

COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM IN THE SUNDARBANS OF BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This paper discusses community based ecotourism in one of the environmentally important spots in the world – the Sundarbans of Bangladesh. The discussion is based on available literature and the results of an empirical study conducted by the authors in a local community of the Sundarbans. Some of the local people in the Sundarbans have taken up activities of ecotourism as secondary occupation during the tourist season in order to increase their meagre income. The main ecotourism activities undertaken by the local community are selling products of local handicrafts, cultural shows, amusement programmes and tour guidance. On the whole, the respondents of the study felt that ecotourism has had some impact on the socio-cultural and economic life of their community. However, they had mixed views on the nature of the impact (positive or negative) on the different aspects of their socio-cultural and economic life. While the impact on the economic aspect was perceived to be generally positive, the opposite was the position regarding the impact on culture and traditions. In view of the tremendous scope for ecotourism, both the government and the non-government agencies involved in the general tourism sector should work together in order to develop community based ecotourism in the Sundarbans.

Introduction

Tourism has been a growing industry in many parts of the world. A decade ago Weaver (1999) observed that the number of international tourists went up from approximately 25 million in 1950 to 561 million in 1995, with much of the tourists choosing the unspoiled third world destinations. The same trend has been continued. Tourism has developed in response to the increasing interest of the people for travel in pursuit of recreation and enjoyment. Unregulated exploitation of the tourist potential has created concerns of environmental degradation in many centres of tourist attraction. This environmental concern in tourism has given rise to what is now known as ecotourism. While retaining the conventional objective of people's enjoyment, ecotourism is simultaneously engaged in addressing to the new concern of environmental protection. This paper discusses ecotourism in one of the environmentally important spots in the world – the Sundarbans of Bangladesh.

The paper deals with the following substantive aspects of ecotourism in the Sundarbans: (i) the concept of community based ecotourism, (ii) description of the Sundarbans of Bangladesh as a place of ecotourism, (iii) the scope of ecotourism in the Sundarbans, (iv) some of the activities of ecotourism presently undertaken by the local community in the Sundarbans and (v) the impact of the current community based ecotourism in the Sundarbans. Discussion on the present activities of community based ecotourism in the Sundarbans and its impact is based on a small empirical study undertaken by the authors. The overall objective of the empirical study was to find out the impact of community based ecotourism in the Sundarbans. The village of Purba Dhangmari in the Khulna district of Bangladesh was selected for the study. A sample of 50 householders out of the total 316 households in the village was covered for the study. The field level data collection for the study was carried out in the month of January 2011.

1. Community Based Ecotourism

Ecotourism is the nature-based tourism which means protection of nature as well as enjoying it. The International Ecotourism Society (2006)

defines ecotourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” Ecotourism may come with more potential benefits than conventional tourism. It can bring economic benefits into a local community, such as additional income, and can offer tourists a ‘more meaningful experience than conventional tourism.’ Conventional tourism is simply travelling for pleasure. People are more likely to protect their natural resources when they see that they benefit economically from ecotourism. Hawkins and Khan (2001) say that though there are a variety of definitions used to describe ecotourism, in general they all depict ecotourism as being in harmony with nature, and as the opposite of mass tourism. In the words of Kutay (1989), ecotourism is “nature tourism which directly or indirectly promotes conservation and supports sustainable economic development.” It is from the perspective of ecotourism that Raloff (1980) examined the relationship between economic development and the conservation of natural resources, warned the governments about the damaging environmental practices and the problem of overpopulation on a global scale, and called for formulating a plan to tackle the unsustainable practices that have been taking place. Thus an important characteristic of ecotourism is its linkage to, or emphasis on environmental conservation – tourists’ enjoyment combined with preservation of local environment.

