

# Ecotourism: A new door to possibilities for Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT:** This is the high time for Bangladesh to enhance ecotourism in this corona pandemic period. Bangladesh is a country filled with natural wonders and untouched reserves and home to a variety of unique and magnificent creatures. With hills, valleys, forests, beaches, lakes and rivers, ecotourism in Bangladesh is ideal. Although this is still a relatively new form of tourism in Bangladesh, ecotourism is on the rise and extensive efforts are being made to promote it in the country. Bangladesh has the olden opportunity to emancipate the economic backwardness with optimally utilizing the cope of ecotourism throughout country. This paper focuses on the status and prospects of ecotourism of extensive level in Bangladesh and points out its role in the economic development of the country and how can Bangladesh make it popular and beneficial also. Relevant data for this paper were collected from many government websites of Bangladesh and other websites.

**Keywords:** Economic, Environment, Ecology, Geography, Natural, Development, Travel, Tourism, Bangladesh, Destination, Diversity, Impact, Bio-diversity, Sustainable, Currency, Employment, Transport, Management, Framework, Heritage.

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), ecotourism can be defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education”. Such traveling can be created thanks to an international network of individuals, institutions, and the tourism industry where tourists and tourism professionals are educated on ecological issues. At the same time, the Australian National Ecotourism defines ecotourism as “ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation.” The application of

the term 'ecotourism' has of ten initiated controversy, mainly due to the fact that 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 benefits to a poor country of the target destination. The concept of ecotourism is now a common issue for the developed countries where it is still a new area for the tourism industry in Bangladesh. Although there are a number of barriers in ecotourism in Bangladesh such as natural disaster, population pressure, inadequate physical infrastructural support, lack of motivation and awareness among the general people, absence of appropriate information, lack of proper guideline for the tourists, absence of quiet and solitary zones etc, still Bangladesh has a 'goldmine' for her unparalleled bio-diversified natural habitats, wildlife and ancient heritages. 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 provides a great emotional and learning experience to the visitors. If proper steps can be taken to protect the ecotourism spots along with adequate measures to make the destinations as eco-tourist-friendly with appropriate policy to allow ecotourism, then undoubtedly the socio-economic condition of remote local people will be improved and Bangladesh will be able to earn a huge amount of foreign exchange through it. The main goal of this paper is to explore the possibilities of economic development of Bangladesh through ecotourism as a new tool. The objectives of the study are to (i) study the economic impact of ecotourism; (ii) explore the benefits Bangladesh may achieve through properly managed ecotourism industry and, (iii) propose the ecotourism as a new tool of economic development in the remote ecologically-rich areas in particular and the whole nation in general.

### Importance of the Study

Tourism is the fastest growing and single largest industry in the world. Tourism as a multi-faced industry is playing pivotal role in the global as well as in the individual economic perspective. In the year 1950, the international tourist arrivals were 25.2 which rose to more than 800 million in the year 2005 and in 1950, the world tourism earning was US\$ 2.1 billion and the same stood at US\$ 623 in 2004 (WTO, 2005). The World Tourism Organization forecasted that in the year of 2010, the total world tourist arrivals will be 1,006.4 million and it will increase to 1,561.1 million in 2020 and the figure of the same for South Asia will be 10.6 million and 18.8 million in the year of 2010 and 2020 respectively and at the same time WTO forecasted that the number of tourist arrivals in Indian Ocean destinations will be 91.544 million and 179.249 in the year 2010 and 2020 respectively and the figure of the same in Bangladesh will be 0.255 million and 0.415 million in the corresponding years (WTO, 2000). According to WTO forecast the earnings from tourism will rise to US\$ 2 trillion a year by 2020.

The tourism industry of Bangladesh is of no exception from this. It can play an important role to contribute in the national economy of the country. In view of several holy shrines in the country there is the prospect of attracting millions of tourists to the country. But full potential of tourism could not be used largely due to inadequate and ineffective promotional activities of the industry. Institutional framework for attracting tourists has been in existence for more than three decades, but various institutions promote Bangladesh tourism with little coordination. This is construed to be one of the major hurdles adversely affecting the promotional activities and the resultant growth rate of the tourism industry in the country. It is of utmost importance to examine the special features of tourism firms' promotional activities and suggest how to improve those activities in order to attract a reasonably good number of foreign tourists to visit the country and take their services. So far the researcher knows no comprehensive study addressing promotional aspects of the industry in Bangladesh has been conducted yet by anyone. Even a very few studies are available related to the issue of tourism marketing in Bangladesh. As tourism industry in Bangladesh has failed to undertake adequate and effective promotional activities due to policy guidelines, resource constraints, religious view of local people, hartals by politicians and they lack of marketing orientation, hence, a study on this area is essential to uncover the relevant facts. It is also

