

Problems and Prospects of Eco-Tourism in Sundarbans

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Abstract: *Eco-tourism is a buzzword. It is one of the important sources of job creation and the way of poverty alleviation. Eco-tourism is basically nature-based tourism. It has originated from conscience of environment. It does not harm environment. This study reveals that the future of eco-tourism in the Sundarbans is very positive and it will bring benefits for the locals as well as the whole country. This study suggests that public-private partnership (PPP) is necessary for the development of eco-tourism in the Sundarbans. Eco-tourism can generate economic benefits at local and national levels and thus promotes incentives to conserve the resources on which it depends on. In this context, the focus should be given on sustainable planning to flourish eco-tourism as a great potential for the economic development. Eco-tourism can be a tool not only for poverty alleviation but also for the economic emancipation of local communities and the country as a whole. It is multi-billion dollar industry and one of the largest job opportunities in the world.*

1. Introduction

Tourism has many faces; eco-tourism is one of them. The term “eco-tourism” blends “ecology” and “tourism” and covers the scope of tourism that draws upon natural, man-made and cultural environment. It is comparatively a new term in tourism literature. Eco-tourism came into prominence in the 1980s as a strategy for reconciling conservation with development in ecologically rich areas. Recognizing its global importance, the United Nations (UN) designated the year 2002 as the International Year of Eco-tourism (IYE). The United Nations has effectively recognized the economic and social importance of this activity which is increasing globally. Tourism has become one of the major cultural and economic forces in the world today. A very recent but widely hailed tourism, alternatively known as eco-tourism, is a potential instrument for rural economic development, environmental natural heritage conservation. In the perspective of Bangladesh it is a very new

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term. Only few people are known about this matter. In this study, it is tried to show the brief of eco-tourism and its characteristics. Then the problems and prospects of eco-tourism in the Sundarbans will be showed.

Eco-tourism is basically a nature-based tourism. Eco-tourism has originated from conscience of environment. It does not harm environment. On the other hand, the local people earn money through eco-tourism. Eco-tourism is defined as environmentally and culturally sustainable tourism that provides and ensures social and economic benefits primarily to the local people and then to the nation as a whole, which interact with each other and live within a definable area.

According to the Encyclopedia of Eco-tourism, the term 'eco-tourism' is nature based, environmentally friendly and sustainably managed.

Finally, eco-tourism is a nature-based tourism that involves interpretation of natural and cultural environment and ecologically sustainable management of natural areas.

While there is no universal definition of eco-tourism, its general characteristics can be summarized as follows by the World Tourism Organization (WTO).

- (1) All nature-based forms of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas.
- (2) It contains educational and interpretational features.
- (3) It is generally, but not exclusively organized for small groups by specialized and small, locally owned businesses. Foreign operators of varying sizes also organize, operate and/or market eco-tourism tours generally for small groups.
- (4) It minimizes negative impacts upon the natural and socio cultural environment.
- (5) It supports the protection of natural areas by generating economic benefits for host communities, organizations and authorities managing natural areas with conservation purposes.
- (6) Increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among the locals and the foreign tourists.
- (7) Providing alternative employment and income opportunities for the local communities.

2. Objectives and Methodology

The study attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- (1) To see the possible prospects of eco-tourism in Sundarbans.

(2) To identify the problems and offer some policy guide lines.

The present study is mainly based on secondary data. The secondary data were collected from published official statistics, reports, documents, books, articles, daily newspapers, theses, dissertations, statistics and publications of BPC and the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, web-sites of related local and international institutions.

3. Eco-tourism Products in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a combination of verdant forests, riverine countryside, and long stretches of sunbathed beaches, fearsome wildness, meandering rivers and magnificent World's largest mangrove forest. Bordering the mighty Bay of Bengal stands this magical tapestry in green with all the glory of its past and the splendid colors of its natural present.

Bangladesh enjoys a unique position, being easily accessible from many popular destinations in South Asia. Bangladesh has a fairly large number of virgin eco-tourism spots to offer.

The Sundarbans: The Single Largest Mangrove Forest and the Abode of the Royal Bengal Tiger

Consummately located about 320 kilometer south-west of Dhaka and spread over an area of about 6000 square kilometer of deltaic swamps along the coastal belt of Khulna, is the single largest mangrove forest on the earth, the Sundarbans- the home of the Royal Bengal Tiger. These deeply dense mangrove forests are criss-crossed by a network of rivers and creeks. Tourists find here tides flowing in two directions in the same creek and often tigers swimming across a river or huge crocodiles basking in the sun. Other wild lives in this region are cheetahs, spotted deer, monkeys, pythons, wild-boars and hyenas. The forest is accessible by river from Khulna or Mongla. There are rest-houses for the visitors to stay and enjoy the unspoiled nature with all its charm and majesty.