Community based ecotourism is not simply a tourism business that aims at maximising profits for investors. It is more concerned with the impact of tourism on the community and environmental resources, and emerges from a community development strategy, that uses tourism as a tool to strengthen the ability of rural community organisations that manage tourism resources with the participation of the local people. Unlike mass tourism that often results in disruption of local economies, seasonal unemployment, degradation of natural and cultural environment, community based ecotourism is supposed to be more cautious and environment friendly with sustainable tourism approach. Community based ecotourism is regarded as a tool for natural and cultural resource conservation and community development. It provides alternative economic opportunities, which are in essence in rural areas. It has the potential to create jobs and generate entrepreneurial opportunities for people from a variety of backgrounds, skills and experiences,

including rural communities and especially women. Examining the prospects of community empowerment, Scheyvens (1999) identified four levels of empowerment that may be achieved through successful community based ecotourism ventures: psychological, social, political, and economic. It is in view of the recognition of ecotourism's immense potential that the United Nations Economic and Social Council declared 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism. Many of the developing countries in Africa, particularly the continent's tourism leaders have been investing heavily in ecotourism (Vieta 1999). As a positive sign for the development of ecotourism in developing countries, there is also a suggestion that the ecotourism organisations worldwide should highlight unknown ecotourism spots instead of already popular ones (Hasan 2002).

Community based ecotourism has been implemented in many developing countries, often in support of wildlife management, environmental protection and development of the indigenous peoples. With reference to the function of community based ecotourism towards the indigenous people Reid (1992) speaks of developing the indigenous peoples' cultural opportunity spectrum for tourism. Lindberg *et al.* (1996) points out three basic objectives of community based ecotourism. First, it aids the environmental protection of the area; second, it generates financial revenue through entrance fees, donations and government support; and third, it provides valuable jobs that add to the social and economic structure of the host community. Thus the local community is at the centre of community based ecotourism. That is, in addition to tourists' enjoyment and environmental preservation, there is a third dimension in community based ecotourism, viz. development of the host community.

Community based ecotourism contributes to sustainable community development. Richards and Hall (2003) in the context of things such as foreign aid, food shortage, and health care, point out the increasing importance placed on the role of sustainable tourism during the last two decades. Similarly both Gould (2004) and Garraway (2007) have emphasised the positive role of ecotourism in achieving sustainable development. In the words of Weinberg *et al.* (2002), community based ecotourism has become a vital part of

sustainable community development and at present is the fastest-growing sector of the tourism industry. Drakopoulou (2008) reaffirms that community based ecotourism delivers significant benefits to the local people and is considered as a form of small-scale development programme which complies with the fundamental principles of sustainability. Giampiccoli and Nauright (2010) point out another dimension of the socio-economic development involved in community based ecotourism. They find its strategies as important for a better distribution of wealth and democratic decision making in the local communities across a country.

In order to derive the best results from community based ecotourism both in terms of socio-economic development of the community and environmental preservation, there has to be careful planning. As Salam *et al.* (2000) suggest, well-planned tourism could provide economic and political incentives for proper management and conservation which could bring additional benefits to the local communities and regional economies. Training of the community members for effective participation in ecotourism and facilitators for proper management of the activities of ecotourism should form part of the planning process for community based ecotourism. As a strategy for the training in ecotourism Corless (1999) suggests that to ensure the development of community based ecotourism initiatives such as training, the need for it should arise from within the community rather than the government.

2. The Sundarbans of Bangladesh

This paper discusses ecotourism in one of the environmentally important spots in the world – the Sundarbans of Bangladesh, which stretches 80 km into the Bangladesh hinterland from the sea coast. The Sundarbans means beautiful forests. The forests here are not just mangrove swamps; they include some of the last remaining strands of the mighty jungles which once covered the Gangetic plain. The Sundarbans cover an area of 38,500 sq km, of which about one-third is in water.