expected that the findings and analysis of this study will help formulate appropriate promotional measures and thus motivate effectively more potential foreign tourists to visit Bangladesh as well as to contribute the economy of the country. At the same time, this study may be helpful for the policy-makers of the country to devote their attention to the issue of the segments of the tourism market that they wish to attract.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The word ecotourism is derived from two different words: ecosystem and tourism; forming ecotourism, which has the literary meaning of environment friendly tourism. Today's much hyped about ecotourism rises from the concept of the nature based tourism. Kabir and Bhuiya (2004) opined that ecotourism is sacred for preserving and sustaining the diversity of natural and cultural environment. It accommodates and entertains visitors in a way that is minimally intrusive or destructive to the environment and sustains and supports the native cultures. It therefore relates to sustainable environmental tourism. Thus, ecotourism is a responsible form of tourism encouraging the preservation of wildlife, natural habitats, heritage, the culture and creed of the local populace as well as making minimal collision on the environment. The popularity of ecotourism is increasing across the world. Although ecotourism has significant practical value in developing countries where the needs of financially insolvent communities may conflict directly with the need to exploit on the growing tourism industry, in most cases the sites are taken up by developers who select certain areas as tourism hotspots without much forecasting of the impact that the local communities will face in the future. These communities often depend on the specific area for food and shelter, yet their concerns are buried beneath the potential for capitalizing on natural resources. Ecotourism counters such actions. It aims at creating viable and sustainable scopes of tourism, axing the impact that all these activities might have on the environment. It also aims at improving the lives of the local people living in the area.

Ecotourism is exploding around the world yet little is known about its possible and/or projected impacts and implications, Funnell and Dowling (2003). According to the International Research Group (1992), ecotourism is travel for natural attraction. It took the place of so called „site seeing“, „escaping from the maddening crowd“ and now it has become a major trend for globe trotters. Globally environmentally aware tourists now prefer

ecologically sound and sensitive tourism and demanding high quality natural experience in nature with least possible negative environmental impact. Primarily, the word “eco” is derived from Greek word “oikos” which is loosely translated as “habitat” and is an abbreviation of the term “ecology”. The word tourism developed from the Hebrew word “tora”, meaning “to study, learn or research”. The International Ecotourism Society (1991) previously known as the Ecotourism Society defined ecotourism as: “Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people.” According to International Union for Conservation of Nature (1996): “Environmentally

responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature and accompanying cultural features both past and present that promotes conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples.” Sustainable development is confirmed by this form of tourism and the total ecology including flora and fauna will be in their own form. Lascurain (1996) also described ecotourism as an environmentally responsible travel that appreciates nature, promotes conservation, had low visitor impact, and creates opportunities for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local community. Structure of ecotourism is provided in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Structure of Ecotourism**



Source: Fennell (2015)

It can also be understood that inappropriate planning and mismanagement can lead to threatening the integrity of ecosystems and local cultures. Moreover, with the rise of the number of visitors, ecologically sensitive areas can gradually face fierce environmental degradation. Climatic changes, reckless construction and decorative activities, environmental pollutions can also lead to harming the ecological balance. If all these drawbacks can be eradicated, significant opportunities for both conservations of nature and benefit to local communities can be achieved.

Along with this ecotourism can also provide much-needed revenues for the nation as well.

Bangladesh might be imaged differently as an ecotourism destination shifting its stereotyped image; for instance flock of parrots over paddy field in Bangladesh might be an ecotourism destination (Khondkar, 2015). Ahmed and Mollah (2014) opined that ecotourism is not only confined in touring sites of natural beauty, it can also be of archaeological, and recreational tourism. The types of ecotourism sites are identified in table 1.

**Table 1: Types of Ecotourism Sites**

Types	Sites
Marine	Marine-protected areas, coral reefs, islands, beaches, bays
Terrestrial	Mountains, volcanoes, caves, trails, forest areas
Freshwater	Lakes, rivers, hot and cold springs, waterfalls
Cultural	Churches, historic sites, festivals
Manmade	Urban parks, reforestation sites

Source: Ahmed and Mollah (2014)

Lascurain (1991) emphasized the development of ecotourism and said that it involves traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific object of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any past and/or present cultural aspects of destination. Although ecotourism implies a scientific, esthetic or philosophical approach, however, the eco-tourist is not required to be a professional scientist, artist or philosopher. The main point is that the person who practices ecotourism has the opportunity of immersing him or herself in nature in a way that most people cannot enjoy in their routine, urban existences. This person will eventually acquire a consciousness and knowledge of the natural environment, together with its cultural aspects, that will convert that person to somebody keenly involved in nature conservation issues.

### III. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are:

1. to develop a conceptual framework to understand the concept of ecotourism,
2. to identify the ecotourism destinations in Bangladesh,
3. to identify the constraints of promoting Bangladesh as an ecotourism destination, and
4. to identify the future prospects of promoting Bangladesh as an ecotourism destination.

#### Characteristics of Ecotourism

**1) Involves travel to natural destinations:** These destinations are often remote areas, whether inhabited or uninhabited, and are usually under some kind of environmental protection at the national, international, communal or private level.

