

## ‘Package Eco-tour’ as Special Interest Tourism Product-Bangladesh Perspective

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### Abstract

In terms of visitation by tourists and issues of sustainability, the Natural World Heritage Sites are getting wider attention in recent times. Taking into consideration as a case, Bangladesh in general, with the Sundarbans in particular, this study has been aimed to outline the visit to this forest as a special interest tourism activity with detailed conceptual framework and marketing approaches. This has also attempted to develop the grounds of marketing of a ‘Package Eco-tour’ that is capable of minimising the negative impacts of tourism on such sites’ authenticity, ecological set up and biodiversity. With the unique application of the ‘Participant Observation’ approach in tourism research, the study has been based on the explanatory case study method. Results of this study have showed that the tourists’ visit in an all inclusive package format can be practised within a delicate and fragile natural set up that can potentially reduce the harmful negative consequences. Again, as a form of special interest tourism, such kind of package tour represents better marketing prospects through creating appeal to both domestic and international tourists.

**Key Words:** Eco-tourism, Special Interest Tourism, the Natural WHS, tourism package tour, sustainability

### 1. Introduction

Traditional trade of tourism always emphasises on the materialistic side of tourism facilities rather than the authenticity in charm and enjoyment. However, Bangladesh is one of those few countries whose natural treasures still remains unexplored and the Sundarbans is an excellent example in this case. Bangladesh offers distinctive and delicate attractions of her own which are different from those that the tourists haunt in other neighbouring countries. It is believed that the expansion of eco tourism activities in protected natural landscapes including the World Heritage Sites (WHS) can create the ground for tourism promotion through the involvement of individuals and organisations (Keitumetse, 2009; Wallace and Russell, 2004). This study has outlined the visit of the Sundarbans as a special interest tourism activity with detailed conceptual frameworks. Additionally, the study has also attempted to analyse the issues of marketing of the ‘Package Eco-tour’ through the understanding of responsible management of impacts of tourism on the sites’ delicacy, ecological set up and biodiversity. However, this study has been confined within geographical boundary of the Bangladesh part of the Sundarbans.

### 2. Literature Review:

#### 2.1 *The Trends of Special Interest Tourism:*

In a simple meaning, ‘Special Interest Tourism (SIT)’ refers to the touristic interest to any specific fields of tourism. Douglas *et. al.*, (2001) have attempted to explain this tourism typology as the custom-made prerequisite of leisure with enjoyable experiences that is focused by specifically articulated group or individual interests. Where, Read (1980) has opined that this tourism is related to peoples’ movement within a specific region or destination of particular interest. Following the definitions, special interest tourism can be categorised as mainstream tourism that focuses on specific field in small scales and not in general. The SIT product is high yielding and labour-intensive that requires experts of the service providers and interpreters, as ‘thousands of unusual travel opportunities worldwide’ (Hall, 1989: 81). Special interest tourism contributes to the economy and helps to raise several niche markets. Special interest tourists express an aspiration for real experiences and authenticity which allow them lively recognition with host communities in a non-exploitative manner and tourists’ involvement with special interest activities becomes a platform to provide the way of finding personal fulfilment (Stebbins, 1982). SIT is ethical and sustainable tourism as the tourist experiences are not gained at the cost of damaging the qualities, if a society which made the experience possible (Ritcher, 1989). Special Interest Tourism is a growing segment in the global travel and tourism market (Frommer, 1988). Still, the number of special interest tourists remains low compared with those of mass tourists and this issue of is a fundamental problem of sustainability in tourism (Wheeler, 1991). However, special interest tourism is

booming and a substantial market proportion is attracting high-income earners who prefer long and expensive tours characterized by diversity and challenge (Alpine, 1986). The ties between special interest tourism and the environment have developed in several phases around the middle of the twentieth century, thus developing the typologies like ecotourism, nature-based tourism or wildlife tourism under one umbrella (Hudman, 1991).