The Sundarbans are home to many different species of birds, mammals, insects, reptiles and fish. Since 1966 the Sundarbans have been maintained as a wildlife sanctuary, and it is estimated that there are now about 400 Royal Bengal tigers and about 30,000 heads of spotted deer in the area. Over 120 species of fish and over 260 species of birds have been recorded in the Sundarbans. The Gangetic River Dolphin (*Platanista Gangeticus*) is common in the rivers of the area. No less than 50 species of reptiles and eight species of amphibians are known to be inhabitants of the Sundarbans. The Sundarbans now supports the only population of the Estuarine or Salt-Water Crocodile (*Crocodylus Parasus*) in Bangladesh, and its population today is estimated to be less than two hundred.

The Sundarbans is also home to sea gypsy fishing families who catch fish using trained otters. To see this pristine environment, tourists need to get a permit from the Divisional Forest Office in Khulna. With the permit in hand, it is possible to hire a boat from Mongla or Dhangmari to get into different points, where guides are available on hire to take one into the Sundarbans.

The potential for community based ecotourism in the reserved forests of the Sundarbans lies in the fact that the total area is large and that its boundaries have been fully protected by the Department of Forest, Government of Bangladesh for many years. Encroachment and permanent settlements are not allowed in the forest area. These factors constitute a solid base and a good starting point for good planning, development and management of responsible ecotourism in one of the most interesting and the world's largest mangrove forest areas, where the wilderness value is pronounced. Community based ecotourism is important for the development of southwest region of Bangladesh as it may accelerate regional as well as national economy through creating new job opportunities which will lead to rise in the living standard of the local people.

3. Ecotourism in the Sundarbans

Ecotourism has already existed in the Sundarbans on a limited basis and provides an important alternative source of revenue for the funding

of environmental conservation initiatives of the government Forest Department. It generates some funds for the protected areas as well as employment opportunities for the surrounding local communities. Although tourism in Bangladesh suffers from a poor image in general, ecotourism potential on the contrary is rated high. Presently it is in an early but promising state of development.

Table 1
Number of Foreign and Domestic Tourists Who Visited the Sundarbans
During 2003-2004 and 2008-2009

Year	Foreign	Domestic	Total
2003-2004	1457 (03.01)	46887 (96.99)	48344 (100)
2004-2005	1298 (01.84)	69078 (98.16)	70376 (100)
2005-2006	1582 (01.68)	92632 (98.32)	94214 (100)
2006-2007	2083 (02.15)	94745 (97.85)	96828 (100)
2007-2008	1861 (02.31)	78689 (97.69)	80550 (100)
2008-2009	1900 (02.27)	81893 (97.73)	83793 (100)
Total	10181 (02.15)	463924 (97.85)	474105 (100)

Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Source: Khulna Forest Office 2010

Table 1 provides the official data on the number of tourists who visited the Sundarbans forest during six years in the last decade. Foreigners constituted only a small percentage (2.15%) of the tourists. One need not be concerned about the lower number of foreign tourists. Domestic tourism is no less important. As Carballo (2002) notes, domestic ecotourism might be at least as significant as international tourism, for it spreads national wealth within the country and thereby reduces inter-regional differences. On the whole, there has been an increase in the number of tourists (both foreign and domestic) to Sundarbans during the last decade. However, there has been a slight dip in the number of tourists in the year 2007-08. This drop probably was caused by the severe cyclone SIDRY, which destroyed one-

fourth of the forests on 5 November 2007 (The annual data on the tourists pertain to the months from July to June. Hence the data for the year 2007-08 covers the immediate post-SIDRY period). Despite the after effects of this disaster, since then the forests have been regaining their natural beauty and the number of tourists has been picking up. However, the authors believe that the actual number of tourists visiting the Sundarbans would be at least double of the official statistics. It is reported that, because of widespread corruption, the forest officials generally do not provide the actual statistics about the number of tourists visiting the Sundarbans with the objective of misappropriating part of the revenue from the visitors.

