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Reckless plastic waste dumping greatly endangering Bay of Bengal

Mehedi Al Amin Published at 12:18 am December 17th, 2018



Plastic is one of worst pollutants that are causing harm to the seas and oceans across the world Bigstock

Plastic waste constitutes more than 60% of the litter found in the beaches of Bangladesh, according to a survey

Bangladesh, as a part of the South Asian Seas (SAS) region, currently faces the worst case scenario of sea pollution due to plastic – one of the worst pollutants that are harming the seas and oceans around the world.

Marine litter or debris, which include plastic wastes, are the persistent, manufactured, processed solid material found in marine and coastal areas – predominantly the result of poor waste management – is a fundamental problem due to its harmful effect on the environment, wildlife and human health in the Bay of Bengal, says a country report based on the reviews of scientific and policy documents together with a recent preliminary survey on marine litter along four beaches of Bangladesh.

The report, titled "National Status including Database, Proposed Recycling Enterprise and Interventions on Marine Litter," is the outcome of a South Asian Seas Program (SASP) called the Preparation of Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter in the SAS region.

The Department of Environment under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change prepared the report, is the first of its kind in Bangladesh, with technical support from the South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP) and funding from the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep).

According to the report, marine litter reaches the ocean from the land through river runoff, drainage system, wind action and intentional or unintentional discharge of materials in the sea due to human activities.

A total of 6,705 pieces of waste products were found on a 18.5km stretch of the four sea beaches – Laboni and Inani in Cox's Bazar, and Ananda Bazar and Patenga in Chittagong – in Bangladesh during the survey.

Among the litter, 63% were found to be plastic, 13% foamed plastic, 2% cloth, 1% glass and ceramic, 1% metal, 9% paper and cardboard, 3% rubber, 1% wood, and 7% other materials.

Plastic bags were found to be the most common type of litter: at least 2,182 pieces of plastic bags were found on the beaches. The survey also found 589 pieces of insulation and packaging foam, 470 pieces of cigarette butts and filters, and 300 bottles.

The survey also found bottle caps and lids, drums, jerry cans, buckets, disposable utensils, straws, stirrers, drink packaging, food containers, bags, gloves, cigarette lighters, syringes, baskets, crates and trays, mesh bags, fishing gear, and many other kinds of plastic waste on the four beaches.

The report made a number of recommendations to bring down and control the reckless dumping of plastic waste on the beaches.

PLASTIC FOUND AT FOUR BEACHES OF COX'S BAZAR AND CHITTAGONG

	Length of beach in sample (km)	Total waste found (pieces)	Plastic found (pieces)	Proportion of waste that is plastic (%)
Inani Beach, Cox's Bazar	5.5	3742	2619	70
Laboni Beach, Cox's Bazar	5.5	831	432	52
Ananda Bazar Beach, Chittagong	6	1918	997	52
Patenga Beach, Chittagong	1.5	214	126	59

Origin and impacts

According to the report, there are two sources of marine litter: sea and land.

The sea-based sources include merchant ships, ferries and cruise liners, fishing vessels, offshore oil and gas platforms, and fish farming installations, while the land-based ones include sewage, municipal and industrial wastes.

Around 80% of the litter on the beaches, including industrial products and waste, come from the second source.

Most of the industries in Bangladesh are situated near the major river systems such as the Buriganga, Shitalakkhya, Balu, Turag, Karnaphuli, Rupsa, and Meghna – all of which end up in the Bay of Bengal.

These industries directly dispose their industrial waste into these rivers without proper management, which ultimately end up in the Bay.

Globally, plastic is one of the most dangerous pollutants for seas and oceans. It is directly affecting the ecology and biodiversity of the oceans because of its non-biodegradable nature.

Plastic lasts up to a 1,000 years, and accounts for nearly 90% of the debris in the oceans around the world. Plastic also kills up to one million sea birds and 100,000 sea mammals and countless fish every year.

Also, plastic litter breaks into small pieces called microplastic, which affects many species, including seabirds, marine mammals and fish through entanglement and ingestion, and humans after entering the food chain. Microplastic beads can also cause cancer in humans.

HEROES FOR THE HEROES 15% OFF LET'S WALK TOGETHER Bata

WASTE COLLECTED FROM FOUR SEA BEACHES OF COX'S BAZAR AND CHITTAGONG

	NUMBER OF PIECES	PROPORTION OF TOTAL (APPROX %)
Plastic	4193	63
Foamed Plastic	860	13
Paper and Card-board	610	9
Rubber	237	3
Cloth	146	2
Glass and Ceramic	90	1
Metal	36	1
Wood	90	1
Others	443	7
Total	6705	100

Experts and DoE's take

The Department of Environment (DoE), together with other government and non-government agencies, have introduced many policies and strategies to control the plastic pollution over the years.

"It is the duty of the city corporations and municipalities to properly manage waste, not the DoE's," said Dr Fahmida Khanom, DoE director of natural resource management and research, regarding the report. "We can ask them to collect the waste and keep the beaches, seas and ultimately the environment clean. But what we ultimately need is productive coordination among all the authorities responsible for waste management across the country."

She further said: "This is the first study we have prepared. The results do seem bad, but it is the starting point of something good."

Prof Md Kawser Ahmed of Dhaka University oceanography department, who was a consultant in the survey, said: "We surveyed only macroplastic in the beach areas, not underwater. We still do not know the microplastic scenario. We need to conduct a lot more large-scale studies to know the underwater pollution and microplastic situation."

Environment and Social Development Organization (ESDO) Secretary General Dr Shahriar Hossain added that there was no alternative other than banning plastic from all stages in society. "As long as it's not, we should manage our waste properly. Single use plastic materials should also be banned immediately."

In 2002, Bangladesh became the world's first country to ban thinner plastic bags after they were found to have choked the drainage system during devastating floods. All types of production, marketing, carrying, and using of plastic bags were made a punishable crime.

However, they are still widely used, ignoring the ban.

Measures and recommendations

The report recommended formulating different strategies and action plans at the regional, national and local levels to minimize the impact of plastic wastes and other marine litter.

The 3R's – Reduce, Reuse and Recycle – policy has achieved much attention of many countries in tackling the issue, according to the report. Two other R's – Refuse and Redesign – were also added recently to the policy.

The National 3R Strategy for Waste Management was launched in Bangladesh in 2010. The city corporations and municipalities are making efforts to incorporate the concepts and guidance of this strategy in improving their solid waste management activities.

Similar strategies should be initiated and implemented on an urgent basis for better management of marine litter in the country, the report said.

It also recommended raising awareness about littering through academic activities as well as information campaigns to convey the effect of littering – near the marine areas and in general – to the public and initiate a long-term behavioural change.

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