### *2.2 Ecotourism as SIT:*

Ecotourism is a type of nature-based special interest tourism. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) has defined ecotourism as travel to natural areas that is responsible towards environmental conservation and sustains the host community's well-being (TIES, 2011). Ecotourism is a sub-branch of tourism centred on the tourist's desire for engagement in a relatively nature-based environment where the tourist and the supporting facilities have lower impact on the environment (Rymer, 1992). In general, ecotourism as special interest tourism has some specific features, like: services or products based on nature, dynamic management for reducing environmental blows, a component of environment education and contribution towards the conservation of natural environment through closer liaison with the host communities (Buckley, 2003). Forests and natural reserves are rapidly becoming tourism products due to the wider interests of tourists and their involvement. The building of environment-friendly resorts and hotels across the world represents the growth of ecotourism markets and the tourist's awareness for the preservation of environment in sustainable ways. 'Tour operators choose the accommodation, the range of excursions, the routes, the choice of airline and the prices' (Middleton and Clarke, 2001: 13). A significant number of ecotourism destinations in developing countries lack modern tourist facilities. Ecotourism in these countries are beneficial in many ways, mainly contributing to the indigenous livelihood, employment generation, small scale linkage tourism business development (souvenir items, food shop, eco-products etc.), and reducing the dependency on single economic sector. Thus, in general ecotourism helps the local economy in great ways (Campbell, 1999).

### *2.3 Ecotourists' Characteristics and the 'Package Eco-tour':*

Ecotourists are not homogeneous groups, but rather a group which differ across a number of different dimensions (Fennell, 2002). The typologies of ecotourists can vary. They are hardcore nature tourists like scientific researchers, dedicated nature tourists like those people interested in the cultural and natural history of protected areas, mainstream nature tourists are those who have interest in atypical trip and casual nature tourists like those people who participate nature by the way (Lindberg, 1991). Again, ecotourists are clustered in another five different groups according to their characteristics. These are 'nature exclusive', 'social and nature oriented', 'autonomous and nature oriented', 'enthusiastic generalists' and 'less passionate' (Wallace and Smith, 1997). Ecotourists are more adventuresome and dynamic to choose activities. Ecotourists prefer outdoor attractions like parks, wilderness, protected and rural areas (Kretchman and Eagles, 1990). They are allocentric-midcentric in character and prefer authentic experiences (Weaver, 1998). Tourism packages are mainly designed for the educated and affluent visitors. These packages are largely consumed by international tourists. Thomas Cook organised an early form of package tour on the 5th of July, 1841. The route was between Leicester and Loughborough with a distance of twelve miles and the means of transportation was open carriage train (Thomascook, 2011). In recent times, the package tour is a rapidly expanding product in the ecotourism market (Laws, 1997) as prices for the tour are set to match the competition rather than undercut them (Holloway, 2004). Research has shown that lower price (compared to competition) often leads to the consumer perception of the product/service being of inferior quality (Rao and Monroe, 1989 as cited in Darke and Chung, 2005).

### *2.4 Tourism in Bangladesh:*

To predict tourism and travel situation in Bangladesh by 2020, the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) has relied on the Tourism Satellite Accounts (TSAs). By 2020, in Bangladeshi Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the personal travel, demand and contribution of travel & tourism will grow by 7.6%, 7.0% and 6.4%, respectively. Again in 2011, Bangladesh is expected to earn BDTk 6.6 billion from international tourist spending and the expected number of international visitors is 443,000. The forecasted international tourist arrival by 2021 is expected to rise to 630,000, indicating the annual increase of 3.6% per annum with earnings of BDTK 13.5bn (WTTC, 2011). The tourism potentiality of Bangladesh is globally recognized and she is ranked on the number one position in the 'Lonely Planet Best-Value Destinations 2011'. The Lonely Planet is a production of the British Broadcasting Corporation and is the world's most popular tourist publication (Lonely Planet, 2011). The Royal Bengal Tiger, mangrove vegetation, spotted deer, crocodile and diverse bird life make it an attractive destination for ecotours and ecotourism is considered to become the most feasible and promising