**2) Minimizes Impact:** Tourism causes damage. Ecotourism strives to minimize the adverse effects of hotels, trails, and other infrastructure by using either recycled materials or plentifully available local building materials, renewable sources of energy, recycling and safe disposal of waste and garbage, and environmentally and culturally sensitive architectural design. Minimization of impact also requires that the numbers and mode of behavior of tourists be regulated to ensure limited damage to the ecosystem.

**3) Builds environmental awareness:** Ecotourism means education, for both tourists and residents of nearby communities. Well before departure tour operators should supply travelers with reading material about the country, environment and local people, as well as a code of conduct for both the traveler and the industry itself. This information

helps prepare the tourist as The Ecotourism Societies guidelines state “to learn about the places and peoples visited” and “to minimize their negative impacts while visiting sensitive environments and cultures”.

**4) Provides direct financial benefits for conservation:** Ecotourism helps raise funds for environmental protection, research and education through a variety of mechanisms, including park entrance fees, tour company, hotel, airline and airport taxes and voluntary contributions.

**5) Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people:** National Parks and other conservation areas will only survive if there are “happy people” around their perimeters. The local community must be involved with and receive income and other tangible benefits (potable water, roads, health clinics, etc.) from the conservation area and its tourist facilities. Campsites, lodges, guide services, restaurants and other concessions should be run by or in partnership with communities surrounding a park or other tourist destination.

**6) Respects local culture:** Ecotourism is not only “greener” but also less culturally intrusive and exploitative than conventional tourism. Whereas prostitution, black markets and drugs often are by-products of mass tourism, ecotourism strives to be culturally respectful and have a minimal effect on both the natural environment and the human population of a host country. This is not easy, especially since ecotourism often involves travel to remote areas where small and isolate communities have had little experience interacting with foreigners.

**7) Supports human rights and democratic movements:** Although tourism often is glibly hailed as a tool for building international understanding and world peace, this does not happen automatically; frequently in fact tourism bolsters the economies of repressive and undemocratic states. Mass tourism pays scant attention to the political system of the host country or struggles within it, unless civil unrest spills over into attacks on tourists. Ecotourism demands a more holistic approach to travel, one in which participants strive to respect, learn about and benefit both the local environment and local communities.

Ideally, ecotourism should satisfy several criteria, such as:

1. Conservation of biological diversity and cultural diversity through ecosystem protection
2. Promotion of sustainable use of biodiversity, by providing jobs to local populations

3. Sharing of socio-economic benefits with local communities and indigenous peoples by having their informed consent and participation in the management of ecotourism enterprises
4. Tourism to unspoiled natural resources, with minimal impact on the environment being a primary concern.
5. Minimization of tourism's own environmental impact
6. Affordability and lack of waste in the form of luxury
7. Local culture, flora and fauna being the main attractions

For many countries, ecotourism is not simply a marginal activity to finance protection of the environment, but is a major industry of the national economy. For example, in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Nepal, Kenya, Madagascar and Antarctica, ecotourism represents a significant portion of the gross domestic product and economic activity.

The concept of ecotourism is widely misunderstood and in practice is often used as a marketing tool to promote tourism, which is related to nature. This is an especially frequent malpractice in the realm of Jungle tourism. Critics claim that these green-washing practices, carried out in the name of ecotourism, often consist of placing a hotel in a splendid landscape, to the detriment of the ecosystem. According to them, ecotourism must above all sensitize people to the beauty and the fragility of nature. They condemn some operators as green-washing their operations: using the labels of "green" and "eco-friendly", while behaving in environmentally irresponsible ways.

#### **Ecotourism: The Principles Behind It**

TIES highlights some principles associated with what ecotourism stands for: more than minimizing physical, social, behavioral, and psychological impacts, ecotourism is also about building a culture of environmental respect and protection while providing positive experiences to visitors and hosts. On the host's side, an ecotourism mindset is one generating value for local people and the industry, and they should help deliver remarkable experiences to visitors while raising their sensitivity to local environmental, political or social issues.

#### **The Benefits and Reasons Why Ecotourism Has Been Growing**

Among the reasons that help understand why ecotourism has been growing are:

- It is easier to access remote ecotourism destination nowadays thanks to cheap flights and accessible infrastructures;
- Many people are not happy or feel fulfilled with traditional tourism destinations and activities – so there's a greater interest in challenging and more educative tourism;
- There is a greater awareness about the need to protect the environment and desire to contribute towards this cause;
- Travelers wish to be perceived as different and eco-friendly;
- Ecotourism may help protect sensitive environment locations and raise awareness on local environmental and social delicate issues;
- It may also generate income opportunities for local people

#### **Ecotourism can be a boom for the Bangladesh tourism industry**

While the impact of global warming and climate change has been crucial in the question of sustainable tourism development, ecotourism has drawn the attention of world leaders.

International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as -- responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people. The Australian Commission on National Ecotourism Strategy terms it -- nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and is managed to be ecologically sustainable.

