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FOREST-BASED TOURISM IN BANGLADESH: STATUS, PROBLEMS, AND PROSPECTS

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Bangladesh is a land of diverse forest-based natural attractions throughout the evergreen, semi-evergreen, and mangrove forest ecosystems. The article attempts at exploring various dimensions of ecotourism industry and critically analyzes the relationship among the stakeholders, overall strength-weakness of ecotourism sector and impediments hindering its development. National Parks, Ecoparks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Game Reserves, and the like have been developed in the natural forest ecosystems to attract tourists from home and abroad. Cheap transportation, lodging and associated costs, unique scenic beauty and wilderness of all sites and socio-cultural diversity of indigenous communities living in the forest together make up the strength of the industry as a whole. The study identifies a number of impediments, including conflict among the stakeholders and forest degradation hindering expansion of ecotourism industry. For sustainable development of forest-based tourism, traditional 'Top-down' management approach is suggested to avoid and voice of all stakeholders needs to be considered in decision-making.

Keywords: *ecotourism, policy, stakeholder, SWOT analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Forest-based tourism, popularly known as 'ecotourism' that blends 'ecology' and 'tourism', is defined as environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples (The Nature Conservancy,



2009). Forest-based tourism is regarded as an effective tool for sustainable conservation of forest resources and its biodiversity. It plays both conservation and revenue earning roles. Conservation roles are played in two ways: by keeping intact, and somewhere by improving, the existing forest resources to attract the tourists and secondly by involving the poor forest dwellers, who were removing trees and other non-timber products for their livelihood, in different income generating activities within the ecotourism area.

Bangladesh, a country of south Asia lies between 20°34' and 26°38' north latitude and 88°01' and 92°41' east longitude. It shares boundary on the west and north side with India, on the south-east with Myanmar, and on the south with Bay of Bengal. The country enjoys a sub-tropical monsoon climate characterized by rain-bearing winds, moderately warm temperatures, and high humidity. While there are six seasons in a year, three namely, winter, summer, and monsoon are prominent. Winter that is quite pleasant begins in November and ends on February. Monsoon starts in July and stays upto October. This period accounts for 80% of the total annual rainfall (BBS, 2003). The annual temperature averages between 7°C to 36°C. April is normally the warmest and January is the coolest month.

Tourism in Bangladesh is not a fully flourished, rather a developing industry. In recent times, with the gradual development of infrastructure facilities and increasing exposition, Bangladesh is fast emerging as a tempting tourist spot. This article is aimed at critically exploring various issues of forest-based tourism industry of the country, analyzing its problems and future priorities. The following section of the article describes potentials and attractions of popular tourist spots in different forest areas and the succeeding sections critically analyze, among others, contribution and interrelationships of the stakeholders and their roles in sustainable tourism development. Existing strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats are discussed subsequently. The article ends with policy implications and concluding remarks with future priorities.

POPULAR FOREST-BASED TOURIST SPOTS IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a country of diverse attractions that include the lush green countryside, the world's longest sea beach, colorful cultural diversity, remains of ancient civilization and the world's largest single patch mangrove forest. There remain numerous potential spots of ecotourism opportunities throughout the country. Table 1 shows some of the

popular forest-based tourism spots along with area and year of establishment, while in Figure 1 those spots are located in the map of Bangladesh.

Figure 1. Map of Bangladesh showing ecotourism hotspots



Ecologically the forests of Bangladesh can be classified into four types: a) Tropical moist deciduous forest, b) Tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forest, c) Mangrove forest and d) Freshwater swamp forest (Champion and Seth, 1968). Each of the forest types harbors a number of tourist spots. Tropical deciduous forest, popularly known as Sal forest, is Bangladesh's dry deciduous forest that houses a rich diversity of flora and fauna. This forest area is easily accessible from major cities including the capital city, which is about 160 km away. Considering its potentialities and facilities the Government declared 8 436 ha area of Sal forest situated in Madhupur as a National Park in 1962 with the aim of conserving forest genetic resources as well as establishing forest based recreation facilities.

Tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forest type spreads over the hilly regions of Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the greater Sylhet. This forest area covers about 0.67 million ha of land, which is 4.65 percent of the total land area of Bangladesh (Muhammed et al., 2008). The forests consist of a mixture of many tropical evergreen and tropical deciduous species (over 400 tree species) occurring in association with each other and with bamboo (Khan, 2001). Most of the wildlife sanctuary, game reserves and national parks are situated within this forest type (see Table 1). These forests are also inhabited by a number of tribal communities, with their distinctive cultures, rituals and traditions that increase tourist attraction to an extent.