area of development for the Sundarbans (Hussain and Acharya, 1994). However, data indicates that the year-based increase of ecotourist numbers in the Sundarbans is upward with relatively lower contribution of international tourists. According to Iqball, et. al., (2010), the figures represent that in the year of 2006-2007, the Sundarbans was visited by the highest number of tourists, both domestic and international with 2083 and 94,745, respectively. The number dropped slightly in the later years. The reason for this trend may be due to the temporary political turmoil in Bangladesh that gradually improved later on and is reflected in the growth of WTTC (2011) data. In general, the number of ecotourists to the Sundarbans, in comparison with the gross total international tourist arrivals in Bangladesh is very low. One possible reason is the lack of quality services and tours those can expectedly meet the demand of the ecotourists and to ensure more of their participation.

### 3. Methodology

This qualitative study has employed techniques used in the 'Participant Observation' research approach using personal observation and informal interviews. The informal interviews were unstructured followed by open-ended discussions with respondents based on randomized selection. The researcher stayed in the Sundarbans forest area in between the time frame of February 2011 till August, 2011 for this research purpose. Following randomized selection, the researcher had unstructured and open-ended interviews with ten tourists and ten forest dependent people to understand their perceptions and mindset about package tours in the Sundarbans. The five areas of the forest where the interviews were conducted were: Khulna, Mongla, Syam Nagar, Heron Point and Koyra. The very basic reason for the interview sites selection was the crowd of the respondents, where mostly they remain scattered. An attempt was made to explore the general and existing tourism scenario in the Sundarbans through observation and interviews. Total number of these informal interviews was twenty, regardless of gender, nationality, and age or profession. On the other hand, due to the attachment of ecological issues, this study has largely depended on the extended review of literatures including newspaper articles or editorials, journal articles, online information, published official reports as secondary source of data and information.

#### 3.1 The Case Study Site:

The word 'Sundar' stands for beautiful and 'Bans' means jungle - the Sundarbans denotes the 'Beautiful Jungle'. The Sundarbans is the world's largest littoral mangrove forest and is one of the largest such forests in the world. All the data shown in this section are produced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2011). Total area of this forest is around 600,000 hectares, almost two-third of which is in Bangladesh and the rest is in India. In 1997 an area of about 140,000 hectares was declared as a World Heritage Site. The Sundarbans is adorned with natural and tidal waterways, rivers, canals, muddy flats and salinity based small islands. The Sundori, Gewa, the Nypa palm and other twenty seven nearly extinct mangrove species mainly dominate the Sundarbans. The forest has almost 334 species of flora and 375 species of fauna; including 260 bird species, the world famous Royal Bengal Tigers, some threatened species like estuarine crocodiles and the Indian Pythons. The Sundarbans is the roaming area of the largest populations of the Royal Bengal Tiger in the world. Spotted deer, the nearly extinct mugger crocodile, the wild cats, the wild boar and wild cat species are ever wonders to the tourists. The Sundarbans possesses all beauties to become a paradise for eco-tourists. To get glimpses of wild life and the undemanding life of local inhabitants: fishermen, the Bawalis (wood cutter), the Mouwalis (honey collector) and other functioning indigenous forest workers, Heron point, Dublar Char and Katka are regarded as the central spots.



Figure: Interview site of the Sundarbans-Bangladesh Part (in \*asterisk). (Source: Modified from the World Wide Fund for Nature, 2011)

