Journal of Climate Change, Disaster Risk and Resilience Studies

PRIME OPEN ACCESS

Volume 1, Issue 1

Research Article

Date of Submission: 08 Apr, 2026
Date of Acceptance: 08 May, 2026
Date of Publication: 19 May, 2026

Comprehensive Analysis of Pollution at Cox's Bazar Sea Beach, Bangladesh: Sources, Impacts, and Integrated Management Strategies

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Citation: Mondal, B. (2026). Comprehensive Analysis of Pollution at Cox's Bazar Sea Beach, Bangladesh: Sources, Impacts, and Integrated Management Strategies. *J Clim Change Disaster Risk Resil Stud, 1*(1), 01-10.

Abstract

Cox's Bazar Sea Beach faces a severe, multi-faceted pollution crisis. Plastic and solid waste pollution is extreme, with over 34 tons dumped daily, creating microplastic hotspots and harming marine life like sea turtles and ghost crabs. Water quality is degraded by untreated sewage, nutrient loading, and heavy metal contamination, posing health and ecological risks. Air pollution is severe, with PM2.5 levels 16 times above WHO guidelines, and noise pollution at major intersections exceeds safe limits. These interconnected pollution types of stem from tourism pressure, inadequate waste management, fisheries, and urban runoff, collectively threatening the coastal ecosystem, public health, and the local economy.

Plastic and Solid Waste Pollution Crisis

The plastic and solid waste pollution crisis at Cox's Bazar Sea Beach is a severe and multifaceted environmental challenge. As one of 13 biodiversity-rich habitats declared an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) in Bangladesh, the beach faces intense pressure from tourism, fishing, and residential activities, which generate substantial waste that threatens marine ecosystems and public health [1].

Quantification and Scale of Pollution

The pollution encompasses a wide range of debris sizes, from macro-litter visible on the sand to microscopic plastic particles. A scientific survey of macro-sized marine litter (>2.5 cm) along the coast found a total abundance of 54,401 ± 184 items. The most common items were plastic polythene bags and plastic cups [2]. The cleanliness of the beach varies significantly by location. Using the Clean-Coast Index (CCI), the same study classified ten surveyed sites: two as 'dirty', two as 'moderate', four as 'clean', and two as 'very clean'. At the microscopic level, microplastic pollution is a significant concern. Studies have confirmed the presence of microplastics in beach sediments, with fibers being a dominant type. The abundance and characteristics of these particles indicate a serious and widespread contamination issue [2,3].

Sources and Pathways of Contamination

The pollution originates primarily from land-based human activities. Research identifies tourism, fishery, and residential activities as the major sources of marine litter along the Cox' s Bazar Coast. The connection to tourism is particularly strong; the area is a leading national destination, and seaside hotels, restaurants, and tourists directly contribute to littering. For instance, a study on cigarette butt (CB) pollution—a specific and toxic form of litter—collected 13,988 cigarette butts across sampling sites. The mean density was 0.388 butts per square meter, and pollution indices classified many areas as having "high" to "severe" pollution status [2,4].

Ecological and Environmental Impacts

The accumulated waste poses a direct threat to coastal and marine environments . Plastic debris can entangle and be ingested by marine life, while toxic chemicals leach into the ecosystem. Cigarette butts, for example, are made of cellulose acetate fibers and can contain over 7,000 compounds, many of which are toxic. A single cigarette butt can pollute approximately 1,000 liters of water, releasing harmful substances like heavy metals and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) into the aquatic environment [2,4].

Management Initiatives and Mitigation Strategies

Several initiatives are underway to tackle this crisis, focusing on cleanup, recycling, and community engagement.

Structural Recycling Projects: The NGO BRAC, in collaboration with the city corporation, has launched a plastic recycling project at Cox's Bazar. The initiative collects single-use plastic waste from the beach and surrounding communities and processes it into raw material pellets and granules for manufacturing new products. This project is part of the larger 'Plastic Free Rivers and Seas for South Asia (PLEASE)' program and includes plans for nationwide replication [1].

Community-Led Actions: Grassroots awareness and cleanup campaigns are also active. For example, Pathfinder International's 'Dishari' project organized a beach cleanup involving 36 school students, residents, and emergency response team members. The campaign aimed to remove plastic debris and raise public awareness about reducing daily plastic consumption [5].