The World Heritage Site, declared by the UNESCO, the Sundarbans is an immaculate place for eco-tourism. Main tourist spots inside the Sundarbans include Hiron Point (Nilkamal), Katka and Tin Konna Island to view tigers, deer, monkey, crocodiles, birds and natural beauty. Herds of spotted deer are often found to graze here. Another major attraction inside the Sundarbans is Dublachar (island), mainly a fishermen's village.

Flora and Fauna of The Sundarbans

The Sundarbans mostly comprises of mangrove forests. Mangroves are salt-tolerant plants occurring in the tropical and sub-tropical intertidal estuarine regions, sheltered coastline and tidal creeks. Sundarbans are the largest mangrove reserve in the world. The specialties of mangrove plants are that they are inundated

by salt water during high tides. Hence to adapt to these adverse situation the plants develop negatively geotropic breathing roots which occurs vertically from the ground. These roots are known as pneumatophores. There are more than 80 species of mangrove in Sundarbans including the mangrove associates and the true mangrove species.

The Sundarbans has rich faunal diversity. Nature in its pristine form exists here. The mangrove forests of the Sundarbans consist of a complex eco-system. The Sundarbans is rich in wildlife. It is mainly because the forests of the Sundarbans is protected by the government and hence it is more or less undisturbed especially the core area.

Future of Eco-tourism in the Sundarbans and Benefits

There is no doubt that tourism has an impact on the environment both natural and man-made. But if it is a planned tourism and properly defined eco-tourism, we can consider its impact in a positive way. The Sundarbans play a vital role in developing the entire regional economy and national economy.

Globally people are interested in enjoying nature. The demand of nature and eco-tourism is increasing day by day. In Bangladesh, The Sundarbans is one of the centers of eco-tourism. Globally it is well known as a famous tourist spot. At present 45000 tourists visit this place annually. On the other hand, 300000 people are indirectly dependent on Sundarbans' resources.

There is a good chance of developing eco-tourism in the Sundarbans and obviously it will be profitable. It is the only alternative to use Sundarbans' resources and landscapes in a properly planned way. The philosophy is minimum use and maximum profit without destruction of the tourists. The Sundarbans' landscapes and plants and animals are the real raw materials of tourism and for the near future.

Local people's participation is for the benefits of the locals. They can create employment opportunities and can earn money from the eco-tourism industries. They can change their life styles if they can earn money. Some private organizations such as Sundarbans' tourism, Bengal Tours and Travels, Surma Travel Agency are making eco-tours privately and expecting a good chance and bright future for eco-tourism in the Sundarbans.

Finally, the Sundarbans has economic and ecological chance for eco-tourism development. For the preservation of the Sundarbans' culture and tradition, long-term conservation and forest management, biodiversity and ecosystems protection of, local employment creation and socio economic development for the inhabitants, there is no alternative way without eco-tourism development. So the future of eco-tourism in the Sundarbans is very positive and it will bring benefits for the locals.

Eco-tourism and Sustainable Development

Eco-tourism is basically thought to conserve the biological diversity and renewable resources. The main reason for saving renewable energy is to think, about the sustainable development. So eco -tourism and sustainable development are interrelated with each other. Because to ensure eco tourism there is needed to have a sustainable plan for the development of any country. At present time, Bhutan has taken a plan to increase its economy size by adopting eco-tourism strategy.

4. SWOT Analysis of Eco-tourism in The Sundarbans

Strength

The climate of Bangladesh is very much favorable to the tourists. The country has a tropical monsoon. The strengths include the following points:

1. Virgin natural beauty is a major strength of the country. It is also known as a green country.
2. The Sundarbans in the South is the largest mangrove forest in the world. Its wild variety of flora and fauna attracts tourists from far and wide. If exploited properly, it could be the centre of attraction for nature loving soft adventurous tourists.
3. The people of the country are hospitable and welcoming, especially the people of the rural areas.
4. Bangladesh is located strategically in a very vital position of the South Asia.

Opportunities

It is not very difficult to implement eco-tourism, riverine tourism and spiritual tourism as the country possesses enough opportunities to develop these types of tourism. Government has formulated favorable foreign investment policy to attract overseas investors in readymade garments, leather goods, natural gas and petroleum sectors and liberal policy for joint venture investment in tourism sector as well.

