

Importance of Eco-tourism in Respect of Economic Development of Bangladesh

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***Abstract:** In this paper, efforts have been made to identify the possible economic benefits of eco-tourism. Bangladesh with her inundated scopes of being one of the most significant nations having lots of eco-spots can have impending prospects in eco-tourism industry. A World Tourism Organization (WTO) initiated a study which concludes that in developing countries, particularly in the least developed countries like Bangladesh, tourism is almost universally one of the leading sources of economic growth, foreign exchange, investment and job creation. Revenue from eco-tourism is an important economic benefit at national and local levels. Taxes can provide valuable financial resources for developing infrastructure, tourist attractions and other public facilities and services and tourism marketing and training required for developing tourism as well as to help finance poverty alleviation programs by the Bangladesh Governments. Eco-tourism in Bangladesh, thereby, can play the most vital role in development of the socio-economic status of the root level and hence fight against poverty at the origin. The demand of nature and eco-tourism is increasing day by day. In Bangladesh, Sundarbans is one of the centers of eco-tourism. Globally it is well known as a famous tourist spot. It is found in this study that 45000 tourists visit this place annually. On the other hand 300000 people are indirectly dependent on Sundarbans resources.*

1.0 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, manmade and cultural environment. (Firoz, 2007: 8) 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). (Islam, 2003: 108) The United Nations has effectively recognized the economic and social importance of this activity which is increasing globally.

2.0 Objectives of the Study

The study attempted to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To identify the possible benefits of eco-tourism.
- 2) To analyze the economic impacts of eco-tourism in Bangladesh.
- 3) To focus the role of eco-tourism in Bangladesh economy.

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3.0 Methodology

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 Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) and the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, web-sites of related local and international institutions.

4.0 Eco-tourism

a. Definition of Eco-tourism

Eco-tourism is basically 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 interacted with each other and live within a definable area. (Haque, 2004: 10)

According to the Encyclopedia of Eco-tourism, the term eco-tourism is nature based, environmentally friendly and sustainably managed. (Islam, 2003: 112)

Finally, eco-tourism is a nature-based tourism that involves interpretation of natural and cultural environment and ecologically sustainable management of natural areas. (Bashar, 2007: 10)

b. Characteristics of Eco-tourism

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 interpretation 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 locals and foreign tourists.
 - (7) Providing alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities. (Islam, 2003: 113)
7. The Principles of Eco-tourism

c. Principles of Eco-tourism:

- (1) It should not degrade the resource and should be developed in an environmentally sound manner.
- (2) It should provide long-term benefits to the resource, to the local community and industry.
- (3) It should involve education among all parties, local communities, government, non-government organizations, industry and tourists.
- (4) It should encourage all-party recognition of the intrinsic value of resources.
- (5) It should involve acceptance of the resource in its own terms, and in recognition of its limits, which involve supply-oriented management.
- (6) It should promote moral and ethical responsibilities and behavior towards the natural and cultural environment by all players. (Islam, 2003: 114)

d. Objectives of Eco-tourism

Eco-tourism has the following objectives.

- (1) Generate greater awareness among public authorities and the private sector regarding eco-tourism's capacity to contribute to the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage in natural and rural areas, and the improvement of standard of living in those areas.
- (2) Disseminate methods and techniques for the planning, management, regulation and monitoring of eco-tourism to guarantee its long-term sustainability.
- (3) Promote exchanges of successful experiences in the field of eco-tourism.

- (4) Increase opportunities for the efficient marketing and promotion of eco-tourism destinations and products on international markets. (Siddiqi 2003:8)

5.0 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. (Morshed, 2006: 23)

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.

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

Approximately 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, and wild-boars. 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 Kona 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. (Morshed, 2006: 28)

5.2 Sylhet - The Land of Two Leaves and a Bud

Immediately nestled in the picturesque Surma Vally amidst scenic tea plantations and lush green tropical forests, Sylhet is a prime attraction for all tourists. Its terraced tea gardens, eye-soothing orange groves and

pineapple plantations and hills covered with tropical forests form a beautiful landscape. A number of haors (big marshy land) provide sanctuary to the millions of migratory birds flying from Siberia across the Himalayas to avoid the severe cold of winter.