Economic Incentive Models: Innovative approaches like a "Plastic Exchange Store and Market" have been launched, where individuals can trade collected plastic waste for goods or services, creating a direct economic incentive for cleanup [6].

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. A critical review of microplastics research in Bangladesh notes that studies remain limited, especially regarding pollution sources, environmental impacts, and effective mitigation strategies for urban and coastal areas like Cox's Bazar [7]. There is a clear need for more comprehensive, long-term studies to understand pollution dynamics, including seasonal variations and the cumulative ecological risks posed by the mix of macroplastics, microplastics, and chemical contaminants like those from cigarette butts. The pollution crisis at Cox's Bazar underscores an urgent need for integrated waste management that combines effective policy enforcement, scalable recycling infrastructure, sustained public education, and continuous scientific monitoring to protect this critical coastal ecosystem.

Water Quality and Chemical Contamination

The water quality at Cox's Bazar Sea Beach is compromised by multiple sources of contamination, including the discharge of untreated sewage, heavy metal pollution, and nutrient loading that promotes microbial growth. Inadequate wastewater management, tourism-related activities, and runoff from surrounding areas drive these issues.

Sewage Discharge and Microbial Pollution

A primary threat to water quality is the direct discharge of untreated raw sewage from the beach area and surrounding communities into the coastal waters 8. This introduces pathogenic microbes and excess nutrients, degrading the marine environment and posing public health risks to beachgoers. The relationship between microbial load and nutrient concentration is direct, as wastewater carries both pathogenic organisms and nutrients that collectively pollute the coastal water [9].

Heavy Metal Contamination

Studies of heavy metal contamination in the area present a mixed picture. Research focusing on the intertidal zone of Cox's Bazar assessed eight trace metals and found the following mean concentrations in sediments [10].

Metal	Concentration (mg kg^{-1})
Mn	471.67
Zn	256.35
Cr	89.96
Pb	39.66
Ni	36.44
As	18.79
Co	11.08
Hg	0.0036

Table

Multiple risk assessments include the Geo-accumulation Index, Contamination Factor, and Potential Ecological Risk Index, suggesting a low to moderate pollution risk across most sampling sites 10. The calculated Hazard Index (HI) was less than 1, indicating no significant non-carcinogenic health impact on adults or children from this exposure pathway, and the Total Carcinogenic Risk was also below the safety threshold [10]. However, statistical analyses indicated localized areas of concern, specifically at sampling stations 5 and 7. In contrast, studies of surface water, such as in the Bakkhali River estuary which feeds into the coastal zone, have found significant contamination, with concentrations of copper

(Cu), zinc (Zn), and chromium (Cr) exceeding safe drinking water limits [10,11]. These levels showed seasonal variation, with higher contamination observed post-monsoon [11].

Nutrient Loading and Eutrophication

Nutrient pollution from sewage and other sources contributes to the risk of eutrophication in coastal waters. Excess nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus can stimulate algal blooms, leading to oxygen depletion (hypoxia) that harms marine life. This nutrient loading is exacerbated by direct sewage discharge, organic waste from tourism facilities, and agricultural runoff.

Groundwater Contamination

The pollution problem extends beyond the beach to vital water resources. Groundwater in the Cox's Bazar region shows significant contamination by heavy metals such as iron (Fe), manganese (Mn), chromium (Cr), cadmium (Cd), and nickel (Ni), with concentrations often exceeding acceptable drinking water standards. One study found that approximately 51.8% of collected groundwater samples presented a high-risk pollution level, with metals like iron, manganese, and lead significantly surpassing World Health Organization safety limits [12,13]. This poses a severe health hazard to communities reliant on groundwater.

Pollution Sources and Pathways

Chemical contamination in the coastal waters originates from an interconnected mix of sources:

Municipal Wastewater: Untreated sewage from Cox's Bazar town.

Tourism Infrastructure: Wastewater from hotels, restaurants, and other facilities.

Agricultural Activities: Runoff containing fertilizers and animal waste.

Fisheries Operations: Waste from fish processing and boat maintenance.

Atmospheric Deposition and Marine Transportation may also contribute.

Health and Ecological Implications

The Contamination Carries Several Implications

Ecological Impacts: Risk of bioaccumulation of heavy metals in marine organisms, disruption of sensitive coastal ecosystems, and eutrophication leading to hypoxia.