The Mangrove forest in Sundarbans, with an area of 0.74 million ha (Muhammed et al., 2008), and a cluster of islands is the greatest mangrove forest in the world. The Sundarbans is the natural habitat of the world-famous Royal Bengal tiger, spotted deer, crocodile, jungle fowl, wild boar, lizards, monkeys, and an innumerable variety of wildlife. The main attractions of this area for tourists include wildlife photography, boating, and meeting local fishermen, woodcutters, and honey collectors. Thousands of meandering streams, creeks, rivers, and estuaries add charm more.

A variety of grassland and wetland ecosystems spread across Sylhet, Sunamganj and Netrokona districts of north and northeast Bangladesh. These fresh water wetlands support a wide variety of species of fauna and flora, both terrestrial and aquatic. This area is described as "a wetland ecosystem of outstanding international significance" especially as waterfowl habitats (FAO, 2000) and Tanguar *haor*¹ was declared as "Ramsar site" in 1992.

Table 1. Popular forest-based tourist spots with area and year of establishment

Names	Forest types	Area (ha)	Year of estd.
Sunderbans (W) WS	Mangrove	71,502	1996
Sunderbans (E) WS	Mangrove	31,226	1960
Sunderbans (S) WS	Mangrove	36,970	1996
Lawachara NP	Hill forest	1250	1996
Rema-Kalenga WS	Hill forest	1795	1996
Satchari WS	Hill forest	243	2006
Chunti WS	Hill forest	7764	1986
Teknaf GR	Hill forest	11615	1983
Bhawal NP	Sal forest	5022	1974
Madhupur NP	Sal forest	8436	1962
Ramsagar NP	Sal forest	28	2001
Himchari NP	Hill forest	1729	1980
Kaptai NP	Hill forest	5464	1999
Nijhum Dip NP	Coastal mangrove	16352	2001
Meda Kachchapia NP	Hill forest	396	2004
Khadimnagar NP	Hill forest	679	2006
Pablakhali WS	Hill forest	45087	1962
Char Kukri-mukri WS	Coastal mangrove	40	1981
Fashiakhali WS	Hill forest	1302	2007
Hazarikhil WS	Hill forest	2908	-
Banskhali EP	Hill forest	1200	2003
Madhabkunda EP	Hill forest	266	2001
Kuakata EP	Coastal mangrove	5661	2006
Sitakunda EP	Hill forest	808	1998
Madhutila EP	Sal forest	100	1999
Dulahazara EP	Hill forest	900	1999
National BG	<i>Ex-situ</i>	84	1961
Sitakunda BG	Hill forest	808	1998
Tanguar <i>haor</i> (Ramsar site)	Swam forest	9725	1992 (Ramsar site declaration)
Hakaluki <i>haor</i>	Swamp forest	18000	-

Source: BFD (2007); EP, Ecopark; NP, National Park²; GR, Game Reserve³; BG, Botanical Garden; WS, Wildlife Sanctuary⁴

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS USING 4RS

Ecotourism stakeholders have been analyzed using rights, responsibilities, returns, and relationships (4Rs) and are shown in Table 2. The forest department (FD), and operating local and international NGOs, among the key stakeholders, have direct access to the forest areas. The FD is the government agency responsible for overall forest management, execution of development and conservation projects and collection of revenue. Some NGOs are responsible for executing management projects in participatory approach that involve local communities in forest production and protection. The indigenous communities, living in and adjoining forest fringes since pre-historic times, enjoy customary access to the forest resources.

Table 2. Forest-based tourism stakeholder analysis using 4Rs

Key stakeholders	Rights	Responsibilities	Returns	Relationship
Tourists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not to disturb or alter natural environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recreation • Education and research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good with the other stakeholders
Indigenous communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customary ownership • No legal rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional conservation efforts • Co-management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food, fuel • Cultural and religious attachments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor with FD • Moderate with the mainstream people • Good with NGOs
NGOs and donor agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access • No legal rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist in management planning • Project execution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forest protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good with all stakes
FD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to all resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revenues • Forest protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor with forest dwellers
Mainstream Bengalis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No legal rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in co-management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Livelihood through small enterprises targeted to tourists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate with FD and indigenous communities

They depend on the forest resources for fruits, fuel, and other non-timber products. In some areas they operate small business of traditional handicrafts and novelty items that are popular among the visiting tourists. The mainstream Bengali people have no legal rights and access but in some areas operate small business targeted to tourists too.

