

THE TRACE WE LEAVE



Based on Two Decades of International Coastal Cleanup* Experience

THE TRACE WE LEAVE

Twenty Years Of Waste & What It Reveals

Muntasir Mamun

FOREWORD BY

Nicholas J. Mallos

ILISH BOOKS

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In Loving Memory Of

Dewan Mahbub Alam

— my *Boy Scout Leader*, from whom I learned some of life's earliest lessons in courage, discipline, and companionship. Long before I understood journeys, responsibility, or leadership, he quietly shaped the path beneath my feet. Many of the values that carried me through life were first learned beside him, in moments that seemed ordinary then, but remain unforgettable now.

This book carries traces of those early lessons,
and of a man whose influence remains long after his absence.

Praise for The Trace We Leave

In THE TRACE WE LEAVE, Muntasir Mamun lays out twenty years of longitudinal experience coastal clean-up on a shore hundreds of kilometers from his home in Dhaka. In a global economy that is fueled by convenience, he presents a tide of inconvenient borderless truths about consumption, invisible connections and the disconnect between reality, perception, and human behavior. And while Mamun's experience entitles him to write a cynical polemic, his account is akin to the star thrower parable—like the hundreds of volunteers who come back each year, we are called to join him to save what we can, however and whenever we can.

Suzy Becker

author of “All I Need to Know I Learned From My Cat”

*

Plastic waste is one of the greatest environmental challenges of our time. Combined with climate change and biodiversity loss, it is creating a perfect storm for the planet. This book is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand how environmental movements grow, spread, and create impact.

It offers a deep and thoughtful exploration of coastal clean-up efforts, explaining what is happening on the ground and why simplistic solutions are not enough. The book makes it clear that meaningful change requires structural shifts in the way we consume goods, assign responsibility, and manage waste not only in Bangladesh, but across the world.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to reflect on the actions we can take at both personal and community levels to address the growing crisis of plastic pollution.

Aditya Pundir

The Climate Reality Project India and South Asia

*Having read Muntasir Mamun's new book, *The Trace We Leave — Twenty Years of Waste and What it Reveals*, I found it rigorously researched, deeply insightful, and highly compelling.*

The book powerfully explains how Bangladesh, as a densely populated delta criss-crossed by rivers and highly vulnerable to cyclones and floods, not only produces plastic waste but also redistributes and pushes it outward through its waterways, amplifying environmental and climatic damage. Particularly striking is its analysis of how weak enforcement of environmental policies has gradually turned Bangladesh into what the author describes as "a country of rivers buried in a sea of plastic."

The book also draws attention to the largely invisible crisis of microplastics, the tensions between locals and tourists over responsibility, and the broader behavioral and structural dimensions of pollution. Yet despite the severity of the problem, the narrative remains hopeful, recognizing informal recycling systems, emerging corporate responsibility initiatives, and the growing role of Bangladeshi youth and civil society. Ultimately, the book ends with a thoughtful call for political will, stronger governance, improved research and data, effective law enforcement, and greater global collaboration to confront the crisis in meaningful and lasting ways.

Dr. Lilly Nicholls

Former Canadian High Commissioner to Bangladesh

*

*This book *Reveals* is a powerful exploration of waste, plastic, and environmental change across Bangladesh's coastlines over two decades. Blending field observations, research, data, and human stories and also reveals how consumption, tourism, policy, corporate influence, and everyday behavior have reshaped both landscapes and lives. More than a study of pollution, it is a reflection on responsibility, invisibility, and the lasting marks humanity leaves behind.*

Muntasir Mamun's this book is a gem of information and an essential resource for researchers, scientists, journalists, policy makers, environmental activists, and politicians seeking to better understand the growing global waste crisis and its social, economic, and environmental consequences. I am confident that readers will find this book insightful, thought-provoking, and valuable, and that anyone concerned about the future of our environment should own a copy to appreciate the depth of knowledge and experience it offers.

Dr. Anwar Hossain

New Mexico Tech

I first met Muntasir Mamun in 2012, when he attended a training program for International Coastal Cleanup coordinators that I organized in Korea. By then, he had already been working along Bangladesh's coast for years—quietly, persistently, and under conditions that would have discouraged most people.