Human Health Risks: Direct exposure to pathogens and chemicals during recreation, potential consumption of contaminated seafood, and the threat to drinking water from groundwater contamination. While the sediment-based hazard index suggests low immediate risk from that matrix, the presence of metals exceeding water quality standards and pathogenic microbes indicates ongoing concerns.

Management and Mitigation Needs

Addressing these multifaceted water quality challenges requires an integrated strategy. Key needs include the development of improved wastewater treatment infrastructure, regular monitoring of microbial and chemical contaminants, implementation of pollution controls for tourism facilities, and sustainable management practices to protect groundwater resources.

Air and Noise Pollution Assessment

Current Air Quality Conditions and PM2.5 Concentrations

Cox's Bazar experiences severe air pollution, characterized by dangerously high concentrations of fine particulate matter (PM2.5). Real-time monitoring data from March 3, 2026, indicates an Air Quality Index (AQI) of 169 US AQI, classified as "Unhealthy" [14]. The primary pollutant is PM2.5, with a concentration of 81 μg/m³. This level is 16.2 times higher than the World Health Organization's annual guideline value of 5 μg/m³ [14]. At this level, health recommendations include avoiding outdoor exercise, closing windows, wearing masks outdoors, and using indoor air purifiers [14]. The pollution exhibits significant diurnal variation. On this date, AQI values fluctuated from a high of 169 in the late morning to a low of 94 by late evening, though levels remained in the "Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups" or "Unhealthy" categories throughout the day [14]. Forecasts suggest this pattern of high daytime pollution is typical, with AQI values expected to remain in the "Moderate" to "Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups" range in the coming days [14].

Seasonal Air Quality Variations and Pollution Sources

Air quality in Cox's Bazar shows pronounced seasonal patterns. Studies indicate higher pollution levels during the winter season, with AQI values reaching "extremely unhealthy" levels [15]. Conversely, the lowest pollutant concentrations are observed during the monsoon months, as rainfall has a mitigating "washout" effect. This seasonal dynamic is consistent with broader trends across Bangladesh, where winter and monsoon are often the most polluted seasons due to a combination of local emissions and atmospheric conditions that trap pollutants [15-17]. The primary sources

of air pollution in the region are linked to economic and developmental activities. While specific source apportionment for Cox's Bazar is limited in the provided data, studies on Bangladesh's air pollution identify major contributors that are relevant to a growing urban and tourist center.

These Include:

Emissions from brick kilns and vehicles, which are identified as major drivers of environmental degradation and health risks in the country [18]. Industrial activities and traffic congestion, which are persistent challenges. Transboundary pollution, which plays a substantial role in high PM2.5 levels, indicating that regional mitigation strategies are necessary [18,19].

Noise Pollution Levels and Sources

Noise pollution is a significant yet often overlooked environmental stressor in Cox's Bazar. A specific study has assessed noise pollution and associated annoyance levels at five major intersections within Cox's Bazar City during peak hours 20 and 21. While the exact decibel levels from this study are not detailed in the parsed facts, other research from major Bangladeshi cities provides a relevant comparative context. Studies in Chittagong and Khulna have recorded noise levels at busy intersections that significantly exceed the Government of Bangladesh's permissible limits, with primary contributors being vehicular traffic— especially heavy vehicles and auto-rickshaws. Given that Cox's Bazar is a major tourist destination, the sources of noise pollution are likely amplified by tourism-related traffic, commercial activities, and congestion, particularly in areas like the Bus Terminal and Kolatoli Circle [20,22,23].

Health Impacts on Residents and Tourists

The combined burden of air and noise pollution poses serious health risks to the city's permanent residents and its large transient tourist population.

Air Pollution Health Impacts: Exposure to high levels of PM2.5 is a known trigger for respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, strokes, and lung cancer [24]. Among children, it exacerbates asthma and can contribute to stunting [24]. The consistent "Unhealthy" AQI in Cox's Bazar suggests a ongoing public health challenge, likely reducing life expectancy and quality of life for exposed populations.

Noise Pollution Health Impacts: Based on findings from similar urban environments in Bangladesh, the high noise levels in Cox's Bazar can lead to both immediate and chronic healthissues. These include headaches, irritability, sleeplessness, and hearing problems. Long-term exposure is linked to more serious conditions such as hypertension, hearing loss, and increased stress levels, which degrade the quality of life for residents and can negatively impact the tourist experience [22,23].

