

Government sets 12 eco-tourism rules for Saint Martin's Island

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Dhaka: In an effort to safeguard Bangladesh's only coral island, the government has issued a comprehensive set of eco-tourism rules for Saint Martin's Island, aiming to preserve its fragile ecosystem while allowing limited visitor access.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change announced the new regulations on October 22, detailing 12 specific conditions that tourists and tour operators must follow. The measures are designed to control environmental damage and promote sustainable tourism in line with the Guidelines for the Protection of Environment, Ecosystem, and Biodiversity of Saint Martin's Island and for Eco-Friendly Tourism, 2023.

Issued under Section 13 of the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995, the notification makes ministry approval mandatory for all vessel operations to and from the island. The Bangladesh Inland Water

Transport Authority (BIWTA) has been instructed not to authorize any trips without prior clearance.

To streamline tourist management, visitors must book their trips through the Bangladesh Tourism Board's official website. Each ticket will include a QR-coded travel pass, and any ticket without this feature will be considered invalid.

The number of daily visitors has been capped at 2,000 to ease environmental pressure. Access will also vary seasonally: only day trips will be permitted in November, overnight stays will be allowed in December and January, and the island will remain closed to all tourists in February.

The new policy also prohibits several environmentally harmful practices. Activities such as beach bonfires, barbeque parties, loud music, and the use of motorbikes or sea bikes are now banned. Tourists are also forbidden from carrying polythene or single-use plastic items, including plastic bottles, straws, chip packets, and small toiletry packs. Visitors are encouraged instead to bring reusable water flasks and eco-friendly alternatives.

To protect native flora and fauna, entry into Keya forests and the collection or trade of Keya fruits are prohibited. Any form of harm to marine life — including turtles, corals, birds, crabs, starfish, and seaweed — will be treated as a serious offense.

Officials say the new regulations aim to transform Saint Martin's into a model of sustainable tourism, balancing economic opportunities with environmental stewardship.

A coordination meeting on eco-friendly tourism, chaired by ministry adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan, was held earlier this week. It was attended by Environment Ministry Secretary Farhina Ahmed, representatives from the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, and other stakeholders.

According to officials, full enforcement of the guidelines will help prevent ecological degradation and ensure that Saint Martin's Island remains a pristine natural treasure for generations to come.