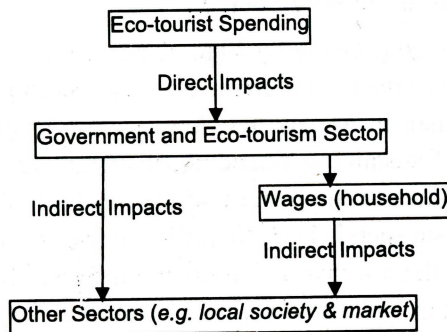
5.3 The Hill Districts- Paradise for Nature Lovers

The three hill districts of Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari offer dazzling beautiful spots where nature has been least disturbed. Far from the madding crowd, the scenic and calm spots of these areas offer rare opportunities to the tourists to have holiday in tranquility. The ethnic minority groups like Chakma, Marmas, Tripuras and Murangs are famous for their music and dances. The highest peak of Bangladesh Tahjing Dong (4632 feet) is located in the Bandarban district. (Murshed, 2006: 29) Rangamati Hill District is a wonderful repository of scenic splendors with flora and fauna of varied descriptions and the largest artificial lake (Kaptai) in Asia is a fascinating tourist spot.

6.0 Economic Impacts of Eco-tourism

Economic impact refers to the change in sales, income, jobs, or other parameters generated by eco-tourism. Eco-tourism plays a particularly important role because it can create jobs in remote regions that historically have benefited less from economic development programs than the more populous areas. (Siddiqua, 2006: 138) The impacts of eco-tourism can be grouped into three categories: direct, indirect and induced. Figure 1 illustrates some of these impacts.

Figure 1
Economic Impact of Ecotourism



6.1 Direct Impacts

Direct impacts are those arising from the direct initial tourism spending. Under this concept, revenues from tourists, in the form of entrance fees, domestic airfares, accommodation and food, hiring charges of the guide, sale of local goods such as handicrafts and souvenirs and tax revenues levied on the above are distributed among the population that is most likely to exploit the natural areas. Such a transfer of revenue establishes a direct link between conservation and personal income.

6.2 Indirect Impacts

The complex economic linkages transmit the impacts from those who sell goods and services to tourists to others in the local economy (who sells goods and services to the agents.) For example, hotels, restaurants and bars hire local workers, pay rents to locals, and purchase local "intermediate inputs" like fruits and vegetables, fish, meat etc. from the local markets and producers. Payments for these goods and services enter the economy, influencing the incomes of local agents who may not have any direct contact with tourists and also the local society who may be directly involved in the subject. These agents, in turn, stimulate new rounds of local expenditures that influence the income of still more local agents.

6.3 Induced Impacts

Outside agents, including operators of boats also purchase locally supplied goods and hire local workers and the restaurant employees spend part of their wages to buy various goods and services from the local market, thereby generating induced impacts.

6.4 Eco-tourism as an Earning Source

Eco-tourism, although growing by 20 to 30 percent a year, still represents less than one-tenth of the total tourism industry. (Siddiqua, 2006: 139) In Asia, the eco-tourism in Annapurna Conservation Project have allowed for a basically self-sustaining financing of integrated conservation and development activities to the benefit of the local population. (Siddiqua, 2006: 139) Malaysia spends US\$ 30 million a year for the publicity of its tourist products in the international tourism markets. The Government of Indonesia spent from 1975 to 1982, US\$ 21 million for the restoration of the 9th century Borobudur Buddhist Temple in Java, one of the eco-tourist spots in the country. Now Borobudur attracts more than one million tourists every year, and earns no less than US\$ 500 million per annum for that country (Siddiqua, 2006: 140).

7.0 Role of Eco-tourism in Bangladesh Economy

Bangladesh with her inundated scopes of being one of the most significant nations having lots of eco-spots can have impending prospects in eco-tourism industry. Currently Bangladesh attracts about 4.5 percent of tourists who visit South Asian countries. Over 50 percent of the tourists travel to India, from where 62-65 percent visits Bangladesh. (Siddiqua, 2006: 142) A World Tourism Organization (WTO) initiated a study which concludes that in developing countries, particularly in the least developed countries like Bangladesh, tourism is almost universally the leading source of economic growth, foreign exchange, investment and job creation.

7.1 Job Creation in Remote Locality

In rural areas, even a few new jobs can make a big difference. Eco-tourism related goods and services can not only provide local people with additional income but also create new jobs for them. Tourism provides employment opportunities by diversifying and increasing incomes that help reduce the vulnerability of the people.

