



## ASIA AND THE NEAR EAST

### Shrinking Forests in Bangladesh Get Protection

**DHAKA, Bangladesh**—The Lawachara National Park northeast of this capital is dying—its sambar deer and Kebu bagh leopard have already disappeared—but a new project aims to change that trend.

Bangladesh has extended land protection rules to a large portion of Lawachara, where land encroachment has been killing the habitat and its ecosystems.

Lawachara is not the only shrinking forest in Bangladesh. More than half of the country's forest cover has disappeared in the last 30 years, and today even the forests in sanctuaries and national parks are threatened. Land encroachment, mainly for rice fields, is to blame, as is illegal logging for fuelwood and bamboo and cane collection.

Now the forest is gaining protection through a U.S.-funded land management program, the Nishorgo Support Project, in newly protected areas.

A recent report in *The Daily Star* in Dhaka said that forest cover has shrunk by about 15 percent and forest density and abundance of tall trees by 60 percent in recent years. Wildlife species—from small deer to parrots and wild fowl—are endangered.

The Nishorgo project, aiming to halt this destruction, has helped increase the number of staff at Lawachara to halt poaching and illegal logging. The project is providing specialized training in biodiversity conservation to Forest Department field managers and helping them develop management plans.

To meet the needs of nearby villagers for food, fuel, and other necessities, the project is also working with the Forest Department and local communities to improve and manage the working forests that surround Lawachara's protected area.

New policies ensure that revenues and other fees from tourism in the protected forests are shared with local communities, said Philip DeCosse of International Resources Group, which is working on the project through a USAID contract.

To further reduce dependence on forests, USAID is developing alternative income-generating activities, such as cattle rearing, fish culture, ecotourism, and tree nurseries.

"I knew nothing about running a nursery, but I received the Nishorgo training, and now, when I sell my tree plants, I will get cash," said one recently trained Lawachara nursery farmer. "Now I have an income source, my family will be better off, and I can train others—my son, his wife, some of my neighbors."

Shamol Dev Barma was among the first to receive training as an ecotour guide in the Lawachara protected area. "Now I realize that the forests can be a source of income for us. We will live happily only if we can save the protected areas," he said.

Through the Nishorgo project, an international hotel chain was persuaded to invest in conservation awareness campaigns.

The Bangladesh Scouts are also working with the Forest Department to promote hiking, birding, and a greater appreciation of conservation among young people.



**A member of the Teknaf Reserve looks over tree seedlings. A USAID-funded project helps train community members around Lawachara National Park to produce a variety of seedlings used to restock home gardens and increase local supplies for fuelwood, poles, and nontimber forest products. The seedlings also serve to restore and rehabilitate the park's degraded areas.**

International Resources Group