Table 2
Revenue Earned by Government of Bangladesh from Ecotourism in the Districts of Khulna and Bagerhat during 2003-2004 and 2008-2009 (in BDT)

Year	Khulna	Bagerhat	Total
2003-2004	1058339 (33.85)	2068650 (66.15)	3126989 (100)
2004-2005	816950 (26.80)	2231780 (73.20)	3048730 (100)
2005-2006	1363137 (41.47)	1924215 (58.53)	3287352 (100)
2006-2007	734088 (34.90)	1369105 (65.10)	2103193 (100)
2007-2008	552410 (15.22)	3076750 (84.78)	3629160 (100)
2008-2009	1175180 (27.33)	3124980 (72.67)	4300160 (100)
Total	5700104 (29.24)	13795480 (70.76)	19495584 (100)

Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Source: Khulna Forest Office 2010

The average annual earnings of the government of Bangladesh during a six year period in the last decade (table 2) has been over 32 lakh or 3 million (3249264) BDT (Bangladesh Taka). There are two entry points to the Sundarbans, one in the east division through the Bagerhat district and the other in the west division through the Khulna district. The numbers of tourists visiting the Sundarbans through the east division are more than those

through the west division. Consequently the revenue earnings of the east division are much higher than those of the other division, as can be seen from the information given in table 2. Over 70 per cent of the earnings from tourism in the Sunderbans during the six years reported in the table came from the Bagerhat division. Every year the government of Bangladesh earns considerable revenue from the tourists in the form of entry fees and charges for stay in the place. For staying in the Sundarbans a foreign and a native tourist have to pay 750 and 250 BDT respectively per night. The amount of revenue earned by the Bangladesh government in a few years in the last decade, presented in table 2, shows the high potential of the Sundarbans as an ecotourism site of Bangladesh.

4. Activities of Community Based Ecotourism in the Sundarbans

Community based ecotourism in the Sundarbans has attracted several people of the locality as a source of economic pursuit. Although community based ecotourism is a relatively new phenomenon in the Sundarbans, most people know at least something about it. When asked about the level of their knowledge about it, 25 out of the 50 respondents in the study have stated to have some knowledge about it, whereas the others were reported to have moderate (22 respondents) or full (3 respondents) knowledge about community ecotourism. As many as 48 out of the 50 respondents expressed their readiness to have fresh or further involvement in activities of community based ecotourism in their locality.

Table 3 on the socio-economic background of the 50 respondents of the study conducted by the authors shows that half of them were illiterate and just four of them had education beyond the SSC (secondary school certificate) or class X. The maximum level of education obtained by any respondent in the sample was bachelor degree. The main regular occupation of the respondents has been agriculture or fishing. At the same time it may be noted that only 18 out of the 50 respondents have had regular job throughout the year. The others have been dependent largely on seasonal work. Thus ecotourism has been a welcome alternative job for many of the residents of the area. Activities of ecotourism have been secondary occupation in the case of as many as 33 of the respondents in the study.

Table 3
Respondents of the Study by Their Socio-Economic Background

Socio-Economic Background	Category	Number
Education	Illiterate	25
	Class I-V	12
	Class VI-X (SSC)	09
	Above SSC	04
	Total (Mean = Class V)	50
Primary Occupation	Agriculture	15
	Fishing	14
	Other	21
	Total	50
Secondary Occupation	Ecotourism	33
	Agriculture	04
	Trade	03
	Other	10
	Total	50
Monthly Income in BDT	1000-3000	09
	3001-6000	39
	Above 6000	2
	Total (Mean = 4620)	50

As the information provided in table 3 shows, many of the people engaged in ecotourism are ordinary people and have taken up activities of ecotourism as secondary occupation during the tourist season in order to increase their meagre income. The monthly income of the respondents in the study ranged from 1000 to 8000 BDT. The mean monthly income of the

group of the respondents was 4620 BDT. Thus they are not professional tourists, but ordinary members of the local community who are engaged in activities of ecotourism as a supplementary source of income. At the same time, as alternative sources of income they contribute to improving the living standard of the people and reducing their dependence on the Sundarbans for their living.

