**The polluter pays**

Hashim Zaman

Saturday, Jan 29, 2022

The writer is an environmental economist based in Islamabad, Pakistan.

Environmentalists have welcomed the Islamabad High Court’s landmark ruling on the fate of Margalla Hills National Park (MHNP). The bold and unprecedented judgment felt improbable at first, but the much-needed verdict will become a precedent.

A gazettement of a protected area means greater ecosystem services and climate resilience for all species that dwell within. It recognises the ecological and cultural values for the effective conservation of its ecosystems and biodiversity. However, it does not entail tearing down a massive chunk of concrete only to release millions of tons of greenhouse gasses into the stratosphere. It does not demand the citizens of the capital to breathe carbon in a smoggy winter.

Demolition is not the solution; it would prove equally detrimental to the environment and a clear negation of the intent of this verdict. While associating the preservation of ecosystems to Article 9 of the constitution (right to life) is commendable in its own right, the path ahead should be more inclusive rather than a hammer and bulldozer one. One can vouch that alternatives such as conversion of these structures into an earth museum, a school of environment, wildlife breeding facility, observatory or even a centre for climate research would do justice to the spirit of this verdict. And while at it, demand these irruptions to offset and compensate for all the degradation caused to the national park under the ‘polluter pays’ principle.

Margalla Hills National Park is a remarkable, one-of-a-kind entity, owing to its vast biodiversity and proximity to one of most beautiful capitals of the world. Thousands of bird species sing through the day, while Asian leopards mark their territories through the night. Its jurisdiction stretches across the Margalla reserve forest, military grass farms, Rawal Lake, Shakarparian, and amongst others, along the villages of Kilinjhar, Mangial and Jhang. However, owing to the quarrel amongst the Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad, the Capital Development Authority, the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board and the Punjab Forest Department, the park remains a breeding ground of fragile egos, eyesores, and trash.

Through mindless dumping of solid waste, sewage and major pollutants, these encroachments have continued to degrade the sanctity of the national park, contaminated the groundwater with arsenic, and sunk the life of its inhabitants. The odious fallout sees these money minting entities totally devoid of Environmental Impact Assessments. Criminally, they are allowed to operate without any regulated waste disposal, environmental management or social governance plans.

The Rawal Lake too faces the same threat; this is an existential crisis. Existing within the premises of the national park, the lake provides freshwater to residents of Rawalpindi. What can potentially function as a major carbon sink has become a dumping ground for sewage and plastic.

Conservationists ask how a hotel that employs 700 workers, sources its water, and disposes of its waste was allowed to function in the heart of a protected zone located within walking distance to parliament. The MNHP cannot afford another trigger that offsets all gains that shall be realised by this judgment and halting other economic activities within the park.

Simply put, deforestation, human-wildlife conflicts, uncontrolled grazing, forest fires particularly during bird breeding season, invasive plant species and unsustainable food production are major drivers of change that demand equal consideration. Not to mention the polluting vehicles making a beeline to the MNHP and feeding us carbon that induced Islamabad’s air quality to be one of the most polluted in the world only last month. Seven million deaths occur globally each year due to air pollution and all we yearn for is an overpriced seekh kabab on top of a hill.

Protected areas are not meant for real-estate ventures and must be accessible to the public. However, they’re not a sanctuary of unethical choices and unruly ramblers. Any ecosystem in the world has a finite capacity to deliver the provisioning, regulating or recreation services for species wellbeing. Similarly, on any corner of the earth, a national park or a tourist hub has a certain threshold to accommodate a limited number of visitors. Discounting that finite capacity and defying those ecological thresholds means disasters, a case in point being the recent Murree tragedy.

Housing cement factories and sailing practices inside the premises of a protected area might be tolerated in the 1990s, when Islamabad’s population was under half a million, the per capita water availability was a mere 1,000 cubic meters and the power crisis was only limited to politics. However, in these testing times, when China envisions an artificial sun and a new Covid variant crops up every month, it is as criminal as it is undesirable.

While we need to instill a human-centric approach to conservation and embrace the paradox of sustainable development, it must not come at the expense of our urban ecosystems. Conversely, the parks cannot solely linger on government funding but require a self-sustainable mechanism that provides recreation and enhances the ecosystem services provided by a national park. The protected area initiative and the most recent decision of the Ministry of Climate Change to set up a ‘Asian Leopard Reserve’ rightfully falls under this model, where guided walking tours have the potential to generate the capital for the conservation of the magnificent common leopard and the 15,883 hectares of unique biodiversity of this national park.

An absolute demarcation, a refined scientific management plan, and integration of nature and climate-based targets into both the MHNP’s and Islamabad’s master plan is imperative. What is called for is a protected area managed by an independent agency that ensures the regular uptake of strategic environmental and economic assessments to its core. It should also be solely mandated to maintain biodiversity in all terrestrial and marine protected areas of the country. This would be a critical step to create an all-important entity on the lines of the National Parks Service in the United States. If one can learn rainwater harvesting techniques from our cross-border arch nemesis, we can surely take inspiration from across the Khunjerab and hop on the road to an ecological civilisation.

Ungainly and illegal profits have always been the priorities that become the harbingers of our ill-founded policies. Section 21 of the 1979 Wildlife Ordinance permits a limited provision of recreation, roads, and restaurants within the premises of the national park. However, it does not allow the construction of commercial monstrosities and hundreds of other encroachments to ravage its sanctity. It is high time that this Ordinance is revisited owing to the growing biodiversity loss and land fragmentation; all this in a Pakistan that is one of the most affected countries to the climate crisis. Can one imagine an administration that turns a blind eye to the many stone crushing machines that have played havoc with the continuity of the Margalla Hills? This and the criminal acts of the timber mafia have decimated large swathes of hills and forests, in a land where the definition of forest area is still debated amongst the revenue and forest department.

Reimagining our relationship with nature is crucial; redefining our roles as stewards of nature is inevitable. We have witnessed that in the case of our national animal, where the introduction of a trophy hunting programme by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reshaped the conservation narrative, while the mountain communities and the population of the Markhor equally thrived.

Transformative changes coupled with nature positive policies for the protected areas of Pakistan can be a reality. It rests on how we perceive the value of our natural assets, and on the realisation that our economies are embedded within nature, and not external to it. The choice is ours – prosper by protecting our environment or face extinction by ravaging it.

Email: hashimzaman1@gmail.com