



## ECOTOURISM: NEW APPROACH TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

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**Abstract:** The economic globalization of the world has boosted up ecotourism trade and created an avenue for earning revenue countries with attractive bio-diversity, and/or historical heritage. Ecotourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems. Bangladesh, one of the ecologically rich countries in the world, has immense opportunity to appropriately flourish the scope of ecotourism throughout the country. This paper describes the status and possibility of ecotourism in Bangladesh and points out its role in the economic development of the country.

**Key words:** Ecotourism, economic impact, development, Bangladesh

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### Introduction

The World Conservation Union defined ecotourism as "Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed areas, in order to enjoy, study and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features - both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations." Ecotourism came into prominence in the eighties as a strategy for reconciling conservation with development in ecologically rich areas. The application of the term 'ecotourism' has often caused controversy, mainly, because some providers of conventional tourism use the concept as a marketing tool, without embracing its ethical and environmental basis.

Since ecotourism is defined as 'purposeful travel to the natural areas that creates an understanding of cultural and natural history of the environment, safeguarding the integrity of the ecosystem while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people' it can, if successful, bring social and economic benefit to the country of the target destination.

The concept of ecotourism is now a common concept in the developed countries while it is still a new idea for the tourism industry in Bangladesh. Although there are a number of constraints to ecotourism in Bangladesh like, natural catastrophe, population pressure, inadequate infrastructure facilities, lack of motivation and awareness among the common people, absence of appropriate information, lack of proper guideline for the tourists, absence of quiet and solitary zones etc., Bangladesh is a 'gold mine' for it for her unparalleled diversified natural habitats, wild life, and ancient heritage. There is more variety of trees, animals, birds, and historic places in Bangladesh than most of the countries in the world that are earning a lot through ecotourism. The co-existence of man and nature can best be studied in Bangladesh, which can

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provide a great emotional and educational experience to the visitors. If proper steps are taken to protect ecotourism spots, adequate measures are obtained to make the destinations as eco-tourist-friendly, and appropriate policy is adopted to allow ecotourism then, no doubt, the socio-economic condition of remote local people will be improved and Bangladesh can earn a considerable amount of foreign currency through it. The main goal of this paper is to explore the possibilities of economic development of Bangladesh through ecotourism as a new approach.

The objectives of this study are to - (i) study the economic impact of ecotourism; (ii) highlights the role of ecotourism in the socio-economic development of different nations in the world; (iii) explore the scope of ecotourism in Bangladesh; (iv) explore the benefits Bangladesh may achieve through properly managed and maintained ecotourism industry; and, (v) propose the ecotourism as a new source of economic development in the remote ecologically-rich areas in particular and the whole nation in general.

## Materials and Methods

The study is a review work based on secondary data and information. Information and data on ecotourism for different countries are studied. Collected data were analyzed to measure the positive impacts of ecotourism in the context of Bangladesh. The conclusion summarizes the whole study and gives a snapshot on the objective of the study.

## Economic Impacts of Ecotourism

There are two related, but distinct, economic concepts in ecotourism: economic impact and economic value. Economic impact refers to the change in sales, income, jobs, or other parameters generated by ecotourism. On the other hand, economic value refers to the sum of monetary value generated from the above-mentioned parameters. A common ecotourism goal is the generation of economic benefits, whether it creates profits for companies, jobs for communities or revenues for tourist spots in particular and for the government in general. Ecotourism 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 ecotourism can be grouped into three categories: direct, indirect, and induced. Fig. 1 illustrates some of these impacts.

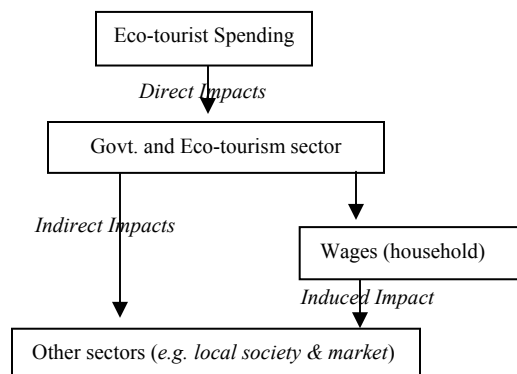


Fig.1. Economic impact of ecotourism.