Table 4
Respondents of the Study by Their Engagement in Ecotourism

Engagement in Ecotourism	Category	Number
Activities	Handicrafts	8
	Cultural Activities	9
	Amusements	6
	Tour Guidance	4
	Other	6
	Total	33
Number of Tourists per Month	1-5 Tourists	25
	6-10 Tourists	5
	Over 10 Tourists	3
	Total	33
Duration of Tourist Activities	1-4 Years	26
	5-8 Years	6
	Over 8 Years	1
	Total	33
Monthly Income from Tourism	Up to 1000	15
	1001-2000	16
	Over 2000	2
	Total (Mean = 1409)	33

The members of the local community of the Sundarbans have been engaged in different activities in the growing ecotourism of the area. As already mentioned, 33 out of the 50 respondents in the study have been engaged in tourism activities as a supplementary source of income. As ecotourism is secondary occupation for supplementary income, engagement of the local people in ecotourism is on a small scale in terms of the type and number activities undertaken and the number of tourists received.

The main ecotourism activities undertaken by the local community are production and selling of local handicrafts, cultural shows, amusements and tour guidance (table 4). All of them are local community based. The number of tourists the local community has been receiving is relatively small. As many as 25 out of the 33 respondents engaged in ecotourism reported that they received up to five tourists per month during the tourist season. Just three of them have had more than 10 tourists per month. Involvement of the local community of the Sundarbans seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon. As many as 26 out of the 33 respondents have been engaged in activities of ecotourism for less than five years. Just one respondent reported over eight years of tourist activities.

When asked about the problems they have perceived in the community based ecotourism of their locality, majority (33 out 50) respondents found no problems. The others reported problems such as unfavourable terms and conditions prescribed by the forest department, small number of tourists, difficulty in communicating with the tourists due to difference in language, and robbery in the case of fishermen. However, they expected help from both the government and the non-government agencies in order to deal with these problems. Specific forms of help mentioned by them include congenial administrative climate, law and security enforcement, loan facility for investment in ecotourism activities, musical instruments for cultural activities, training in English language and improvement in handicrafts. As the members of local community involved in ecotourism of the Sundarbans are ordinary people, their training for capacity building in ecotourism activities

should be considered an important step towards promotion of community based ecotourism. Training will benefit not only the local people interested in ecotourism, but also the tourism industry in general, which in turn will contribute to the national economy (Shamsuddoha *et al.* 2008).

Being secondary occupational engagement, tourist activities of the local people have not been the major source of income for the local community. The amount of income from tourism related activities depends on the number of tourists they receive and the nature of activities. The data presented in table 4 show that the average income from ecotourism has been 1409 DBT per month. The minimum and maximum earnings were 500 and 3000 DBT respectively per month. Just two out of the 33 respondents engaged in ecotourism activities earned over 2000 BDT per month. The relatively low income is also indicative of the trend of the large tour operators not being interested in involving the local community people in their business. All these data on the involvement of the local community in ecotourism show the small scale nature of the activities of ecotourism undertaken by the local community in the Sundarbans.

5. Impact of Ecotourism in the Sundarbans

As ecotourism has the objective of community development and environmental preservation, one should expect activities of ecotourism to have impact on both community and environment. A detailed study of the impact of ecotourism was beyond the scope of the present study conducted by the authors. Information on the impact presented here is based largely on the views expressed by the small sample of 50 respondents from the community. They believed that the activities of ecotourism have had different impact. In some cases the impact has been positive or desirable and in others negative. In some other cases the respondents could see no impact of ecotourism in their locality.

The positive impact of ecotourism reported by the respondents has been on economy, environment and culture. The revenue generated by the activities of tourism has been beneficial to the country as a whole and to the members of the local community in particular. It has also helped the private sector and provided some opportunities for work. As far as the environment is concerned, ecotourism has reduced the dependence of the local people on the Sundarbans, and to that extent it has contributed to environmental preservation. If this can be gradually stepped up, in course of time the role of ecotourism in the protection of environment will be significant. The positive impact of ecotourism on culture consisted in the preservation of the local culture and heritage, and promotion of cross-cultural understanding. In particular, the production of local handicrafts and the performance of cultural activities play an important role in this matter.