The Trace We Leave is the product of two decades of that commitment. Mamun writes as someone who has witnessed the changing nature of plastic pollution, the evolution of corporate sponsorship, and the persistent challenges that continue to hinder meaningful progress. The result is a book that is at once a field record, a thoughtful analysis of systemic failures, and an honest reflection on the limits of volunteer action—qualities that are all too rare in environmental writing.

For anyone who cares about the future of Asia's oceans, and about the patient, often uncelebrated work required to protect them, this book offers an invaluable perspective. Muntasir Mamun's voice is one that deserves to be heard.

Dr. Sunny Sunwook Hong

Founder, OSEAN (Our Sea of East Asia Network)

*

Bangladesh is one of the most river-rich nations on Earth. It is also home to one of Asia's most plastic-burdened coastlines. These two realities are deeply connected, yet until now, no one has told that story with the honesty and depth it deserves.

*In *The Trace We Leave*, Muntasir Mamun draws on two decades of coastal cleanup data from Cox's Bazar and St. Martin's Island to reveal not only what we have been leaving behind, but what it is costing us. The plastic sachet bought for two taka, the polythene bag that carried someone's lunch, the abandoned fishing line—none of it simply disappears. Instead, it fragments into microplastics that enter the fish we eat, the water we drink, and ultimately our own bodies.*

I have stood on these same shores as a researcher. What Mamun describes is not alarmism—it is evidence. This book is essential reading for anyone who cares about Bangladesh's coast and wants to understand, in clear and honest terms, why it is under threat and what it will take to protect it. Read it, then pass it on.

Dr. Mohammad Sorowar Hossain

Independent University, Bangladesh

*Bangladesh leads many populous countries, including India, Pakistan, and the United States, in the amount of mismanaged plastic waste it generates. With unusual honesty, clarity, and compassion, *The Trace We Leave* explores how we arrived at that troubling reality.*

Beginning with a youthful coastal cleanup on St. Martin's Island two decades ago, Muntasir Mamun traces the journey of a movement that grew in visibility even as the waste itself continued to increase. Drawing on years of field observations, research, and lived experience, he reveals that a discarded wrapper is never just litter—it is evidence of the choices, systems, and behaviors that shape our society.

*More than a book about marine debris, *The Trace We Leave* is a compelling reflection on a nation in transition. Through decades of fieldwork, Mamun documents not only what we discarded, but what those discarded objects reveal about our economy, our behavior, our tourism, and our environmental future.*

Enam Ul Haque

Conservationist, naturalist, and founder of the Bangladesh Bird Club





FOREWORD

From the Arctic shorelines to tropical atolls, I have spent many days of my career standing on beaches and reflecting on them after they were cleaned.

Each year, Ocean Conservancy's International Coastal Cleanup® brings together people across more than a hundred countries, all doing the same seemingly simple thing: bending down, picking something up, writing down what it was. On its own, a single data card means very little. A bottle cap. A wrapper. A fragment of something that used to have a shape. But multiply that single card by 40 years, by millions of volunteers, by thousands of stretches of coastline returned to again and again, and something else emerges. Not just a count of trash, but a record of how a relationship between people and the ocean has changed.

That is what this book is, and it is also, quietly, a celebration. It is what happens when someone refuses to look away for two decades, and instead of growing tired of the work, grows more curious about it.

I want to be honest about something: books from inside this movement tend to follow a familiar shape. They open with the scale of the crisis, move through the work being done about it, and close with a call to action. This book does something better. Muntasir Mamun has written an account that earns its hope rather than asserting it. He returns, year after year, to the same shoreline on St. Martin's Island, and instead of asking readers to simply care more, he shows what two decades of returning to one place can teach about how waste behaves, how communities organize themselves around a shared act, and how a single annual ritual, however modest it seemed at the start, can grow into something close to a movement.

The detail that stayed with me longest is the simplest one: in the early years, what volunteers found had identity. A shoe was a shoe. A bottle was a bottle. You could trace an object back to a use, a moment, a story. Somewhere in the last two decades, that changed, and what comes ashore now is more often a fragment than a whole object. That shift says more about the trajectory of plastic pollution than any chart could, and it is the kind of observation you only earn by showing up, on the same beach, year after year, long after the novelty has worn off.