Analysis of the relationships between stakeholders shows that problematic relationships prevail between stakeholders. Successful relationships are those built on trust, understanding and equal participation (Salam and Noguchi 2006). But the relationship between key stakeholders, particularly between FD and local communities is characterized by mutual mistrust, and conflict of interest. The conflict between FD and the indigenous people is a historical event (Alam et al 2008). There are more than 45 distinct indigenous communities living in Bangladesh, with a combined population of around two millions. The antagonistic relationship between the FD, indigenous, and local people is a big obstacle confronting ecotourism development and sustainable forest management at the same time.

SWOT ANALYSIS

The analysis of strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) is presented in Table 3. Unique natural beauty in each of the tourist spots is the highest-level strength. Socio-cultural diversity of mainstream and forest dwelling communities adds more to this strength. Cheap transportation, food and lodging costs are other strengths of most forest spots. But unfortunately, road network and other lodging infrastructure in some areas are underdeveloped. Conflict among indigenous people, mainstream community, and management authority is the most noteworthy threat to the expanding forest-based tourism industry in Bangladesh.

There is a lack of environmental knowledge and awareness among the tourists too since in most cases they do not know what to do and what to avoid. Many tourists are found to create disturbance of birds, animals and other natural dwellers living in their habitat. Sometimes they dispose of wastes hither and thither. Some development efforts e.g. oil and gas exploration in and around the tourist spots and degradation of forest resources also discourage many tourists to visit. However, a number of opportunities remain to develop this industry as a whole. Extensive promotion of forest spots through print and electronic media is required to attract tourists. Properly trained guides should be introduced in each of

the spots. Awareness should be created, finally, among the potential tourists about the virtues of forest-based tourism.

Table 3. SWOT analysis of forest-based tourism in Bangladesh

Strength	Weakness	Opportunity	Threat
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique scenic beauty • Cheap transportation and associated cost • Socio-cultural diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underdeveloped road network • Lodging and food availability • Management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trained guide • Promotion through mass media • Awareness raising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict among stakeholders • Resource degradation • Development initiatives • Tourists' lack of environmental knowledge

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The existing national forest policy of Bangladesh has placed great emphasis on ecotourism. The forest policy states that ecotourism needs to be recognized as a forestry activity that should be promoted within the carrying capacity of nature (Ahsan, 2007). Besides, National Tourism Policy was declared in 1992 with the objectives, among others, to create interest in tourism among the people, to preserve, protect, develop, and maintain tourism resources, to take steps for poverty-alleviation through creating employment, and to open up a recognized sector for private capital investment (National Tourism Organization, 2009). In line with the policy, the government provides incentives to attract private sector partners. The incentives include tax-holiday, loans, concession rates for taxes and duties and in specific cases, allotment of land, and the like.

In conclusion, though local communities are major stakeholders, all the past forest-based tourism development efforts by the government agencies followed a top-down approach without appropriate consultation with the local people and communities who would likely be benefited or affected. This is the reason behind the conflict among the stakeholders, and such conflict is ultimately hindering development of this industry as a whole. For sustainable development and operationalization of ecotourism the voice and feelings of local community members should be taken

under consideration. They should be given access and rights to operate and deliver ecotourism activities in the tourism spots of forest areas.

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ENDNOTES

1. A *haor* is bowl-shaped depression between the natural levees of a river subject to monsoon flooding
2. "National Park means comparatively large areas of outstanding scenic and natural beauty with the primary

object of protection and preservation of scenery, flora and fauna in the natural state to which access for public recreation and education and research may be allowed” [(paragraph) (p) of Article 2 of Bangladesh Wildlife (Preservation) Order, 1973)].

3. “Game Reserve means an area declared by the government as such for the protection of wildlife and increase in the population of important species wherein capturing of wild animals shall be unlawful” [(paragraph) (c) of Article 2 of Bangladesh Wildlife (Preservation) Order, 1973)].
4. “Wildlife Sanctuary means an area closed to hunting, shooting or trapping of wild animals and declared as such under Article 23 by the government as undisturbed breeding ground primarily for the protection of wildlife inclusive of all natural resources such as vegetation soil and water” [(paragraph) (p) of Article 2 of Bangladesh Wildlife (Preservation) Order, 1973)].

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