Weakness

The following points show the weaknesses in this area:

- (1) The main weakness is the country's infrastructure. It is not well developed for suiting the needs of the tourists.
- (2) The political situation is not stable and often hartal and strikes discourage the tourists to visit the country.
- (3) Fund allocation on eco-tourism is insufficient.
- (4) The country often suffers from image crisis. The country continues to

remain as an unknown Country to the tourist generating countries.

Threats

The followings are the threats for the eco-tourism industry in Bangladesh:

- (1) Natural disasters are the biggest threat for the country especially flood and cyclone.
- (2) Unstable political situation has already created a bad image abroad, which is the biggest threat for development of eco-tourism.
- (3) Continuous campaign against Bangladesh by certain quarters as a fundamentalist country is another obstacle. This is a threat because it may raise socio-economic problems in future.

5. Problems and Prospects of Expansion of Eco-tourism in Bangladesh

It is a very clear matter that eco-tourism is a new idea in the context of Bangladesh. So experts have started to think about this form of tourism now a days. So problems of expanding eco-tourism have been discussed below.

- The burning problem is the budgetary problem. Govt. don't allocate big amount to expand eco-tourism.
- Bangladesh is still in mass tourism.
- Another critical problem is the lack of coordination among the ministries.
- Lack of awareness of local people about foreign tourists is another concern.
- Bangladesh can't sell its tourism as eco-tourism to the world tourists. People know it as mass tourism.
- The process to make policy for eco-tourism is in under refrigerator.
- Animals and forests are depleted by the people of Bangladesh every day which is a significant problem of expanding eco-tourism.

There are some good news about the expansion of eco-tourism in our country. It shows some features of Bangladesh which are very potential for eco-tourism. Some points are given below-

- Nature of Bangladesh is very preferable for eco-tourism
- We have some tourist spots they are rich by attractive flora and fauna like the Sundarbans.
- There is the largest mangrove forest "Sundarbans" which can be the ideal of eco-tourism for all over the world.

- It should bring economic development. It should contribute to GDP. It should create the scope of employment for local people and so on.
- Ecological or environmental development- it should preserve flora and fauna, no destruction of nature and animal.
- Natural beauty of Bangladesh helps to establish eco-tourism

6. Major Findings and Recommendations

- It is found in this study that eco-tourism can be not only for poverty alleviation but also for the economic emancipation of the local communities and the country as a whole.
- This study reveals that the future of eco-tourism in the Sundarbans is very positive and it will bring benefits for the locals as well as the whole country.
- This study suggests that public-private partnership (PPP) is necessary for the development of eco-tourism in the Sundarbans.
- At present 45000 tourists visit this place annually. On the other hand, 300000 people are indirectly dependent on Sundarbans' resources.

Recommendations

There is shown the finding from two sides of studies on the problems and prospects of eco-tourism above. Now after considering every matter from fields and policy levels some recommendations can be set to establish eco, tourism in Bangladesh.

- As it is a new idea in Bangladesh, so at first a very pragmatic policy of eco tourism in Sundarbans is a crying need at this moment.
- To make this policy, govt. can take the help from the neighbor countries Nepal or Maldives.
- Effective strategy is needed to go ahead for the progress of eco-tourism.
- Cooperation among related department of govt. should be established on this issue.
- Experts on eco-tourism can be hired from countries rich in eco-tourism and visiting our natural sites with them to understand potentiality.
- Bangladesh government should start to conserve the forest and natural sites like the Sundarbans.
- Public Private Partnership (PPP) needs to get priority on this issue.
- Mass tourism should be stopped by policy.

- Strong rules and regulation for tourists should be set by the government.
- Encouragement of growing eco resort can be the way to spread eco-tourism.
- Govt. should invite the eco-tourists to our country through advertisement in the prominent tourist spots of the world.
- In term of infrastructures in tourist areas need to be well planned and should maintain some codes and conducts which will save the environment.

7. Conclusion

Eco-tourism can generate economic benefits at local and national levels and thus promote incentives to conserve the resources on which it depends. In this context, the focus should be given on sustainable planning to flourish eco-tourism as a great potential for the economic development.

The goal of eco-tourism development in the Sundabans should be to capture a portion of the enormous global tourism market by attracting visitors to natural areas and by using the revenues, it is possible to fund local conservation and fuel economic development.

Eco-tourism can be a tool not only for poverty alleviation but also for the economic emancipation of local communities and the country as a whole. It can also help addressing various dimensions of poverty and complement conservation efforts. Bangladesh, being easily accessible from many popular destinations in South Asia, enjoys a unique position to attract eco-tourists and can change the socio-economic scenario of the nation in near future.

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