#### 4. Findings and Discussions

The findings have been diverse and covered wider angles. Eight out of the ten tourists agreed that they liked to visit the Sundarbans as a destination for special interest tourism activities. However all of the five domestic tourist respondents opined that they had a great desire to visit the place for a long time and they were very satisfied to get the chance. One of the respondents was very overwhelmed and answered 'I can realize now what I have missed so far'. All of the domestic respondents answered that this was their first visit to the Sundarbans. The reason was poor publicity of the forest as a potential tourist destination. On the other hand, the international tourists also asserted on more media exposure of the Sundarbans. They believed that this site was not well advertised in the global media. Nine out of the ten interviewees coined that the existing transportation network to the forest was not of satisfactory level. Their suggestions for improvement included building easier transportation network and enhanced facilities for the tourists. Surprisingly, all of the ten respondents agreed that an all-inclusive package tour would be much appreciated by them. The Swedish tourist said, 'I am even willing to pay whatever the expenses would be for a well organized package tour'. The main reason behind this expectation was the lack of service providers for tourism products. On this point, one of the respondents answered 'I do not really understand the reason for not involving more of the private sector to operate tours in the Sundarbans'. On the other side, all of the forest-dependent respondents answered that tourism can bring positive impact on the sources of providing their livelihood. A wood collector who was an interviewee responded, 'We cannot get the right price for our produces...we definitely welcome tourists those will help to support our livelihood.' Based on the findings and following the extended format of the 7W's of what, who, where, which mode of transportation, what arrangements for accommodation and entertainment, what measures for sustainability and pollution control, what price- the tourism product may be designed as an all inclusive 'Package Eco- tour' to the Sundarbans and can attract the high spending ecotourists as well as genera touristsl. Reasons for this prediction are numerous. The Sundarbans- the world's one of the widely known forests, posses the capability to become a global hub for ecotourism. For the tropical climate, opportunities for cruising and boating, forest ecology, exceptional population of wildlife, unspoiled beaches throughout along the Bay of Bengal and around some islands, indigenous collectors of forest produce, cultural annual festivals and diverse culture (Moss, 1993). Six key ecologically important sites of the forest namely Katka Tiger Point, Katka-Kachikhali, Dubla Island, Nil Komol, Mandarbaria and Koromjal highlight the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans. The travel route for the package tour between Khulna and the Sundarbans is very popular amongst the tourists as mentioned by most of the tourists. As desired by the local forest dependent respondents, the tour can be designed as harmless to the ecological set up and supporting their sources of livelihood through the participation of ecotourists. Thus, ecotourists can positively contribute to the sustainability and conservation of a tourist destination through their presence, exploring the wild life and

indigenous livelihood (Swarbrooke, 1999).

#### *4.1 Competitiveness of the Product:*

The package eco-tours can be aimed to target more international than domestic ecotourists. Governments of developing countries treat international tourists as the key imperative tourism market area. Because, in comparison with the domestic tourists, these tourists hang about for a longer time at a destination, splurge more, use expensive accommodation and transport and fetch currency that positively contributes to the host country's international financial circumstances (Middleton and Clarke, 2001). The product can target young aged, highly spending and educated tourists and 'Green Consumers' from the United Kingdom and the United States of America, as stated by both South American and British tourists. In the USA, 67% general and 76% experienced ecotourists are in the 25-54 age group with equal participation of both male and female (Backman and Potts, 1993). They are middle income group and 35% of them belong to managerial or professional class. 96% of practised ecotourists are either college educated or have a degree (Cook, *et al.*, 1992). Considering the behavioural trends, the American people are eager to pay 5% to 10% added prices to buy ecofriendly products (Coddington, 1990). The package tour can likely to frame market strategies that will help the Sundarbans to become the ultimate destination for global ecotourists for relaxation and recharge. Data shows that ecotourists are most likely to be childless or 'empty-nesters' visitors and are eager to experience a more relaxed holiday (Reingold, 1993). Based upon theories and observations, the package tours can again target group family visits and these can be the ideal family package tours. As a river-based country, river cruise is not uncommon in Bangladesh. The river cruises so far in Bangladesh are identified as short-haul journeys, mainly limited within the river area and a one day concept. The package tours are basically the updated concept of river cruise and all inclusive - normally considering hospitality, comfort and overall satisfaction of the tourists as key factors for success. There is a close link between the nature and literature. Students, researchers and academics of almost all countries are expected to have heard about the Sundarbans and have some sort of ideas in their mind regarding its features as a forest or as a UNESCO natural World Heritage Site. The Italian tourist argued that tourism in Venice experiences sustainability problems and excessive pressures on the resources for which tourists cannot even enjoy their trip. The number of tourists was 16.5 million in comparison with only 60,209 local residents in 2009 (Visit Venice, 2011). Tours in the Sundarbans are not expected to be considered to exceed the carrying capacity and not to ensure responsibility towards the nature or the wildlife. Again, ecotourists are very often unwilling to visit some parts of Thailand, due to pollution problems, like solid waste, oil spillage or even noise. Data represents that almost one – third of water in Thailand is not suitable for consumption (The World Bank, 2001). Mainly for this reason, in 2007, 83.07% of total tourist arrivals in Thailand were for leisure activities than ecotourism (Mintel Oxygen, 2011). Tours in the Sundarbans are also thought to ensure minimum pollution by adopting initiatives of waste storage and recycling, technical problems reduction and noise control. Facilities like video recording to make documentaries or short format films for free of charge can act as strengths of the tour to persuade ecotourists to participate as argued by six of the domestic tourist respondents. Ecotourism is a sort of instructive nature based travelling experience that significantly contributes to preserve the ecosystem as well as respect the uprightness of indigenous communities (Scace *et al.*, 1992). All of the respondents said that the tours should endorse ethical or moral behaviour and responsibilities to the cultural and natural environment.