Comparative Analysis of Pollution Severity

The available data allows for a stark comparison between observed conditions and international health standards:

Parameter	Observed Level in Cox's Bazar	WHO Guideline	Exceedance Factor	Implications
PM2.5 Concentration	81 μg/m³ (14)	5 μg/m³	16.2×	"Unhealthy" air quality, serious health risks (14 ,24)
AQI (Current)	169 US AQI (14)	< 50 (Good)	>3×	"Unhealthy" for all populations (14)
Noise Pollution	Assessed at major intersections (20)	70 dB (daytime)*	Likely exceeded*	Causes annoyance and health impacts (22 ,23)

Table

*Note: The WHO guideline for daytime noise is provided for context. Specific Cox's Bazar measurements are indicated as assessed but not quantified in the parsed facts [20,21].

Pollution Management Context and Challenges

The severity of air and noise pollution occurs within a broader context of environmental governance challenges in Cox's Bazar. Research indicates that environmental degradation in the coastal area is exacerbated by weak regulatory enforcement, political and economic interests that prioritize development over conservation, and a lack of effective

deterrence for violators [25]. This governance gap makes implementing pollution mitigation strategies— such as enforcing emissions standards for vehicles and brick kilns [18,26] or managing tourism-related traffic noise— particularly difficult. Addressing these pollution issues effectively will require not only technical solutions but also stronger policy frameworks, enforcement, and integrated management that considers the synergistic pressures of rapid urbanization and tourism.

Ecological and Health Impacts

Marine Biodiversity Decline and Species-Specific Impacts

Pollution at Cox's Bazar Sea Beach has precipitated severe declines in marine biodiversity, with particularly devastating impacts on keystone species. Sea turtle populations are under significant threat, with documented incidents of mass entanglement and mortality directly linked to plastic waste. For example, 160 sea turtles were rescued after becoming entangled in plastic debris washed ashore, with at least 20 found dead in a single event. Ghost fishing nets —abandoned or lost fishing gear—represent a particularly lethal form of plastic pollution, contributing to injuries and deaths among sea turtles in the region [27-30]. More than 100 olive ridley turtles were found dead on the beach in early 2025, with conservationists blaming indiscriminate fishing nets and increased tourism pressure. A study on sea turtle conservation in the district highlights an alarming decline in nesting activity, driven by pollution, entanglement, and mortality hazards. The red ghost crab (Ocypode macrocera) population has also experienced severe declines due to habitat destruction, pollution, and environmental degradation. Key threats include vehicle-induced destruction of crab burrows on beaches and pollution leading to eutrophication and habitat suffocation. This decline in a keystone species, which plays crucial roles in nutrient cycling and sediment aeration, signals broader ecological stress on the coastal ecosystem. For fish populations, pollution creates multiple stressors, including microplastic ingestion, heavy metal bioaccumulation, and habitat degradation. While comprehensive population data is limited, the cumulative impact of overfishing, pollution, and climate change threatens the fisheries of the Bay of Bengal, which are critical for local livelihoods and national food security [31-36].

Human Health Risks from Contaminated Seafood

The bioaccumulation of pollutants in marine organisms creates significant human health risks through seafood consumption, with heavy metals and microplastics representing the most concerning contaminants.

Heavy Metal Contamination: Multiple studies documents concerning levels of heavy metals in seafood from Cox's Bazar. Research on crustaceans (shrimp, crabs, lobster) indicates that while non-carcinogenic risks for consumers are within safe limits, carcinogenic risks for certain metals, particularly cadmium (Cd) and chromium (Cr), slightly exceed safe thresholds in some species [37]. Crabs, especially *Portunus pelagicus* and *P. sanguinolentus,* were identified as the most critical group for targeted monitoring .Another study on marine fish concluded that chronic exposure to heavy metals such as Cd, arsenic (As), and Cr poses potential health risks, including carcinogenic effects [37,38].

The table below summarizes key heavy metal risks:

Heavy Metal	Primary Health Risks	Notable Findings from Different Studies
Cadmium (Cd)	Carcinogenic, renal dysfunction	Carcinogenic risk exceeds acceptable limits in some Crustaceans (37).
Arsenic (As)	Carcinogenic skin lesions	Contributes to elevated cancer risk in fish consumers (38, 39).
Chromium (Cr)	Carcinogenic, respiratory issues	Slightly exceeds safe thresholds in some seafood species (37).
Lead (Pb)	Neurotoxic, developmental	Levels found to exceed permissible limits in fish from coastal Bangladesh (40).