What makes this book worth celebrating is not that it pretends the work is finished. It is that it shows the work compounding. A cleanup that began under harsh weather and quiet ridicule became, over twenty years, a dataset, a community, a body of evidence serious enough to shape how a country understands its own coastline. Volunteers who were children at the first cleanups are now bringing their own. Local businesses that once saw no reason to participate are now sponsors. None of this erases the harder chapters in this book, the interventions that did not hold, the policies that exist more clearly on paper than on the ground, and Mamun is honest about every one of them. But read together, what they add up to is not a record of futility. It is a record of persistence finding its footing, attempt by attempt, year by year.

That, to me, is the real story of every long-running cleanup, on every coastline where our volunteers gather. The beach will need cleaning again next year. We know that. We show up anyway, and over enough years, that showing up becomes its own kind of infrastructure: a community that notices, that measures, that remembers what the shoreline looked like a decade ago and refuses to accept it as the new normal.

This book is a record of what that kind of attention reveals, and a tribute to everyone, in Bangladesh and on coastlines everywhere, who has shown up for one more cleanup, certain that this time, the pattern they're building will outlast the trash.

Read it as a field report from the front edge of a slow-moving crisis, written by someone who never stopped going back.

Nicholas J. Mallos

Vice President, Ocean Conservancy

Former Director, International Coastal Cleanup®

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PART 1

ARRIVAL

MORNING BEFORE THE CLEANUP

It began under harsh weather and quiet ridicule. Yet the first coastal cleanup took place. Over time, it grew. People began to recognize it. Some began to understand it.

One memory remains. A group of five visually impaired students from the University of Dhaka joined the cleanup. Whether they could fully grasp the sea is uncertain. But they stepped into it with curiosity, letting the waves touch their feet, and at times bending to collect waste.

*One of them kept calling out,
“This is the sea, this is the sea.”*

When something sharp touched their feet, they would ask, “Is this waste? Is this waste?”

In that moment, the act became more than its purpose.

Coastal cleanup was never only about collecting waste. It became a space where experience could change people. There remains a hope that one day, it will be observed as a shared occasion—almost like a festival.

Pantha Rahman
Educator and Filmmaker

Morning Before The Cleanup

We never thought we would be able to pull this off. It wasn't that the work itself was difficult. Cleaning a beach is not complicated. But starting it was something else entirely. It required us to cross a boundary of doubt, logic, and, in many ways, common sense. We lived in Dhaka, far from the coast, where Cox's Bazar felt like another world. To many around us, the idea made little sense. If you want to clean, they said, start with your own city, your own streets, your own neighborhood. They weren't wrong. Dhaka needed cleaning. Everywhere did. And yet, we were boarding a bus to clean a place we did not belong to, perhaps a place we might never belong to. We did not have a perfect answer for that. But we went anyway.

All of us had grown up together in some form or another. The same school, though not always the same years, and the same Thursday afternoon scout meetings where cleaning was never presented as something extraordinary. It was simply part of what we did. We swept our school grounds, cleared trash, cleaned the footpath in front of our gate without thinking much of it. Getting our hands dirty was never a hesitation. It still wasn't. There were sixteen of us on that journey, and alongside us came a senior writer and a photographer, both drawn to the strange simplicity of the idea. Clean a beach. Even then, none of us fully understood what we were stepping into.

Our uncertainty was not about the work. It was about the people. We had reached out to a local school, and they told us that around a hundred students might join. It sounded unreal, almost too hopeful. If they came, this could become something. If they didn't, we would still clean. When the bus finally left Dhaka and the city slowly faded behind us, we kept trying to reach our local contact. The calls did not go through. Again and again, we tried, and again and again, there was

silence. Somewhere along that long, dark highway, a quiet tension settled among us. No one said it out loud, but it was there. What if no one comes? What if this was just an idea, nothing more?

We reached Cox's Bazar at dawn and made our way to a government rest house, arranged through the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner. It was not meant for us, and certainly not for that many people, but we were allowed to stay. Three rooms held twenty-four of us, a space meant for six stretched far beyond its intention. It did not matter. We were there. There was no time to settle. Some of us skipped breakfast as we rushed to the local school. To our relief, students were already gathering. For the first time, it felt real. And then, without warning, the rain began. Not heavy, not violent, but steady enough to soak through shirts and expectations alike.

