

'Overtourism' in Cox's Bazar: Strategies beyond perceptions

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I was really shocked when I first noticed the statistics revealed in a report of the Business Standard titled "Cox's Bazar: An idyll losing itself to unplanned urbanization" on 20 September 2021. Cox's Bazar, a district located in south-eastern Bangladesh, receives approximately one crore tourists annually. The area is also home to approximately 2 lakh residents and nearly 1 thousand local and foreign aid officials who work at the Rohingya refugee camps. According to industry insiders, the district town has seen a proliferation of at least 520 hotels, motels, guest houses, and cottages. With over 20,000 rooms available to house more than 120,000 guests daily, the annual resident capacity at the present developmental condition in Cox's Bazar is almost four crore tourists.

If we see, even the current state of Cox's Bazar is far from ideal with the existing tourist numbers. The pressure of 1 crore tourists is already taking a toll on the environment, leading to marine pollution, environmental degradation, traffic congestion, and strain on infrastructure and resources. Now, imagine the situation if the number of tourists visiting Cox's Bazar were to increase four-fold as per the unplanned developmental capacity. The consequences could be disastrous and could cause irreversible damage to the ecosystem, economy, and local population.

However, we have the report on present development and their capacity. Is there any survey on how many tourists should actually allow in Cox's Bazar annually to keep the city in ideal condition, or what is the actual maximum tourist capacity of Cox's Bazar to keep it environmentally friendly?

The future of Cox's Bazar hangs in the balance, and we must take immediate action to prevent its collapse. The number of visitors to Cox's Bazar may vary yearly, but we must consider the

worst-case scenario and prepare accordingly. We cannot afford to wait until it's too late. The time to act is now!

According to authorities, Cox's Bazar town produces 145 tonnes of sewage daily, but the municipality can only manage 20 tonnes. As a result, the excess waste from hotels and motels is released directly into rivers and the sea, leading to pollution. The influx of tourists exacerbates the problem, which increases waste generation. In 2019, the High Court (HC) banned construction within 300 meters of the seashore, but many tourist accommodations have disregarded the directive. Several hotels and motels have been built on prohibited land without prior planning. The construction process may lead to soil erosion and sedimentation, harming marine life by reducing their habitat and food sources. Not only that, such development activities generate a large amount of waste, including plastics, sewage, and chemicals. These pollutants enter the sea and affect marine ecosystems. In addition, the increased traffic of boats and ships can lead to oil spills and other accidental discharges.

On a recent visit to Cox's Bazar, I observed that the speed boat number in the kolatoli, laboni, and sugandha is relatively high, which not only participating pollution through excess sound and chemical discharge but is also very risky for the visitors during roaming in the water.

The above are some examples of the critical condition of Cox's Bazar. Actually, at this rush moment of multiple sources of marine pollution, environmental protection is essential to maintain a pollution-free city and, ultimately, our resourceful sea. Tourists often use plastic items such as water bottles, straws, and food containers, which can end up littering the beach. The local authorities should enforce regulations that protect the environment, such as prohibiting the disposal of waste and pollutants into the sea. Additionally, they can encourage using eco-friendly products near the beach markets and even within a particular area as a primary step. Though beach cleaning and dustbins in the beach area impressed me this time but it should be done intensively. On that issue, local authorities, hotel owners, and tourists can work together to ensure sustainable tourism and a sustainable sea.

The other vital issue, 'Eco-friendly tourism,' is a hot topic now. Many organizations, GOs, and NGOs are funding that issue both nationally and internationally. Nowadays, there is a heavy number of scientists, researchers, and social workers are seen visiting Cox's Bazar. This indicates a lot of work conducted in the Cox's Bazar area, but the output is not very significant. So, fund and output monitoring with evaluation should be confirmed privately and governmentally.

Frankly, maritime tourism in Bangladesh is plagued by numerous gaps and challenges, ranging from information/data gaps to policy and implementation issues. Scientific information on pollution hotspots and pollution attenuation still needs to be improved, and there is only fragmentary primary data, especially on tourist-based pollution. A complete data set should be collected to develop a proper management strategy.

Policies and regulations also need to be improved in Cox's Bazar. There needs to be stronger networking among policymakers. In Cox's Bazar, laws and management systems are

deteriorating, and there is blindness to laws and regulations among the people. Causes should be identified why there is a wide gap in collaboration between government and non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, the existing law implementation issues also contribute to the problem, with a lack of trained workforce and awareness and financial problems which need to be considered properly. Finally, there needs to be more reporting and publicity of pollution status to the public through TV channels. Gaps in information, policy, implementation, and reporting are significant challenges that must be addressed to control marine pollution in Bangladesh effectively.

It is worth noting that the government of Bangladesh has taken some measures to regulate the development of the tourism industry in Cox's Bazar. For instance, the Cox's Bazar Development Authority (CBDA) has been working to develop a master plan to ensure sustainable tourism development in the region. The government has also introduced a grading system to classify hotels and motels based on their facilities and services. But measures should be taken rapidly; otherwise, things will be more complex to control in the future. We have to consider sustainability and responsible tourism practices to ensure that the benefits of tourism are maximized while minimizing negative impacts on the environment and local communities.

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