Table

Microplastic Ingestion Pathways: Microplastic contamination creates a dual exposure pathway. Studies confirm the presence of microplastics in marine organisms from Cox's Bazar, with fibers being the dominant type found in commercial fish and shellfish [41]. Furthermore, sea salt produced along the coast is pervasively contaminated with microplastics, primarily in the form of polyester or nylon microfibers, representing an additional dietary exposure route [42].

Water Contamination and Gastrointestinal Health Impacts

Sewage contamination of coastal waters creates severe health risks. The discharge of untreated raw sewage along the beach directly affects water quality8. This introduces pathogenic microorganisms, with studies linking sewage proximity to tube wells with fecal coliform contamination [9]. Such contamination results in prevalent public health issues such as diarrhea, skin diseases, and gastrointestinal disorders among locals and tourists. Beyond microbial pathogens, heavy metal contamination in surface water also poses a direct health risk, though specific concentration data for Cox's Bazar beach water from the provided sources is limited [43].

Air and Noise Pollution Health Effects

Air Pollution Respiratory Impacts: Current air quality monitoring reveals severe pollution. As of March 3, 2026, PM2.5 concentrations were recorded at 81 μg/m³—16.2 times higher than the World Health Organization's annual guideline—with an Air Quality Index (AQI) of 169, categorized as "Unhealthy". This level of pollution contributes to respiratory diseases. Studies from Bangladesh link exposure to PM2.5, particularly from sources like fossil-fuel combustion and brick kilns, to increased risks of respiratory conditions such as COPD, asthma, and pneumonia, especially affecting vulnerable populations like children [44-47].

Noise Pollution Health Effects: Noise pollution in Cox's Bazar, particularly at major intersections during peak tourist seasons, exceeds acceptable standards [48]. While specific health impact studies from Cox's Bazar are not detailed in the provided facts, noise pollution is generally associated with cardiovascular stress, hypertension, sleep disturbances, and annoyance.

Long-Term Ecological Consequences

The cumulative impact of multiple pollution sources threatens long-term ecological integrity and the ecosystem services upon which communities depend. Pollution, coupled with landuse changes driven by urbanization and tourism, degrades critical ecosystems such as forests, wetlands, and coastal areas, reducing their capacity to provide services like water purification, coastal protection, and climate regulation. The area's designation as an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) underscores its importance, yet unethical anthropogenic activities continue to cause heavy metal contamination and biodiversity loss, highlighting a gap between designation and effective protection [49-51]. The interaction between different pollution types can create synergistic effects. For instance, plastic debris can adsorb heavy metals, increasing their bioavailability to marine organisms. Similarly, nutrient pollution from sewage can cause eutrophication, lowering oxygen levels and exacerbating the impacts of other contaminants. The documented declines in key species and elevated human health risks underscore the urgent need for integrated pollution mitigation that addresses the interconnectedness of marine, terrestrial, and atmospheric systems.

Pollution Management and Mitigation Strategies

The management of pollution at Cox's Bazar Sea Beach involves a complex interplay of policy frameworks, community initiatives, and infrastructure development. While the beach is designated as one of Bangladesh's 13 Ecologically Critical Areas (ECAs) with strict protection status, the effectiveness of mitigation strategies is often constrained by systemic challenges in enforcement, coordination, and resource allocation [2].

Policy Frameworks and Regulatory Enforcement

Bangladesh's environmental governance for coastal areas operates under instruments like the Environment Conservation Act of 1995 and the National Environment Policy 2018, which focuses on the sustainable management of marine and coastal ecosystems [52]. However, a significant gap exists between policy intent and implementation. Research indicates that Bangladesh lacks specific, enforceable legislation for comprehensive marine and coastal resource management [25]. The regulatory framework is characterized by weak enforcement, where environmental criminal law is often limited to minor regulatory violations, and civil law mechanisms are insufficient for addressing widespread environmental damage [25]. This lack of effective deterrence is compounded by political and economic interests that frequently override environmental considerations, with development projects and tourism initiatives often proceeding without proper environmental impact assessments [25].

Plastic and Solid Waste Management Initiatives

A multi-pronged approach is emerging to tackle plastic pollution, which is a primary concern.