The local people, who considered the impact of ecotourism as negative, had different views about it. With regard to economy, they pointed out increase in the cost of local living as a result of the inflow of external money through tourism. In the case of environment, they found disturbance of the flora and fauna of the region created by tourist activities. At the cultural front, the negative impact of ecotourism has been identified in the form of loss of cultural values and traditions as a result of intrusion of external values and ideas.

Impact on Specific Aspects

The respondents of the study were asked to give their views on the nature of the impact of ecotourism on certain specific socio-cultural and economic aspects. All of them felt that they have had economic as well as social benefits from the ecotourism related activities. The respondents were further asked to specify if there was change in a particular aspect and if so, whether it was positive or negative. Tables 5 and 6 give the details of their responses in the matter.

Table 5
Respondents by Their Views on the Nature of Impact of Ecotourism on Social Aspects

Aspect	Nature of Impact			
	Positive	Negative	No Change	Total
Crime Rate	10	3	37	50
Women's Status	41	9	0	50
Access to Facilities	35	5	10	50
Educational Opportunity	17	0	33	50
Traditional Customs	2	38	10	50
Local Culture	2	40	8	50

The socio-cultural aspects placed before the respondents were crime rate, status of women, access to various facilities (such as transportation, safe drinking water and health care), educational opportunity, traditional customs and local culture. As can be seen from the data presented in table 5, most of the respondents in the sample found improvement in the status of women and access to facilities as a result of ecotourism in their locality. Overwhelming majority of the respondents found the impact of ecotourism on their traditional customs and local culture as negative. However, majority of the respondents were of the opinion that ecotourism has had no impact, either positive or negative, on crime rate and educational opportunity.

Table 6
Respondents by Their Views on the Nature of Impact of Ecotourism on Economic Aspects

Aspect	Nature of Impact			
	Positive	Negative	No Change	Total
Number of Poor	38	1	11	50
Gap between Poor and Rich	36	4	10	50
Employment Opportunity	47	0	3	50
Sources of Income	44	5	1	50
Level of Income	49	0	1	50
Standard of Living	47	0	3	50

Items of the economic aspect that were presented to the respondents for their opinion on the impact of ecotourism were extent of poverty, gap between the poor and the rich, employment opportunities, sources of income, level of income and standard of living. Majority of the respondents were of the view that ecotourism has had positive impact on all these items of economic aspect of their community (table 6). According to them there was improvement in the economic status of the local community due to ecotourism development, and decrease in the number of the poor people and the gap between poor and rich. Similarly, they found increase in employment opportunities, income and standard of living as results of ecotourism.

Impact on Environment

Another piece of information sought from the respondents of the study is about the impact of ecotourism on environment. On the whole, they found the impact of ecotourism on environment to be negative. While 43 out of the 50 respondents held this view, just seven respondents considered the impact on environment as positive or desirable. People of the locality seem to be aware of the increasing human intervention in environment for the development of tourism.

Also, people of the area seem to be aware of the growing degradation of the mangroves of the Sundarbans. It is a fact that the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans is gradually getting destroyed. There are two reasons behind this situation. They are human-made and natural. People such as woodcutters, fishermen, *mowalies* (honey collectors) and *bawalies* (*golpatta* or round leaf collectors) around the Sundarbans directly depend upon this forest for their livelihood. However, these people do not create much harm to the forest. It is the people who indulge in illegal activities such as smuggling wood and hunting wild animals that destroy the natural conservation system of the forest. The local musclemen, corrupt political leaders, forest officers and the police, robbers, and the greedy buyers of forest woods and wild animals are mainly responsible for the destruction of the forest. The local people are generally engaged as labour in these activities of forest diminution. As they do not find sufficient job opportunities throughout

the year, they are forced to take part as labourers in the destruction of the Sundarbans for their livelihood. Almost all the respondents of the study (49 out of 50) stated this as the main reason for the involvement of the local people in the environmental degradation of the Sundarbans. The natural reason for damage of the Sundarbans is the various types of natural disasters like flood and cyclone which have been occurring at regular intervals.