**Direct impacts:** Direct impacts are those arising from the direct initial tourism spending. The optimistic view is that tourists are an economic force that can promote the conservation of the natural attractions that entice the tourists in the first place. 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.

**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.

**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.

The most significant aspect in connection to the economic impacts with respect to ecotourism is that ecotourists are less demanding, more cooperative and willing to adapt with and accommodate themselves with reasonable facilities. Modern guesthouses or hotels are not the requirement and this, in turn, means that they are being ‘consumed’ by the local environment without causing any change in the local life style.

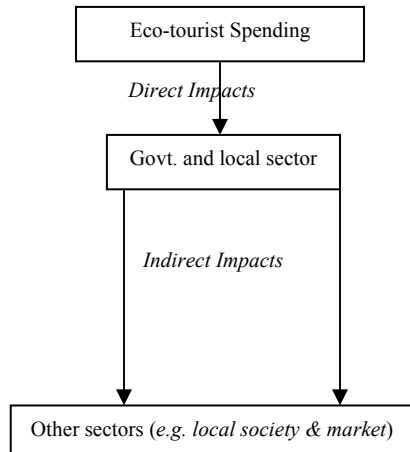


Fig. 2. Exclusive economic impacts of ecotourism.

Eco-tourists welcome management guidelines and abide by the rules, and regulations of the ecosystem, that help to reduce negative impacts of visitors on ecology and the societies they visit. They are committed environmentalist and advocates of conservation and are useful for good public relations. Moreover, they enjoy being a part of the ecosystem and the society while visiting a particular product. This is why they prefer to stay with the people of the locality, roam with them, live like them and even work with the local people. Therefore, the greater the number of micro-enterprises/individual homesteads in a tourism area, the more likely it is that a significant percentage of local people will benefit.

These attitudes of eco-tourists encourage the local society to be directly involved in ecotourism rather than the indirect involvement through tourism service providers like, restaurant, tourism office, etc. This practice of the eco-tourists causes direct economic impact in the micro level of the society (Fig.2) instead of the indirect impact.

**Ecotourism as an earning source:** More than 500 million (Ivanko, 2001) people travel for leisure each year, making tourism the world's largest industry at \$425 billion and climbing, according to the World Tourism Organization (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1993). Tourism provides 10 percent of the world's income and employs almost one-tenth of its workforce. Ecotourism, although growing by 20 to 30 percent a year, still represents less than one-tenth of the total tourism industry.

Foreign exchange earnings from tourism have helped to narrow trade and foreign exchange deficits for the countries worldwide. Tourism contributes significantly to 11 of the 12 countries that together account for 80 percent of the world's poor. Seven of these countries are in Asia (Anon, 2004). People's Republic of China, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines are among these countries. Tourism is a major source of livelihoods in the Mekong region, accounting for 9.7 percent of GDP in Lao PDR and 6.7 percent

in Viet Nam (Anon, 2004). In Cambodia, tourism was a major contributor to its economic recovery in 1999, and accounts for 9.2 percent of GDP. In Thailand, tourism has remained the largest source of foreign exchange earnings since 1982 (Anon, 2004). The contribution of tourism earnings to Nepal's GDP increased from one percent in 1974 to 3.6 percent during 1998/99; it even crossed 4 percent in 1995 (Anon, 2004). But due to political disturbances it dropped to 3.1 in 2001 (Anon, 2004). Since ecotourism is growing in the Asia Pacific region, it must account for a significant part of the above contributions.

The CAMPFIRE project in Zimbabwe (which is a community based wildlife management for safari tourism and sport hunting) generates yearly revenues of up to 4000 USD per household. In Asia, the ecotourism 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 (Wunder, 2000). In Latin America, according to a study by Groom *et al.* (1991) for Madre de Dios region in Peru, tourism benefits depend heavily on the type of destination. They found that easily accessible areas with already intervened natural environment provide less revenue compared to a remote rainforest reserve that caters to wealthier tourists. Drumm (1991) found for the Ecuadorian Amazon region that in spite of much higher tourism spending on tours in exclusive and pristine destinations, local income is found slightly higher in backpacker destinations. Lindberg and Enriquez (1996) concluded that the communities in Belize have profited significantly from tourism directed towards adjacent protected areas by selling handicrafts, providing accommodation and other services.