The United Nations designated 2001 as the 'International Year of Ecotourism' to promote eco-friendly tourism across the globe against mass tourism that causes much damage to nature and the environment. Ecotourism appears to have much in common with the concept of 'alternative tourism' or 'appropriate tourism', which has been discussed within the tourism industry for over a decade. For instance, it provides its greatest benefits (especially if applied at local levels) through pursuit of a widespread but controlled 'small is beautiful' philosophy.

The United Nations World Travel Organization estimates that in 2007 ecotourism captured 7 percent of total international tourism market. Ecotourism and wildlife-related tourism are big business. It is estimated, for instance, that in 1988 there were between 157 million and 236 million international eco-tourists worldwide. Ecotourism strives to minimize the adverse effects of hotels, trails, and other infrastructure by using either recycled materials or plentifully available local building materials, renewable sources of

energy, recycling and safe disposal of waste and garbage, and environmentally and culturally sensitive architectural design. Minimization of impact also requires that the numbers and mode of behavior of tourists be regulated to ensure limited damage to the ecosystem.

Ecotourism means education, for both tourists and residents of nearby communities. Well before departure, tour operators should supply travelers with reading material about the country, environment and local people, as well as a code of conduct for both the traveler and the industry itself. This information helps prepare the tourist as the Ecotourism Societies guidelines state it is “to learn about the places and peoples visited” and “to minimize the negative impacts while visiting sensitive environments and cultures”.

Bangladesh possesses a great potential for ecotourism development. The country entirely itself is an ecotourism destination. There are plenty of ecotourism attractions lying hither and thither of this land. The offshore islands, haors and wetlands, mangrove forests, rivers and culture can be our ecotourism products.

Ecotourism can also be based on traditional culture, archaeological sites and ethnicity. The single largest mangrove forest of the world, the Sundarbans, is a gold mine for ecotourism. Unesco has declared it as a World Heritage Site. Besides, other ecotourism products include tea plantations in greater Sylhet, hilly green areas of Hill Tract Districts, sandy beaches at Cox's Bazar, Inani and Kuakata, rivers, lakes, forest and wildlife, glorious tribal life and the simple lifestyle of the villagers.

Bangladesh may also focus on ecotourism development at St. Martin's Island, a small continental island in the Bay of Bengal that is nine kilometres wide. It is endowed with vast marine and land resources having great biodiversity significance. The island is a good example of co-occurrence of corals, algae, seaweeds, grasses and mangroves.

St. Martin's Island is the most appropriate place of Bangladesh for development and promotion of ecotourism. The geographical location and its natural characteristic are congenial for ecotourism activities. World-class corals, rare species of turtle and serene blue waters around the island attract tourists. But uncontrolled and unplanned tourism may cost the island's natural setting. To protect the island and its bio-diversity, the government can go for ecotourism development instead of mass tourism.

It would help in sustaining the rich biodiversity as well as benefit the local people.

However, development and promotion of ecotourism at the island is not an easy task. Waste management is a grave concern of the island. A population boom in the island poses a great threat to the depletion of biodiversity there. On the other hand, unscrupulous anchorage of tourist vessels damages the coral of the island. Hence, protection of the island and development of ecotourism may not be successful without a comprehensive ecotourism development plan. Bangladesh should emphasize ecotourism in its tourism planning process. Though the government has enacted laws to ensure a pollution-free environment, these needs to be enforced properly with short, mid and long-term projects. The government has enacted Environment Policy 1992 and Bangladesh Environment Protection Law 1995. The National Tourism Policy framed in 2010 also emphasizes ecotourism development as well as preservation and conservation of natural and cultural products.

Ecotourism can bring improved income and living standards for local people. Ecotourism can revitalize local culture, especially traditional crafts and customs. It can stimulate the rural economy by creating demand for agricultural products and through infrastructure development project, it can inject capital into rural area. So for vigorous ecotourism marketing for the benefit of all sharers, there should be interaction among the local community groups and leaders and the local authorities.

Until now in Bangladesh the ecotourism concept is not properly reflected in the current national tourism development programs. The tourism development issue has been skipped in 'Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan prepared in 2009 as well as in 'National Adaptation Programme of Action' developed in 2005.

Many tourism experts believe Bangladesh should go for ecotourism development instead of its effort to accommodate a large number of tourists beyond its capacity. Our neighboring country Bhutan develops tourism in a well-planned and well-controlled manner with the theme 'Low volume, High Values', that means reaping optimal benefits with lesser and a manageable number of tourists. If Bangladesh targets 4-5 lakh tourists by 2020, will the country be ready to manage such a number of tourists?

For development of ecotourism in Bangladesh, it needs well-trained, multilingual guides with skills in natural and cultural history, environmental interpretation, ethical principles and effective communication. The country also needs

ecotourism projects to help educate members of the surrounding community, schoolchildren of the host community. We all need to work hard for ecotourism development.

Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation may carry out different promotional activities for ecotourism. Special brochures and other promotional material may be published and distributed abroad through all foreign missions of Bangladesh. Participation in international tourism fairs, publication of features and advertisements in trade journals would also enable the country to promote its ecotourism products.

### **Ecotourism Destinations In Bangladesh**

Bangladesh can be called as: the most advantageous playground and darling child of nature, as it is still in its infancy in promoting a fully blooming ecotourism industry. Yet, as it is never too late to start anew, Bangladesh has made some progress in establishing itself as an ecotourism destination over the past few years. It exhibits a vast collection of biodiversity compared to many countries that try to promote ecotourism. Very few countries in the world are as rich as Bangladesh in their assets of flora and fauna. The country is called to be a flat alluvial plain, criss-crossed by three mighty rivers – the Padma, the Meghna, and the Jamuna; their innumerable tributaries and distributaries; she also holds mountainous ranges. This country offers thrilling sites for the adventurous; untamed and enchantingly splendid sites for those seeking rest in repose; and all of these sites are rich in natural diversity and serenity.

Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, is situated on the bank of the river Buriganga. In 1608 AD Dhaka was established as the seat of the Imperial Mughal Viceroy of Bengal. The city is widely known for its crafts of Jamdani, silk, muslin and pearls. There are numerous sites of religious, historical and environmental importance. These are the Mughal Constructions, the Armenian Church, the Star Mosque, the National Memorial at Savar, the Central Shadeed Minar, Curzon Hall at the heart of the University of Dhaka, the National Museum, the Baldah Gardens, the National Botanical Garden, the National Zoo, the oldest capital of Bengal– Sonargaon, etc. All of these sites can be considered for promoting ecotourism. In the greater Dhaka division, a number of resorts like Padma Resort, Jamuna Resort, Elenga Resort etc. have been constructed either by riversides or flaunting botanical gardens and mini zoos. Most of these have also constructed small scale amusement parks focusing family based recreation. Within the

Dhaka division, Faridpur district can be an ecotourism site for the Mathurapur Deul at Madhukhali Thana which is noted for highly ornate terracotta; rivers Padma, Modhumoti, Chandana, etc.; Majlis Awlia Mosque or Dighir Par Mosque; Jagodbondhu Sree Angon with Nat Mondir, The Roth, and Nouka Mondir; House of Poet Jasimuddin; the Mausoleum of Bongobondhu at Tungipara.

Sylhet has much to offer as an ecotourism destination. There are numerous recreational parks and resorts with vast lush areas of green, which are now boasted as ecotourism sites, having being tended in small accounts to keep up with the doctrine of ecotourism. There are memorials of two great saints, Hazrat Shah Jalal (RA) and Hazrat Shah Paran (RA) which are both surrounded by acres of gardens and lakes with age old turtles and gigantic fishes. There are more than 130 tea estates, virgin forests, national eco-parks, undiscovered caves and mountain ranges with Manipuri and Khasia tribes who are popular for their folk dances and distinct cultural heritage.

Although there are only a few sites offering ecotourism facilities in the true sense in the greater Rajshahi division in an identified way, but the area has multiple sites of historical and archaeological heritage and most of such sites are situated on massive fields, now transformed to parks and museums have also been constructed in the same. Paharpur Buddhist Bihar was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the year of 1985. It is an 8<sup>th</sup> century BC Buddhist monastery situated at Paharpur in Naogaon. Mahasthangarh at Bogra houses another 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC Buddhist monastery, which is still one of the largest to be discovered in Bangladesh. The Kantaji Temple and the Ramsagor Lake are two important attractions in the northern district of Dinajpur. This temple holds mythological terracotta carvings depicting the entire story of Mahabharata. Maynamati – Lalmai is an extensive centre of Buddhism (7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century) which was developed in Comilla during the Chandra and the Deva dynasties and it is also a religious heritage site.

One of the biggest sites for ecotourism is the Sundarbans which covers 10,000 square kilometers. About 66% of the entire mangrove forest area is estimated to be in Bangladesh and the remaining 34% is in India. It comprises of nearly 55% forest land and 45%. The cluster of islands forms the largest mangrove forest in the world. This mangrove habitat supports the single largest population of tigers aka the Royal Bengal Tiger in the world and compromises of unique collection of flora and fauna, making the place a heaven for

ecotourism. The Sundarbans is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Bangladeshi part of the forest has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1997. This natural mangrove forest has tremendous offerings to inquisitive visitors: tranquil sights of forest and rivers, the Royal Bengal Tigers, huge crocodiles basking under the sun, spotted deer, jungles fowl, wild boar, lizards, varied types of monkeys, and innumerable variety of beautiful birds and ducks. Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC), in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment and Forests, is working extensively in developing the Sundarbans as an ecotourism destination. Stimulating activities take place in the Harbaria Eco-Park, Dublar Char, and other Chars (Islands). Fishing, honey and leaf collection are some of the brave activities conducted in the Sundarbans that support livelihood of local community.