The entire area surrounding the Sundarbans is agro-based and for many people the Sundarbans is a secondary source of their earnings. Extended form of commercial shrimp farming in the whole coastal area increased the salinity rate of the soil, which caused decrease in the natural fertility of land and decline in farmers' incomes over the years. This led many people to be more dependent on the Sundarbans for their livelihood, and collect more wood, honey, *golpatta*, fish, crab etc. from the forest. As a result, the Sundarbans is gradually losing its natural biodiversity, which leads to destruction of the Sundarbans. However it needs to be noted that environmental degradation of the Sundarbans is the result of human intervention largely for commercial reasons and to a lesser degree for livelihood and tourism purposes.

On the whole, the respondents of the study felt that ecotourism has had some impact on the socio-cultural and economic life of their community. However, they had mixed views on the nature of the impact (positive or negative) on the different aspects of their socio-cultural and economic life. While the impact on the economic aspect was perceived to be generally positive, the opposite was the position regarding the impact on culture and traditions. Another interesting piece of the data here is that just three out of the 50 respondents believed that ecotourism led to an increase in crime in their community. The positive attitude of the local community to ecotourism is clearly helpful for further development of community based ecotourism in the area.

Conclusion

Bangladesh is endowed with a large number of ecotourism sites and the Sundarbans is one of them, which has recently been recognised as

one of the natural Seven Wonders of the World indicating the bright prospect of ecotourism business here. The Sundarbans is an area of attractive scenic beauty, biodiversity and rivers, as well as festivals, local cultural art forms and places of religious interest. There are locations of scenic views for tourists. These offer huge potential for developing activities of community based ecotourism, as well as allied services and infrastructure facilities in the surrounding area of the Sundarbans. One major limitation yet to be improved is lack of accommodation surrounding the Sundarbans; guest houses located at Mongla town are far away from the Sundarbans. Local administration has a positive attitude towards ecotourism development in the area, and acceptance by the local stakeholders is also strong. However, all concerned need to come together to exploit the possibility of the community based ecotourism here.

Tourism is viewed as largely beneficial to, and compatible with the process of economic development. The ecotourism business in the Sundarbans is considered to be a potential sector for economic development as the number of tourists visiting the area is gradually increasing. The local people of the area, as indicted by the results of the small study reported here, consider the overall impact of tourism as beneficial to the local economy and are generally in favour ecotourism in the Sundarbans. The government Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation and the private tourist operators should do their part in promoting ecotourism in the area. They should participate in various international fairs and similar events in order to familiarise international and national tourists with the tourist facilities of the Bangladesh Sundarbans. The government and non-government agencies involved in the general tourism sector should work hand in hand in order to develop ecotourism in the Sundarbans and its surrounding areas.

Some action plans can be initiated for the promotion of community based ecotourism in the Sundarbans. (i) There is need to improve the infrastructure facilities for tourism, especially for the stay of the tourists in the locality, such as cottages. (ii) As the local people have to be involved in community based ecotourism, training should be given to the community people involved in tourism activities in order to enhance their capacity in dealing with

the tourists, such as skills in communication and cultural show performance. (iii) The tour operators, whether government or non-government, should be encouraged to involve the local people in the tourism business. (iv) Local handicraft products should be promoted and their quality and variety have to be improved. (v) Action needs to be taken in order to reduce mismanagement of the forest department through increased awareness building, monitoring and accountability. (vi) Local people should be made aware of the prospects of alternative job opportunities in community based ecotourism which not only increases their earnings but also reduces their dependence on the Sundarbans and thereby helps environmental conservation.

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