Malaysia spends US\$ 30 million (Hasan, 2004) a year for the publicity of its tourist products in the international tourism markets. The country has earned US\$8.3 billion during the first seven months of current year. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. The government of that country spent, from 1975-1982, US\$ 21 million (Hasan, 2004) 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.

### **Panorama of Ecotourism in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh is a combination of verdant forests, riverine countryside, and long stretches of sun-bathed beaches, fearsome wildness, meandering rivers and magnificent world's largest mangrove forest. Bordering the Bay of Bengal stands this magical tapestry in green with all the glory of its past and the splendid colors of its natural present. These unique products possess a great potential for environment friendly ecotourism.

The country is home to the Royal Bengal Tigers, leopards, Asiatic elephants, monkeys, langurs, gibbons (the only ape in the subcontinent), otters and mongooses. Reptiles include the sea tortoise, mud turtle, river tortoise, pythons, crocodiles, gharials and a variety of snakes. There are more than 600 species of birds, including the Paradise Flycatcher and the most spectacular kingfishers and fishing eagles (Firoz, 2003).

### **Scope of Ecotourism in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh has many attractive spots from the viewpoint of ecotourism. These spots are divided into two categories based on nature and culture.

**Natural areas:** Under this category the first one is the unique and magnificent Sundarbans Mangrove Forest, which is world's largest mangrove forest and the home of the world renowned Royal Bengal Tiger, the most ferocious predatory animal on earth. As being the World Natural Heritage declared by the UNESCO, this mangrove forest now belongs not only to Bangladesh, but also to the whole world, though the responsibility to protect the forest lies on Bangladesh.

Among the other spots, the Chittagong hill districts are mentionable where 13 tribal groups live in an area of about 2592.1 square kilometers. The biodiversity and natural beauties of the hilly areas along with the different customs and traditions of the localities could be an attractive subject to the eco-tourists.

'*Nijhum Deep*' (Nijhum Island) in Noakhali district is comprised of four small islands – '*chars*'. These are char Osman, Corner of char Osman, char Muid and char Kamla. The '*Nijhum Deep*' is famous for a beautiful forest, which is not natural but planted forest. The island area covers about 14,050 acres of land. Of which the forest occupies 12,800 acres and the rest area is for human habitation. Though the island area is of planted forests, the flora and fauna are suitably adapted there as in natural forests. There are about 10 thousand deer

in the forest, which came from only four pairs released in the forest in 1978. Except that, there are monkeys, mongooses, wild buffaloes, and wild boars also well adapted in the forest. The plants are suitably adapted here with beautiful birds in different seasons of the year. This '*Nijhum deep*' is one of the best breeding grounds for Hilsa fish in Bay of Bengal.

Besides the Sundarbans, numerous mighty rivers, paddy fields stretched up to the horizon, picturesque tea gardens and Chittagong Hill Tracts, St. Martin's Island, Rangamati and Kaptai Lake are also potential ecotourism products on their own attraction.

**Cultural areas:** In this category the 14th century pre-Mogul period *Shatt Gambuz* Mosque at Bagherhat has been declared as a world heritage by UNESCO in 1985. Besides, our pre-Mogul and Mogul period mosques, Hindu temples and ancient Buddhist monasteries have great appeal to the eco-tourists, who like cultural heritage.

The 8th century *Paharpur* Buddhist Monastery in Naogaon, another world heritage declared by UNESCO, is the single largest Buddhist monastery in the world. Whereas Borobodhur in Indonesia which is half of the size of *Paharpur* Monastery earns no less than US\$500 million per annum.; in the latter case the scenario is completely opposite of Bangladesh only for well publicity.

*Kantaj* Temple in Dinajpur is the largest terracotta temple in the world. A former Director General of UNESCO in Bangladesh, on his visit to the temple, gave his opinion that the temple could be a world heritage. The concerned government department may apply to UNESCO for the designation of world heritage of the temple.

