate negative response from the international community. This increase of divers will bring international visibility, attracting other tourism activities like snorkeling, kayaking, hiking, environmental tourism, etc. It will also help open local businesses like hotels, resorts, restaurants, local cottage industries etc. Economic growth based on marine tourism primarily focusing on recreational diving has been very successful in Egypt, UAE, Qatar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Maldives, India, the Bahamas, Mauritius etc. The same model can be applied in Bangladesh too.

Due to the unexplored and untouched dive locations in St. Martins, Kaptai lake and other locations in Bangladesh, this sector could quickly turn into an attractive diving tourist destination like

India, Maldives, Myanmar etc. The best location for diving in Bangladesh will be St. Martins Island. Hence, it is essential to preserve and protect the island and its marine life. Many experts are urging to declare St. Martins Island as an MPA, but still have an option to open it for sustainable ecotourism.

According to IUCN Protected Area Categories System, there are total 2 (two) types of MPA assigning management categories and governance types. One is strict Nature Reserve Protected Areas that are strictly set aside to protect biodiversity and possibly geological/geomorphological features, where human visitation, use and impacts are strictly controlled and limited to ensure the protection of the conservation values.

Another is Wilderness Areas that are generally larger and less strictly protected from human visitation than the category Strict Natural Reserve. Although not usually subject to mass tourism, they may be open to limited people prepared for self-reliant travel such as on foot or by boat. So, we can choose an option where tourism and protection of nature will be performed simultaneously as St. Martins Island generates around 708.0 m US dollars per annum in the tourism sector alone.

***Writer; Edbar Zaman is Currently Working as a Financial Controller in Germany and also as a PADI, TDI and SDI Diving Instructor Worldwide.***