

Popular leisure destination Saint Martin at risk, tourism in danger

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Dhaka : Country's popular leisure destination Saint Martin is currently threatened by unrestricted tourism. Facing at least 20 different types of dangers over the last two decades, the only coral island of Bangladesh is now moving to limit tourism, which, on the other hand, has become a matter of grave worry for the nation's tourism stakeholders.

Due to overtourism, the island's soil, water and air are becoming toxic while the temperature remains at least three degrees Celsius higher than other parts of the country, according to a research paper in a scientific journal named 'Environmental Advance' published on April 15, 2024.

Overtourism has also led to increase in salinity, deforestation, pollution, sea level rise, turtle abode destruction, plastic usage, fresh water crisis,

sea erosion from tidal waves in the island. Though the local population on the island is 10,000, several hundred thousand visitors stay at Saint Martin throughout the year.

Another gruesome worry has added to the list of dangers in the last two months. Besides coconut and kewra trees, all other trees are in the verge of extinction. However, even 300 coconut trees have died because of some white flies in the last few months.

Furthermore, according to another research paper on the island in international journal 'Ocean Science' published in September 2020, Saint Martin can become completely stripped of coral by 2045. Also, the island is home to different types of wildlife, of which, the olive-turtles are nearly extinct, while several bird species are currently endangered.

In August 2020, on behalf of the government, research organisation Centre for Environmental and Geographical Information Services was appointed to conduct a survey at Saint Martin to save the island's biodiversity, which found-"It is not ideal in any way to allow tourists to stay on the island at night. Also, it would not be right to allow more than 1,250 tourists a day on the island during winter".

The department of environment announced Saint Martin an Ecologically Critical Area back in 1999 to protect the island's biodiversity. Lastly, on January 4, 2023, according to the wildlife (conservation and security) act, the environment ministry declared 1,743 sqkm of area in the Bay of Bengal adjoining the Saint Martin's island as reserved area.

To this effect, on January 2, 2021, the environment department issued a public notice, according to which, the government imposed 14 restrictions at the island, including prohibition on holding barbecue dinners with bright lights on, shops, collecting stones and riding any types of vehicles including motorbikes on the beach of the Saint Martin's island.



Flocks of tourists arriving at Saint Martin, leading to overtourism that hampers the island's environmental balance

However, the public notice was neither implemented nor monitored later due to the pressure of tourism stakeholders of the island and the country. The government stepped back from all the aforementioned positions over pressure from tourism companies and tour operators.

Limiting tourist movement

After the current interim government took charge, the matter of taking an initiative to restrict tourism on the Saint Martin's island arose again. It has been decided to limit tourist movement and stay on the Saint Martin's island for the next four months (from November 2024 to February 2025) during a meeting of the advisers of the interim government recently.

The Chief Adviser's Deputy Press Secretary Apurba Jahangir announced the the development while addressing a press briefing at Foreign Service Academy on October 22. Under the new policy, tourists will be able to visit the island during the day in November, however, will not be able to stay the night.

Meanwhile in December 2024 and January 2025, they would be able to stay the night in the island, however, not over than 2,000 tourists a day would be allowed to visit. Afterwards, in February 2025, tourists would be banned from visiting the island altogether.

Other ways around as per stakeholders

Members of the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh (TOAB) called for the reversal of the interim government's decision to restrict the number of tourists and to limit their stay on the Saint Martin's Island. They stressed that the move would largely damage the tourism sector of the country as well as the Saint Martin's Island.

At a press conference held at the National Press Club on October 24, Md Rafeuzzaman, President, TOAB, said, "Despite our strong objections, the government has decided to restrict overnight stays and tourist visits to Saint Martin's Island. This will severely harm the tourism industry and leave local entrepreneurs in a difficult position."

He added, "Around 10,000 people live on Saint Martin, all of whom rely on tourism. If tourism stops, they will lose their livelihoods." According to the tourism stakeholders, there are other ways around to save the island's biodiversity and environmental balance, apart from, banning tourists altogether.

At the press conference, TOAB called for maintaining environmental balance on Saint Martin's Island by strictly banning single-use plastics, while allowing unrestricted tourism including overnight stays. The association also urged the government to create an alternative travel route from Teknaf to the island.

Ayaz Uddin, a resident of Saint Martin's Island and a student of BUET, who attended the press conference, said, "The education rate on our island is still below 20 per cent. The livelihood of the people depends on tourism mostly." He further added, the current travel restrictions and procedures are overly complicated and will definitely deter tourists.

While addressing the conference, Shiblul Azam Qureshi, Former President, TOAB, claimed, "Destroying livelihoods to protect the island's environment is unacceptable." As per him, pollution can be controlled through modern management. "We can ban the use of plastics and emphasise solar power to replace generators on the island," he suggested.