The Hiron Point (Nilkamal), Tinkona Island, and Kuakata are sites popular for observing the nature at its best. The vast grassy meadow running from Katka to Kochikhali (Tiger point) provides opportunities for wild tracking. Kuakata is the southernmost coastal region of the country foreseeing the Bay of Bengal. Kuakata's uniqueness is in its spellbinding natural beauty and the only sea beach in the country where both sunrise and sunset can be seen from the same place. Tribal Rakhaines, their simple life-style, and century old Buddhist monasteries are its other attractions.

Chittagong as a division is the richest in terms of tourism destinations in Bangladesh. Chittagong city is the second largest city and the business capital of Bangladesh. It has a busy seaport and airport. It is famous for its harbor and port; Neval Beach; Patenga Beach and hills; Karnaphuli River; Foy's Lake; Boga Lake; Vatiary Lake; Batali Hill; Chittagong Zoo; Dulahazra Safari Park;

Butterfly Park Bangladesh; the shrine of Bayazid Bostami; the beautiful Chandanpura Mosque; Adher Manik Shanti Niketan Buddhist Monastery; Chatteshwari Kali Temple; Kaibalyadham Ram Thakur Ashram; Zia Memorial Museum; Ethnological Museum; and Chittagong Commonwealth War Cemetery.

Sitakunda, a holy place for Hindu pilgrims, is only 36 km away from Chittagong. The most popular tourism destination in Bangladesh is Cox's Bazar. Its old name was "Bakolia" and before that it was called "Pengwa" (yellow flower) during the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century by the aborigines. It is the tourism capital of Bangladesh. It was named Cox's Bazar after Captain Hiram

Cox who was a British diplomat serving in Bengal as officer of the East India Company. The area beholds the longest unbroken sea beach of the world, numerous Buddhist pagodas, an ancient monastery, Rakhaine culture, delicious local cuisine, surfing wares, and shopping scope of various indigenous products. The beach is overlooked by a crescent shaped low green hill range, the dense jungle on the way to Teknaf known to be the habitat of wild elephants and deer, rare species of birds and jungle fowls. Cox's Bazar is also the home of salt production, shrimp cultivation, tribal handicrafts, and conch shell products. The Himchari waterfalls, the Inani beach, the offshore islands of Maheskhal, Ramu, St. Martin, Sonadia, Kana Raja's Cave, etc. make Cox's Bazar an exotic spot for ecotourism. Overlooking the Naf River, Teknaf is a romantic sub-urban town on the southern tip of Bangladesh just at the boarder of Burma. Maheskhal is an island in the Bay of Bengal in the northwestern direction off Cox's Bazar. The ancient Adinath Temple is seated high on the forested hill of this Island. Travel through the bumpy sea, fishermen's villages, the Rakhaine villages, and salt production are some of the attractions of this island. Ramu is a small Buddhist village, where ancient Buddhist pagodas and rubber gardens can be found. These sites have ample ecotourism potentials; however, require further infrastructural facilities for tourists.

The only coral island of the country is the St. Martin Island which is locally called Narikel Jinjira. Its main attractions include a beach encircling around the island, sunken coral reefs, coconut groves, sea crabs, turtle and crocodile breeding firms, etc. Chera Dwip has a unique scenic beauty which is an extended part of the St. Martin Island. Sonadia is a maiden island near Cox's Bazar that has fishermen's villages and dry fish processing fields.

There are some beautiful hilly districts like Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban, and these are home to a number of tribes, with their distinctive cultures, rituals and traditions. Rangamati is a South-eastern district, 77 kilometers away from Chittagong and it famous for its hills and tribal population. 52% of its population is tribal people. It homes the picturesque Kaptai Lake, the largest man-made lake in the sub-continent, the Parjatan Hanging Bridge, and Shuvolong Waterfalls. Khagrachari is 112 kilometers away from Chittagong; it has an array of green fields, quaint plantations, and winding hills with lots of waterfalls. Khagrachari is famous for Sajek as it is often identified as heaven of Bangladesh (Tripadvisor, 2015). It also has the Alutilla Cave,



Richhang Falls, and the Hanging Bridge. Bandarban is 92 kilometers away from Chittagong; offers the tranquility of the beautiful hills and valleys. It is the home of the Bohmong chief who is the Head of the Mogh tribe. The Mogh are of Myanmar origin, jovial and carefree by nature. The Moghs are simple and hospitable people. Bandarban is also the home of the Morangs who are famous for their music and dance. It has Buddha Dhatu Jadi temple. The top three highest peaks of Bangladesh - Tahjindong, Mowdok Mual, and Keokradong - are also located in Bandarban district, as well as Raikhiang Lake, the highest lake in Bangladesh. Chimbuk peak, Boga Lake, and Sangu River are also highly noted features of the district. The true taste of ecotourism can be experienced by exploring these hilly districts of the country.