#### *4.2 Future Marketing Development:*

Due to the growing consciousness and initiatives to increase the availability of ecology based tourism services or products, the contribution of the tourism sector in national economy is gradually rising in many countries in the world. As a result, concerned authorities and agencies are expected to focus more on ecotourism. This will help the possible expansion of ecotourism market. Product of this study has significant potentiality for market development in the coming years with the help of government's supportive policies of the Bangladesh Tourism Policy-2009, where this has been clearly stated in paragraph 3.1.2 that, 'For developing ecotourism, there will be collaboration with the ministry of environment and forest and other agencies. The government will offer close support for ecotourism development in the Sundarbans, Chittagong hill tracts and environmentally critical areas (MOCAT, 2011)'. The promotional and collaboration activities should focus on future market development. Online advertisements, an interactive website and its link with global tourism guidebooks likes; the National Geographic, Fremme, Lonely Planet etc. can be useful. In fact, a web page can become a platform for service consumers, where they can share their ideas that help to understand the market trends and customer's expectations. The massive popularity of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter has broadened the horizon of internet advertising. Creating collaboration not only with regional travel agents but also with major global travel agents and tour operators are beneficial. To ensure excellent customer services, the tour should

also employ graduates as guides or interpreters. In recent years, schemes of certification and ecolabels in the tourism industry contribute to achieve higher level of sustainability in tourism business. Environmental consciousness among the general mass population is rising and more consumers will to choose greener products. This has made the environment one of the key areas to gain competitive advantage and a common element of tourism's segmenting, targeting and positioning strategies (Font and Buckely, 2001). The tours can attempt to get international certification for its sustainability in the global markets as stated by the majority of the international tourists. A certification characteristically is the representation of the products' higher quality and socio-environmentally soundness (Haaland and Aas, 2010).

## 5. Conclusion:

Findings have revealed that ecotourism can become a popular form of special interest tourism in the Sundarbans. Ecotourism in the Sundarbans can have huge contribution to the local economy and thus offer support to the local forest-dependent population. Demand of a package tour has been high among the tourists regardless of origin of nationality. The package tours developed through this study is a symbolic ecotourism product to highlight the current overall situation and future market trends of a Natural World Heritage Site. The Sundarbans denotes global image and popularity among eco-tourists. However, ecotourism can have negative impacts leading to natural imbalances and the package tours are expected to be designed in accordance with sustainability issues. Such tours as a special interest tourism product obviously can render enormous market potentialities through ensuring responsibility to its delicacy, ecological set up and biodiversity. Issues concentrated on the Sundarbans as an ecotourism destination and a playing ground of touristic interaction with the local indigenous population can pave grounds for further research.

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