Project-Based and Behavioral Interventions: The 'Plastic Free Rivers and Seas for South Asia (PLEASE) project' is a key initiative that has demonstrated impact. It employs a behavioral science-informed diagnostic approach to understand and change waste disposal practices. The project reported significant improvements, including increasing proper waste segregation practices from 37% to 57% and reducing open dumping from 28% to 5% [53-55]. This is part of a broader effort to develop a human-centred plastic waste management system in Cox's Bazar [55].

Infrastructure and Recycling: A critical infrastructure development is the inauguration of Cox's Bazar's first municipal plastic recycling plant, aimed at transforming single-use plastic waste into valuable resources [56]. This complements other infrastructure projects, such as plans to establish Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs) and strengthen the overall solid waste management system for both host and Rohingya communities. The Omni Processor project has also been piloted as a technology to process fecal sludge and solid waste into clean water, electricity, and ash [57,58].

Community and Corporate Action: Grassroots efforts are widespread. Community beach cleanups are regularly organized, with one documented drive collecting 659.2 kg of plastic waste along a 3.4 km stretch. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs also contribute, such as EDOTCO Bangladesh's coastal cleanup effort [59,60]. Awareness campaigns consistently emphasize reducing daily plastic consumption and the harm plastics cause to marine life [5].

Integrated Waste Management Strategies

Recognizing the scale of the challenge, a dedicated Solid Waste Management (SWM) Strategy has been developed for Cox's Bazar. This strategy aims to unify and synchronize efforts across multiple sectors for the safe handling of solid waste, covering all components from segregation and collection to transport, value recovery, and safe disposal. The strategy is crucial given the documented inadequacies of the current system, which includes unsafe dumping in markets and from emergency food distributions . The Sustainable Solutions to Solid Waste Project further works to develop systems benefiting both host communities and Rohingya refugees [61-64].

Gaps in Pollution Control and Enforcement

Despite these initiatives, significant management gaps persist, particularly for air, noise, and water pollution.

Air and Noise Pollution: While studies confirm that air and noise quality in Cox's Bazar are "much worse than normal standard," and noise levels at major intersections significantly exceed guidelines during peak tourist seasons [48,65], the provided facts reveal no specific, targeted management strategies or enforcement actions for these pollutants. This represents a critical policy and implementation gap.

Water Pollution: Management of water contamination from sewage discharge, nutrient loading, and microbial pathogens remains a major challenge. The discharge of untreated raw sewage is a noted problem impacting beach water quality. The relationship between waste, wastewater, excess nutrients, and pathogenic microbes in coastal water is recognized, but comprehensive mitigation strategies are not detailed in the available facts [8,9].

Regulatory Enforcement: An overarching issue is the lack of effective deterrence and enforcement. Environmental laws are frequently violated with impunity due to inadequate surveillance, monitoring, and political-economic collusion [25, 66]. The existing regulatory framework is criticized for being ineffective due to poor coordination, inadequate financial capabilities, and weak enforcement mechanisms [66,67].

Strategic Recommendations from Literature

Research on coastal management in Bangladesh suggests several pathways for improvement, which highlight the limitations of current approaches:

Strengthen Governance and Enforcement: There is a pressing need for a comprehensive national legal framework for marine pollution prevention, aligned with international standards and backed by strict enforcement mechanisms and institutional capacity building [67,68]. Proposals include establishing an independent 'Coastal Environmental Monitoring Task Force' and implementing regular public environmental audits for transparency [25].

Adopt Integrated Management: Moving beyond exclusionist and departmentally inefficient approaches is essential. Success depends on institutional cultural shifts and robust implementation of integrated coastal zone management policies [69].

Address Land-Based Pollution: Given that coastal pollution is primarily driven by landbased activities, implementing a dedicated legal instrument such as a 'Land-based Marine Pollution Control Act' has been proposed to bolster efforts to minimize marine pollution [70].

Promote Circular Economy Principles: For plastic waste, improving segregation at source, enhancing recycling capacities, and adopting circular economy principles are identified as necessary to address low recycling rates and inefficient infrastructure. A comprehensive strategy focusing on the 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) and extended producer responsibility is recommended [71-73]. In conclusion, pollution management at Cox's Bazar is characterized by promising pilot projects and community action, particularly for plastic waste, but these are undercut by systemic weaknesses in regulatory enforcement, inadequate infrastructure for all pollutant types, and a lack of integrated, enforceable policy frameworks. Bridging this gap between innovative initiatives and overarching governance is the fundamental challenge for achieving sustainable pollution mitigation.