Considering the types of ecotourism sites identified in table 1, it can be inferred that the following sites of Bangladesh can also be promoted as sites of ecotourism: zoos; safari parks (Bangabandhu Safari Park, Dulahazara Safari Park); Hakaluki and Tanguar Haors; archaeological heritage sites; parks and gardens (National Botanical Garden of Dhaka, Baldah Garden, Bhawal National

Park, Modhupur National Park, Ramsagar National Park, Kaptai National Park, Himchari National Park, Sitakunda Botanical Garden and Eco-park, Lawachara National Park, Madhabkunda Eco-park, Shopnopuri at Dinajpur, and Vinnya Jagat at Rangpur); etc.

### Present Scenario And Future Prospects Of Ecotourism In Bangladesh

Ecotourism is still not widely practiced in Bangladesh in its truest sense, although some initiatives have been taken, yet many on the way and it is likely that within a couple of years, Bangladesh will be boasting its natural heritage and might be celebrated as a cherished ecotourism destination. Bangladesh is distinguished for its natural beauty; archeological and historical sites; culture and livelihood patterns; and people and hospitality. Scope for expansion of world tourism here is very high as the cost of products and services are low. Accommodation facilities are available throughout the country. Adequate infrastructural development has been visible to reach even the remotest destination. However, further improvements in the alternatives of infrastructural facilities are still in high demand. The study found that experts are unanimous that Bangladesh has great potentials for the development of tourism in general and ecotourism in particular. The one thing left to be done is 360-degree promotional campaign. Most globe trotters are still at the dark of the ecotourism opportunities that Bangladesh offers; and in fact that is why the country is still can be promoted as a virgin ecotourism destination. Present scenario of tourism related laws, acts, policies, and regulatory agencies in Bangladesh are summarized in table 2.

**Table 2: Present Scenario of Tourism Related Laws and Acts in Bangladesh**

Institution/Object	Year of Commencement	Present Status
Tourism Council	1997	Only 3 meeting held in last 15 years
Tourism Policy	Tourism policy was declared in 1992 and reformed in 2010	Declared as industry in 1995
Bangladesh Tourism Board Law	2010	In practice
Bangladesh Tourism Protected Area and Exclusive Tourism Law	2010	In practice
Bangladesh Tourism Protected Area and Exclusive Tourism Act	2011	In practice
Bangladesh Tourism Act	Draft submitted to the ministry in the year 2012	Yet to be approved

Institution/Object	Year of Commencement	Present Status
Eco Tourism/ Ecotourism Development and Management Plan	2004	In practice since 2010
National Tourism Policy/Community Based/Sustainable Tourism Policy	2010	In practice

Source: Islam, 2015

The government prepared Ecotourism Development and Management Plan 2004 and the National Tourism Policy 2010 which are presently being implemented. According to the aforementioned laws and acts, the following activities will take place:

1. Renovating and developing all airports, with both domestic and foreign flight operations, and the services they provide wherever air itinerary is present.
2. Ensuring assistance and basic security of travelers.
3. Identifying potential tourist spots from all over the country and bringing them under proper maintenance, modernization, and supervision.
4. Expanding the existing ecotourism destinations and capitalizing on their potentials without demolishing or distorting the resources.
5. Building public awareness through socially involving activities.
6. Involving local government institutions in developing activities promoting ecotourism.
7. Designing infrastructure and providing improved supervision of the tourism, ecotourism industry through Public Private Partnership (PPP).
8. Monitoring the performance of the different role players in the industry.
9. Capacity building in ecotourism sector.
10. Establishing and maintaining tourism related training centers.

Previously there were no proper promotional activities upholding the ecotourism sector of Bangladesh, however, after the inception of the Bangladesh Tourism Board, an audio-visual commercial called “Discover Beautiful Bangladesh through the School of Life” is being used to promote Bangladesh as a tourist destination. Sundarban Biodiversity Conservation Project (SBCP) comprises a range of integrated activities, which is the major component of ecotourism. SBCP is an identified tool promoting conservation, environmental awareness and education of all

stakeholders and ensuring enjoyment of nature by both international and domestic tourist. Public and private sectors are gradually identifying their prospects of earning foreign exchange and creating job opportunities. The World Tourism Organization formed a Strategic Master Plan with the assistance of UNDP for integrated development of tourism in Bangladesh. Following the Plan’s steps, infrastructure development has already commenced and very soon Bangladesh will come under a tourism network.

