



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

Forest-based Tourism in Bangladesh: Status, Problems and Prospects

Mahbubul Alam and Yasushi Furukawa and Salma Akter

Ehime University, Kochi University, Kochi University

6. April 2009

Online at <http://mpa.ub.uni-muenchen.de/25212/>

MPRA Paper No. 25212, posted 21. September 2010 13:47 UTC

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

Mahbubul Alam
Ehime University

Yasushi Furukawa
Kochi University

Salma Akter
Kochi University

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.

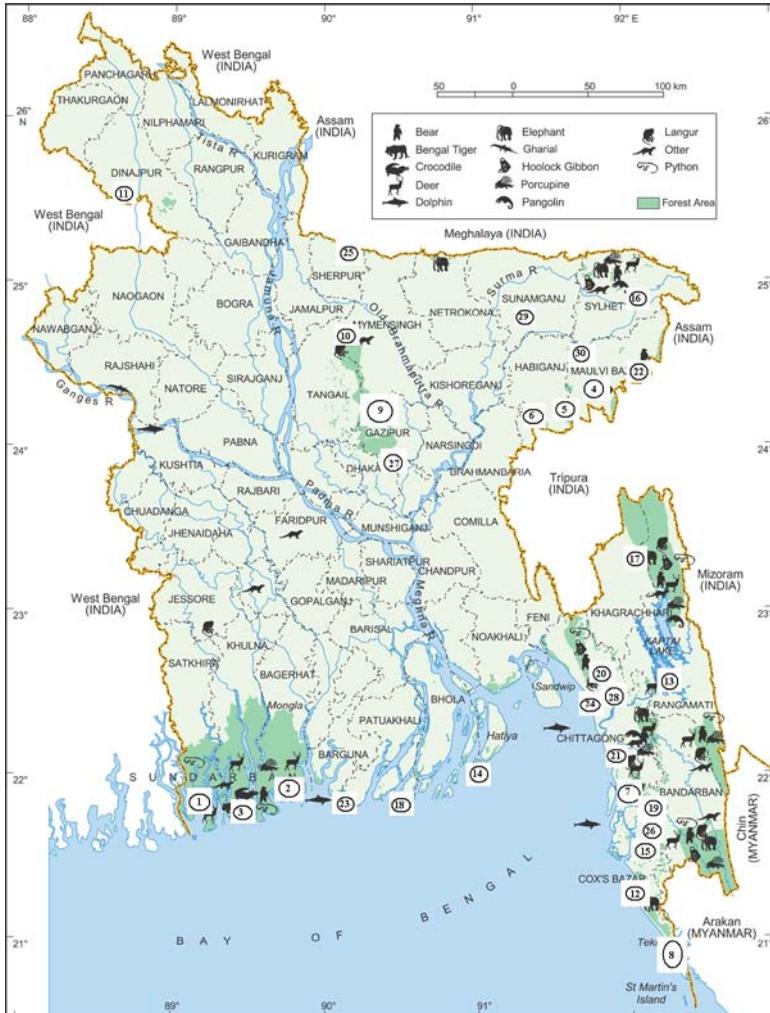
Tourism in Bangladesh is not a fully flourished, rather a developing industry. In recent times, with the gradual development of infrastructure facilities and increasing exposition, Bangladesh is fast emerging as a tempting tourist spot. This article is aimed at critically exploring various issues of 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 eco-tourism 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.

REFERENCES

- Alam, M., Furukawa, Y., Sarker, S.K. & Ahmed, R. (2008). Sustainability of Sal (*Shorea robusta*) forest in Bangladesh: Past, present and future actions. *International Forestry Review*, Vol. 10, No.1, pp.29-37.
- Ahsan, M.M. (2007). Perceptions of tourism by indigenous communities living in and adjoining Lawachara National Park. In J. Fox, J.R. Bushley, S. Dutt and S.A. Quazi (Eds.), *Making conservation work: linking rural livelihood and protected area management in Bangladesh*, Honolulu: East-West Centre.
- BBS. (2003). *Statistical yearbook of Bangladesh 2001*. Dhaka, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
- BFD. (2007). *Bangladesher rokshito bon alaka: vromon nirdeshika (in Bengali)*. Dhaka, Bangladesh Forest Department. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
- Champion, H.G. & Seth, S.K. (1968). *A revised survey of forest types of India*. New Delhi, Government of India publication.
- FAO. (2000). *FRA 2000 forest resources of Bangladesh*. Rome, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.
- Khan, N.A. (2001). *Regional study on forest policy and institutional reform: Bangladesh case study*. Manila, Asian Development Bank.
- Muhammed, N., Koike, M. & Haque, F. (2008). Forest policy and sustainable forest management in Bangladesh: an analysis from national and international perspectives. *New Forests*, Vol. 36, No.2, pp.201-216.
- National Tourism Policy.
[Http://www.bangladeshtourism.gov.bd/corporate_info_policy.php](http://www.bangladeshtourism.gov.bd/corporate_info_policy.php).
Accessed the 20 th of January 2009, at 16:00.
- Salam, A. & Noguchi, T. (2006). Evaluating capacity development for participatory forest management in Bangladesh's Sal forests based on '4Rs' stakeholder analysis. *Forest Policy and Economics*, Vol. 8, pp.785-796.
- What is ecotourism?
[Http://www.nature.org/aboutus/travel/ecotourism/about/art667.html](http://www.nature.org/aboutus/travel/ecotourism/about/art667.html).
Accessed the 5th March 2009, at 10.30.

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)].

SUBMITTED: APRIL 2009

REVISION SUBMITTED: JULY 2009

ACCEPTED: SEPTEMBER 2009

REFEREED ANONYMOUSLY

Mahbubul Alam (malam.ku@gmail.com) is a PhD research fellow at Ehime University, Special Course for Asia Africa and Pacific Rim (AAP) under the United Graduate School of Agricultural Sciences, Matsuyama, Japan.

Yasushi Furukawa (furukwa@fs.kochi-u.ac.jp) is an Associate professor of forest management at Kochi University, Faculty of Agriculture Japan. He has been working on various forestry research issues of Bangladesh for a decade.

Salma Akter (shipon_stat@yahoo.com) is a freelance researcher in co-management of forest resources, Kochi University International Students' Dormitory, Monobe Otsu 200, Kochi, Japan.