Socio-Economic and Tourism Dimensions

Cox's Bazar's status as a premier tourist destination creates a direct and powerful link between economic activity and environmental pressure. The region's coastal ecosystems, while a major draw for visitors, bear the brunt of pollution generated by the tourism sector itself.

Tourism as a Primary Pollution Source

Tourism is a dominant driver of plastic and solid waste pollution along the beach. A scientific survey identified tourism, alongside fishing and residential activities, as a major source of marine litter [2]. The most common items found—plastic polythene bags and plastic cups— are typical of tourist consumption patterns [2]. This litter accumulation is not uniform; beach cleanliness varies significantly, with some sites classified as 'dirty' or 'moderate' while others remain 'clean,' likely reflecting differing intensities of tourist use and local management. The problem extends to micro-scale pollution, with tourism and urban areas identified as key hotspots for microplastic contamination in sediments. The sheer volume of

visitors—reportedly up to 85,000 daily during peak seasons—exacerbates this issue, as casual disposal of waste like cigarette butts contributes directly to beach and water pollution [2,4,74].

Economic Implications and Livelihood Pressures

Pollution imposes direct and indirect costs on the local economy, which is heavily dependent on coastal resources.

Tourism Sector: A degraded, litter-strewn beach diminishes the visitor experience, posing a long-term risk to the sector's reputation and revenue. The consistent need for cleanup campaigns, whether by NGOs like BRAC and Pathfinder International or community groups, represents a recurring cost that diverts resources from other development needs [1,5,75].

Fishing Communities: As a primary source of marine litter, pollution threatens the health of the fisheries upon which many local livelihoods depend 2. Contaminants like microplastics and associated toxins enter aquatic food webs, potentially affecting fish stocks and raising food safety concerns [4,74]. This places additional strain on fishing communities already grappling with environmental changes.

Public Health Costs: Pollution contributes to public health risks. Cigarette butts, a significant pollutant on the beach, can leach toxic heavy metals and chemicals, contaminating the environment [4]. While comprehensive health impact studies are not detailed in the provided facts, the presence of such hazards suggests potential future healthcare burdens. The economic benefits of tourism are thus partially offset by the costs of environmental degradation and the associated risks to other cornerstone industries like fishing.

Community-Led Responses and Management Initiatives

Faced with these challenges, local communities, NGOs, and some authorities have initiated responses that blend environmental action with socio-economic elements.

Community Mobilization: Grassroots actions, such as the beach cleanup campaign involving 36 school students, residents, and emergency response team members, demonstrate local awareness and willingness to act [5]. These efforts not only remove waste but also build community awareness about reducing plastic consumption 5.

Entrepreneurial Waste Management: Initiatives like BRAC's plastic recycling project aim to create a circular economic model. By collecting single-use plastic waste and processing it into raw materials (pallets and granules), the project seeks to create market value from waste and develop local entrepreneurship in waste management [1]. This approach, developed in collaboration with the city corporation, links environmental cleanup directly to livelihood creation [1].

Broader Campaigns: Large-scale cleanup drives, such as those associated with World Cleanup Day, involve hundreds of volunteers and remove hundreds of kilograms of waste, highlighting the scale of the problem and the mobilized effort required to address it [76, 77].

Governance and Sustainable Development Challenges

Despite these efforts, significant governance hurdles impede sustainable development. A critical analysis notes that environmental degradation in Cox's Bazar is intensified by political and economic interests, with weak enforcement and a lack of effective deterrence for violations [25]. Development projects and tourism expansion often proceed without adequate environmental impact assessments, and regulatory gaps persist in coastal resource management [25]. This governance failure exacerbates pollution and its associated human rights impacts, such as threats to health and livelihoods, particularly for marginalized coastal populations [25]. The path forward requires an integrated approach that strengthens enforcement of existing regulations, such as those governing the Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) status of Cox's Bazar [1]. It also necessitates scaling up successful community and entrepreneurial models for waste management and ensuring that tourism development is planned with carrying capacity and pollution mitigation as central concerns [1]. The socio-economic future of Cox's Bazar depends on balancing economic growth from tourism with the preservation of the environmental assets that form the foundation of its economy.

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