We shared the plan quickly under a patchy shelter, voices slightly raised over the soft rhythm of rain, and then returned to the rest house, asking them to come by 8:30. At exactly that time, they appeared. Through the drizzle, one by one, then in groups, until the courtyard slowly filled with young faces. The road outside had turned dark and reflective, scattered with fallen leaves pressed into wet asphalt. We stood close together under the narrow shade, handing out T-shirts, tying bandanas we had carried all the way from Dhaka. And then, almost without instruction, we began to move. Together, in the rain, we walked toward the beach. Not as individuals, but as something quieter, something shared. A movement without slogans. A purpose without certainty.

The shoreline was not what we had imagined. Between the waves and the sand, there were layers. Plastic, wrappers, fragments of lives left behind. The tide had carried them in, and the land had kept them. For a moment, no one spoke. Then someone bent down and picked up the first piece. There was no announcement, no signal to begin. The work simply started.

We did not know it then, but that moment would repeat itself in ways we could not yet imagine. Year after year, across changing groups, across different lives, that same quiet beginning would return. Twenty years is a long time. When I try to place it on a scale, it stretches across more than two-thirds of my adult life. It is not just a measure of time, but a measure of how I learned to see, what I came to value, and how those values remained. And it was never just my journey. There were others who began much younger than I did. I watched them grow through these cleanups, saw friendships form and deepen, saw some of them find their partners in this shared work, and later return with their children, travelling nearly four hundred kilometers and spending eighteen hours on the road just to stand again on the same shoreline.

There is a quiet fulfillment in that continuity, one that is difficult to find elsewhere. If there had been something easier to do, something that required less effort and offered a more direct return to our own well-being, we would have chosen it. We would have found it. But we did not. Not because of obligation, and not because of persistence alone. We continued because nothing else proved as effective. Nothing else came as close to answering what we were searching for. And so, without ever fully explaining why, we kept coming back.

CHAPTER 1

HOW BANGLADESH ENTERED
A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

Before Bangladesh

The International Coastal Cleanup® (ICC) began 40 years ago, when communities rallied together with the common goal of collecting and documenting the trash littering their coastline. The movement was initiated by the passion and spirit of two committed ladies, Linda Mariniss and Kathy O'Hara. Both women were introduced to nature during childhood that helped them to develop a strong sense of love and respect for nature, especially the ocean.

Linda Maraniss was working for the Ocean Conservancy in Washington, DC, and in 1985 relocated to Texas to open a regional office. She had been inspired by the work her Ocean Conservancy colleague Kathy O'Hara, was doing on a groundbreaking report called *Plastics in the Ocean: More than a Litter Problem* that would be published the following year.

Soon after her arrival in Texas, Linda visited Padre Island National Seashore with her husband and was appalled by the amount of trash she saw on the beach. That is when she and Kathy knew they had to do something about it and decided to host a beach cleanup to bring awareness of the problem of marine debris in Texas. They reached out to the Texas General Land Office, local businesses and other dedicated ocean lovers, and planned what would become Ocean Conservancy's first cleanup.

Linda worked to secure funding, did outreach – press releases, interviews, and recruited volunteer zone captains to man stations in the upper, middle and lower coast for the September 20, 1986, event. She used the phrase “Be a Beach Buddy” to help recruit volunteers.

The goal of the cleanup was to create public awareness of the problems caused by marine debris and to collect data on the types and quantities of debris found on Texas beaches.

The cleanup was held as part of COASTWEEK '86, along with other sites in the country. That first cleanup had 2,700 volunteers that removed 124 tons of trash from 122 miles of Texas coastline in just three hours.

In 1987, 18 additional states organized fall beach cleanups during the period known as COASTWEEKS. And by 1988, participation had grown exponentially with more than 47,500 volunteers across 25 US states and territories taking part in beach cleanups.

The following year, in 1989, the cleanup expanded beyond national borders, which marked the transition from a national cleanup to an international event. Cleanups were held in 25 US states and territories, two Canadian provinces (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick), and Cozumel, Mexico.

After 40 years of beach cleanups and data collection, the ICC is an excellent example of people of all ages working together to protect our oceans, beaches and marine wildlife.

Since 1986, the global movement continues with more than 20 million volunteers that help to clean beaches in over 100 countries and nearly all 50 states of the US.

Portions of this historical background of the International Coastal Cleanup in this chapter were contributed by *Renee Tuggle*, an early organizer associated with the movement.