7.2 Generation of Revenues

Eco-tourism is associated with the generation of revenues substantial enough to contribute significantly to the destination's economic development. Revenue from eco-tourism is an important economic benefit at national and local levels. Taxes can provide valuable financial resources for developing infrastructure, tourist attractions and other public facilities and services and tourism marketing and training required for developing tourism as well as to help finance for poverty reduction programs by the Bangladesh Governments.

7.3 Poverty Reduction

Eco-tourism has immense potential to help the global fight against poverty. Most of the eco-spots of the country are located in remote rural areas. Tourism depends not only on financial productive and human capital but also largely on natural and cultural capital which are often assets possessed by the poor. Eco-tourism being labor intensive provides opportunities for the poor of Bangladesh. Eco-tourism in Bangladesh, thereby, can play the most vital role in development of the socio-economic status of the root level and hence fight against poverty at the origin.

Eco-tourism in Bangladesh may provide a means of empowerment to disadvantaged groups such as many native people (including women) by

opening an economic and management role for them in eco-tourism. Eco-tourism provides important employment opportunities for the women of the locality surrounding the eco-spots of the country.

7.4 Economic Development of Local Community

Eco-tourism is accepted as a means that can satisfy both local people in need of gainful economic activity as well as conservationists. Local people are those most immediately benefited by the emerging market for international eco-tourism. Eco-tourism might bring both direct and indirect economic impacts to the local communities. Eco-tourism operations typically tend to be small-scale and sensitive in terms of their impacts on the local environment and culture, involving the participants of local communities as major stakeholders.

7.5 Reduction of Rural Out Migration

One of the main problems in city areas in Bangladesh is the huge pressure of population due to more availability of employment and works with respect to peripheral rural areas. As eco-tourism can increase opportunities for the rural poor in their own communities, it has the potential to help reduce rural out migration to urban areas, increase employment opportunities for the urban people, give them additional income to provide for their families in the rural areas and therefore diminish the overburden of population of big cities like Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, etc. Also, tourism related skills gained by the urban poor can be applied in rural areas helping to reverse the migration process.

7.6 Future of Eco-tourism in the Sundarbans and Benefits for its Inhabitants

There is no doubt that tourism has an impact on the environment both natural and manmade. But if it is 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. (Islam, 2003: 145)

Globally people are interested in enjoying nature. The demand of nature and eco-tourism is increasing day by day. In Bangladesh, 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. (Islam, 2003: 145)

There is a good chance of developing eco-tourism in 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 tourist. The Sundarbans landscapes and plants and animals are the real raw materials of tourism and for the near future. (Islam, 2003: 146)

Local people's participation is for the benefits of the locals. They can create employment opportunities and can earn money from the eco-tourism industry. 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 Sundarbans. (Islam, 2003: 147)

Finally, Sundarbans has economic and ecological chance for eco-tourism development. For the preservation of Sundarbans culture and tradition, long-term conservation and forest management, biodiversity and ecosystems protection, 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.

8.0 Findings of the Study

- Economic impact refers to the change in sales, income generation, job opportunity or other parameters generated by eco-tourism. It is found in this study that eco-tourism plays a particularly important role because it can create jobs in remote regions that historically have benefited less from economic development programs than the more populous areas.
- The impacts of eco-tourism can be grouped into three categories: direct, indirect and induced. Direct impacts are those arising from the direct initial tourism spending. Under this concept, revenues from tourists, in the form of entrance fees, domestic airfares, accommodation and food, hiring charges of the guide, sale of local goods such as handicrafts and souvenirs and tax revenues levied on the above products are distributed among the population that is most likely to exploit the natural areas. Such a transfer of revenue establishes a direct link between conservation and personal income.

- The complex economic linkages transmit the impacts from those who sell goods and services to tourists to others in the local economy (who sells goods and services to the agents.) For example, hotels, restaurants and bars hire local workers, pay rents to locals, and purchase local "intermediate inputs" like fruits and vegetables, fish, meat etc. from the local markets and producers. Payments for these goods and services enter the economy, influencing the incomes of local agents who may not have any direct contact with tourists and also the local society who may be directly involved in the subject. These agents, in turn, stimulate new rounds of local expenditures that influence the income of still more local agents.
- Outside agents, including operators of boats also purchase locally supplied goods and hire local workers and the restaurant employees spend part of their wages to buy various goods and services from the local market, thereby generating induced impacts.
- Eco-tourism can be a tool not only to reduce poverty but also for the economic emancipation of 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 economy.

9.0 Conclusion

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.

The goal of eco-tourism development in Bangladesh 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 to reduce poverty 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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