Moreover, the ancient civilizations like Mahasthangar in Bogra, ancient Buddhist monasteries and stupas/temples in Mainamoti, pre-Mogul period Kusumba Mosque in Rajshahi, Chhoto Sona Mosque of the same period in Chapai Nababganj, Lalbagh Kella in Dhaka, Govinda Shiva and Jagannath Temples in Rajshahi can also be world heritage sites. Above all, the multi-faceted folk heritage enriched by its ancient animist, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim roots, weaving, pottery, and terracotta sculpture are some of the earliest forms of artistic expressions to attract the sustainable tourists.

#### **Necessary Steps Required for the Eco-spots**

Although in Bangladesh we have some world-class ecotourism spots both natural and cultural, unfortunately all the spots are almost unknown to the foreign eco-tourists and consequently are not attracted by them. In the following part the steps for developing nature-based and culture-based eco-spots are mentioned respectively:

**Nature-based eco-spots:** Sundarbans Mangrove Forest deserves attention from the eco-tourists. Necessary steps should be taken so that the ecotourism organizations worldwide highlight the destinations like Sundarbans forest. For example, in the Sundarbans forest areas Mawalis are allowed to enter the forests in the months of April and May for collecting honey. The Forest Department only permits them with a paper slip. They enter the forest and destroy the honey combs and kill the bees drastically and brutally during collection of honey. This happens because the collection is never scientific and systematic. If this could be managed scientifically and properly the local Mawalis will be benefited economically, the forest areas will be rich in biodiversity. Ultimately everything in the honey harvest will be environmentally sound. The natural honey production in the Sundarbans areas by the endemic species of bees is unique in the world. It is necessary to take serious measures in the field not only for economic benefits but also for conservation of unique natural beauties in the forests. All the steps in this forest should be taken in such manner so that every flora and fauna can be able to generate their respective species in an optimal trend; moreover, eco-spots should be placed in those points from which no threats can be created to the ecosystem of Sundarbans.

Next to Sundarbans, Chittagong Hills Tracts (CHT) can be mentioned under nature-based eco-spots. The Eco-tourist approach and practice is necessary in this area not only for local tribes and castes but also for conservation of their traditions so that this hilly region could be one of the most spectacular sustainable tourism areas.

Modhupur Sal forest is the traditional important tourist area in the country which is going to be perished very soon for the lack of proper maintenance and involvement of the local and tribal people. But this can be managed as eco-touristic important place with the involvement of local Garo tribe.

Forest areas of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts (which ranges from Karerhat forest at the north to the Teknaf forest at the south) have several areas that can be treated as the ecotour spots. The areas are Karerhat, Mieresarai, Podua, Chunati, Fashiakhali Eidgaon, Eidgar and Teknaf forests. The local people in these areas can be involved in the management of these eco-spots. Thus, it is possible to uphold the importance of ecotouristic and financial augmentation of these local people.

**Culture -based eco-spots:** In Bangladesh, there are many culture based eco-spots where the local people can be involved for increasing total number of tourists in the country. There are such possibilities we have in Bangladesh, but all of them cannot be brought into practice for description, only few can be taken.

In Bangladesh almost all of the ancient Temples and Monasteries are found neglected although they may be the attractive spots for eco-tourists.

It is found that the last 12 kilometers of the road to Paharpur Monastery from Naogaon is extremely narrow and full of potholes. The construction of a new approach road to the monastery, having less than three kilometer of length, can save tourists from traversing through that horrible 12 kilometers of potholed road. For some restoration works and beautification of the monastery site, the government needs to spend some money. That investment will pay the country high return annually in foreign currency for years.

### **Role of Ecotourism on 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 ecotourism industry. The economic impact can increase political and financial support for conservation of the country. Protecting areas and nature conservation generally provide many benefits to society, including preservation of biodiversity, maintenance of watersheds, and so on. Many of these benefits are intangible. However, the benefits associated with recreation and tourism in protected areas tend to be tangible. For example, explorers at the Sundarbans spend money on lodging, food, and other goods and services, thereby providing employment for local and non-local residents. These positive economic impacts can lead to increased support for the protected areas with which they are associated.