#### CONSTRAINTS OF ECOTOURISM IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is yet not a prominent name in the international tourism market. Although the tourism sector got recognition as an industry in 1999 only three lacs foreign tourists came to Bangladesh in 2010, of which more than 70% came for business and official purposes; and the contribution of the earning from tourism to the country’s GDP is less than 1%. (Hassan, et al., 2013). Thus it is primarily essential to pin point the problems in this sector. A hefty number of stakeholders, either knowingly or unknowingly are involved with the business of ecotourism. Outcome of the discussion about ecotourism issues with them are summarized below:

1. As ecotourism focuses on touring natural habitats of the ecology, local cultures, wilderness adventures and serene sites, so, local or indigenous people can influence the tourists positively with their cordiality and hospitality. However, abstinence of the aboriginals and local riots cause a sense of fear and negativity in the minds of the tourists.
2. There are numerous government and private tour operator organizations in Bangladesh which are actively involved with ecotourism. BPC is one of them. According to the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh, there are at present 317 enlisted tour operators. However, most of these operators only offer package tour deals for the tourists and many

are not well trained or educated enough about ecotourism.

3. Tour guides, transportation service providers, and other assistants are crying needs. Many tourists complain about poor quality of service and adverse social behaviors from the locals. Negative image of service providers, failing schedules of transport facility providers, devastating lengths of journeys with little breaks, bumpy transports, inexperienced tour operators, poor services, and rough itinerary scheduling cost the country a lot in both general tourism sectors and ecotourism too.
4. While promoting tourism destinations BPC might become more effective and responsible. For instance, one poster of BPC promoting tourism to Mahasthangarh, a world heritage site where loitering and climbing up on the shrines is prohibited, showing a group of tourists loitering around the sacred ground and another group positioned over a shrine! Such irresponsible act needs to be rectified with proper training and awareness generation of them.
5. Tourists are most often not educated enough; and their reckless behaviors often contribute to the damaging of the ecotourism sites.
6. Law enforcers are not most often active enough in protecting the ecotourism sites.
7. Hotels, motels resorts, private guest houses, other temporary lodging providers are intricately involved in ecotourism activities, but in most cases, their service charges fluctuate, and no proper guides are offered let alone educating the tourists of the appropriate behavior.
8. Though Bangladeshis are popular for their hospitality, it has been observed that in many sites local hooligans, ruffians, and beggars keep loitering around places of tourist attractions creating disturbance and polluting the entire image of tourism.
9. Bangladesh has established National Tourism Policy (2010) that emphasizes the practice and preservation of ecotourism, which is in most cases yet to be carried out.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The government has enacted Environment Policy 1992, Bangladesh Environment Protection Law 1995, and National Tourism Policy 2010; the main objective of which is to develop sustainable ecotourism through conserving natural resources and promoting community interests as well as

preserving cultural values of the local people by ensuring their participation in the entire process. Ecotourism might be the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry and that requires appropriate strategic planning for effective implementation of the National Tourism Policy. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Educating local people about ecotourism and its maintenance.
2. Necessary measures are required from law enforcement authorities for maintaining the serenity of the sites.
3. Adequate availability of restrooms and refreshment zones are top priorities.
4. Proper waste management system is essential.
5. Unauthorized construction of buildings, shops or make-shift entertainment stoppages should be strictly handled.
6. Ascertaining training and monitoring of tour operators and service providers.
7. Punitive actions should be taken on violations of code of conduct set for the eco-tourists.
8. Ensuring economic benefits of the local/indigenous people.

It is essential to develop strategic plans by the government to portray what needs to be done, the parties responsible for the actions to be taken, and the roles and responsibilities of the relevant parties. The National Tourism Policy can be that platform. With the help of the Government, BPC can also create proper infrastructure for ecotourism. This calls for hassle free visa processing, inbound and outbound traveling coverage along with baggage handling. Marketing strategies and promotional campaigns for place marketing need to be carefully designed, launched, and regularly monitored so that effective results can be achieved (Khondkar, et al., 2012). For capturing the global ecotourism market, the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism should aim at attracting tourists both local and foreign toward the ecotourism destinations of Bangladesh by creative promotional campaigns like: "Incredible India", "Malaysia, Truly Asia", "Maldives, the Sunny Side of Life", "Egypt, Where it all begins", "Japan, Endless Discovery", and "Tourism Australia – Australia Unlimited". These promotional campaigns have millions of tourists flocking to these destinations. Ensuring proper infrastructure and facilities for the tourists will help uphold the image of the country. Through online and offline media, the ministry can educate people about ecotourism; promote the sites both locally and for foreign travelers. Travel shows can also be constructed and aired on different travel and living channels for attracting tourists.

It is also necessary to maintain the service quality of the transportation service providers, tour operators, guides and most importantly the accommodation providers. This can be done by the National Hotel and Tourism Training Institute. It can expand their training facilities all over the country and ensure world class standards of this service based industry. All airlines, water, and land transportation service providers; and tour operators might be brought under tight scrutiny and performance evaluation.

Ecotourism recognizes the idea of preservation of the nature and the local community's involvement. Ensuring ecotourism will not only provide quality employment and revenue generation opportunities for local people, but also will impose the preservation of natural resources, environment and the indigenous and/or tribal cultures. Bangladesh is richer than many other countries in its natural, historical and archaeological heritages. However, this fact is not yet reaching the majority of the foreign tourists; as a result, Bangladesh is still its nascent stage of flourishing as an ecotourism destination.

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