Currently Bangladesh attracts about 4.5% of tourists who visit South Asian countries (Firoz, 2003). Over 50% of the tourists travel to India, from where 62-65 % visit Bangladesh. This statistics indicates the prospect of well-designed and appropriately-maintained ecotourism in Bangladesh. A World Tourism Organization (WTO) initiated study concluded 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. Although there are many immediately, tangible benefits found for the country ecotourism can contribute to economical development of Bangladesh by directly plunging on the key points of economic drawbacks of the nation.

**Job creation in remote locality:** In rural areas, even a few new jobs can make a big difference (Lindberg and Enriquez, 1996). Ecotourism-related goods and services can not only provide local people with additional income but also create new jobs. Tourism provides employment opportunities by diversifying and increasing incomes that help reduce the vulnerability of the poor.

**Generation of revenues:** Ecotourism is associated with the generation of revenues substantial enough to contribute significantly to the destination's economic development. Moreover, ecotourism is one of the few service-sector activities that favor remote locations, and is apparently characterized by a growth in demand that is faster than tourism as a whole. Ecotourism revenues also appear to have considerable positive elasticity in that entry fees to protected areas, which constitute a major source of local ecotourism-related revenue.

Tax revenue from ecotourism 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. Further, tourism related revenues and levies can and in fact help to finance community needs used by all the residents

Malaysia is earning huge foreign revenue by *Mastang*, the second largest mangrove forest in the world, which is only one-tenth in size of the Sundarbans (Hasan, 2004). If Indonesia can earn US\$500 million per

annum from Borobudur then the potentiality of our Paharpur Monastery, which is double in size of Borobudur, is beyond question. It reflects that if proper conservation and marketing of already declared eco-parks in Bangladesh are immediately taken then our country may earn substantially huge foreign currency by attracting more eco-tourists with her exclusive eco-spots unavailable in any other country.

**Poverty alleviation:** Ecotourism has immense potential to help the global fight against poverty. Most of the eco-spots of the country are located in remote rural and urban 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. Ecotourism being labor-intensive provides the poor of Bangladesh, as we have large labor reserves, with opportunities. Ecotourism in Bangladesh, thereby, can play the most vital role in development of the socio-economic status of the root level hence fight against poverty at the origin.

**Empowerment of disadvantaged group:** Ecotourism 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 ecotourism. Ecotourism provides important employment opportunities for the women of the locality surrounding the eco-spots of the country.

As the eco-tourists tend to cope up with the local community, the disadvantaged group of the local community of the Sundarbans, CHT, St. Martin's Island and other remote areas would get more opportunities to take part actively in different services to the eco-tourist like arranging food, preparing custom-oriented cloths and other belongings for them, producing the souvenirs to be sold, and many more.

**Economic development of local community:** Ecotourism 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 ecotourism. Ecotourism might bring both direct and indirect economic impacts to the local communities. Ecotourism operations typically tend to be small-scale and sensitive in terms of their impacts on the local environment and culture, involving the participation of local communities as major stakeholders.

Ecotourism is consumed at the point of production increasing opportunities for individual and micro-enterprises of the target locality to sell additional products or services. For example, the tribal people at the CHT may have the scope to sell the products consuming their cultural and historical heritage as token of souvenir to the eco-tourists. More markets based on local products can be established in the remote areas like the Sundarbans where living means of the natives are mostly dependent on the forest itself. One of the most important criteria for socio-economic development of any community is the diversification in livelihood, which can be achieved through ecotourism and hence causing local population income increase substantially.

**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 ecotourism 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 poor, 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.

## Conclusion

Since ecotourism provides for conservation of nature, includes meaningful community participation, makes profit and can sustain itself, it keeps the natural environment of the concerned spots sound, maintains social and cultural integrity, and promotes economic well-being. As the main characteristic of ecotourism is sustainable tourism, it can be a tool to create public support for conservation and to encourage the co-participation of both private and public sectors in conservation efforts. Clearly, at a time when traditional conservation through enforced protection of natural areas was being questioned for its effectiveness and social impacts, strategies such as ecotourism offered considerable potential for integrating conservation with development.

Ecotourism 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 ecotourism as a great potential for the economic development.

The goal of ecotourism 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.

Ecotourism 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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