

## Assessing benefits of ecotourism

Dr. M. A. BASHAR

In a broad sense, the word 'environment' embraces all the conditions or influences under which any individual or thing exists, lives or develops. Environment is a combination of various physical and biological elements that affect the life of an organism. Environment may vary in scale from microscopic to global and may be subdivided according to their attributes. The aquatic environment for example, is that of rivers, lakes, and oceans, the terrestrial environment has been applied to areas such as cities created by human activity. Forest is a large area of uncultivated land covered by trees, undergrowth and underwood. A man who lives in the city is habituated with his urban daily life, and that is why, he always wants to go out of the city to the forest areas even for a while. Not only the city dwellers, everybody needs to utilize his leisure time in a minimum distance of travel or travel involving at least a one-night stay away from home. That travel takes a man to tourism; and if this tourism is involved in an orientation of natural beauties and scenarios, especially towards the attractiveness of wild plants and animals; wild animal behaviours. The situation appears to man as an ecotourism. Now let us see how the various thinkers and scientists have involved the ecotourism with environmental soundness and economic welfare for the concerned people.

Many definitions of "ecotourism" have been emerged since the term was coined in 1987. In 1991, The Ecotourism Society (TES) developed the following definition: "responsible travel to natural areas that covers the environment and sustains the well being of local people" (Epler Wood, 1996). Expanding on this definition, TES has developed seven basic principles of ecotourism:

- + Avoids negative impacts that can damage or destroy the integrity or character of the natural or cultural environments being visited.
- + Educates the traveler on the importance of conservation.
- + Directs revenues to the conservation of natural areas and the management of protected areas.
- + Brings economic benefits to local communities and directs revenues to local people living adjacent to protected areas.
- + Emphasizes the need for planning and sustainable growth of the tourism industry, and seeks to ensure that tourism development does not exceed the social and environmental "capacity".
- + Retains a high percentage of revenues in the host country by stressing the use of locally-owned facilities and services.

Ecotourism places many demands on a wilderness area, foremost being the ability to accommodate tourists while still providing the experiences they seek. The advantage for the wilderness area is that "because (ecotourism) is primarily resource-based, protection of these natural and archeological resources is essential for sustained ecotourism" (Kusler, 1990). Many conservation organizations and governments see ecotourism as the

means to both preserve and develop remote areas.

The term "ecotourism" (which blends 'ecology' and 'tourism'), covers the scope of tourism that draws upon natural, human-made and cultural environments. The term is most commonly used to describe any theme of travel to experience natural environments or settings. However, the ecotourism society adds social responsibilities to define ecotourism 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". Some refer to ecotourism as nature based tourism. Even if the details vary, most definitions of ecotourism mean a special form of tourism that meets three criteria like: 1. It provides for conservation measures. 2. It includes meaningful community participation; and 3. It



In fashikhali forests, French biodiversity specialist (Prof. D. Theiry) is being demonstrated the process of wild sampling with researchers of "Environment biology and biodiversity lab" of Dhaka University (Dec.-2002).

is profitable and can sustain itself.

Ecotourism, or nature tourism, is just one component of the tourism industry. A precise definition of tourism is exclusive because of its complex nature, involving a combination of attractions, transport, accommodation, supporting facilities and infrastructure. It is generally defined by its spatial dimension, and is thus often characterized by criteria such as a minimum distance of travel or travel involving at least a one-night stay away from home. The lack of a common definition results in multiple interpretations, nevertheless ecotourism should support the concepts and principles that contribute to integrating social, economic and environmental goals. Therefore, ecotourism should have the following: \* To attract tourists to natural environments which are unique and accessible. \* To be used to improve nature conservation through education. \* To lead to changing of attitudes in local people and

government. \* To provide employment and entrepreneurial opportunities to local people. \* To generate revenue.

The idea behind ecotourism is to offer expeditions to unspoiled, inaccessible parts of the world that would interest natural history enthusiasts, or tourists looking for learning through adventure (Jordan, 1995). Ecotourism is nature oriented tourism, which based on the use of natural resources, including scenery, topography, water features, plant life and wildlife, in a relatively undeveloped state. It is also possible to realize the "attraction value" of biodiversity through the income generated by 'ecotourists'. Ecotourists pay to experience the biodiversity of a country or national park and will pay more, and expect less by way of facilities, than conventional tourists. For example, the Monteverde cloud forest in Costa Rica receives 15,000 visitors per year who pay an entrance fee which contributes to the costs of running the reserve. At another

can be considered "hard core" natural history travel. On the other hand, "soft" ecotourism, or natural history tourism, combines nature-oriented travel with beaches, deep-sea fishing, shopping, culture, etc. Tourism and trips in this category tend to try and combine a variety of motivations and activities in single trip, e.g. viewing tropical forest scenery, watching birds and wildlife, visiting archeological ruins etc. The second hard soft distinction refers to the physical rigor of the experience. Will the visitors have to walk miles into undeveloped wilderness, sleep in a tent or crude shelter, and to tolerate primitive sanitary conditions? Or will the visitor stay in quality accommodations, eat in good restaurants, and be conveyed in comfortable transport? Some of hard tourism, from the standpoint of dedication to natural history, falls into the soft category of physical rigor. The inverse also occur when casual devotees seek (or unwillingly endure)



In Sitakundo Forests, the researchers of "Environment biology and biodiversity lab" of Dhaka University are working on Plant-Animal association (Jan.-2003).

visited Rwanda's Park National Des Volcans each year, generating over a million dollars in much needed foreign currency through park entry and gorilla watching fees. It has also resulted in the government of Rwanda stopping the exportation of gorilla habitat from the park to donate native farmers, while the presence of tourists apparently drove off poachers who were making serious inroads in the gorilla population.

According to Brockleman and Dearden (1990) ecotourism along with the cultural and adventure (which are often compatible and incorporated with ecotourism) can be considered one of the fastest growing areas of tourism today. It is estimated that US\$ 25 billion per year flow from developed countries in the North to less developed countries in the South through ecotourism. Further, ecotourism is able to establish a more symbiotic (compatible helpful) relationship with conservation than the more traditional forms of tourism. Ecotourism could present itself as a very viable benefit with a great deal of potential for villages on the borders of national parks and, in some cases, reserves. Ecotourism could support local employment of villagers as guides, porters, construction workers, merchants, as well as through food, lodg-

ing, and handicraft facilities in villages. A major problem of most development programmes in developing countries is that few socioeconomic benefits actually reach the local people. Ecotourism presents the opportunity to directly benefit local populations.

Ecotourism in developing countries with tropical forests has become big business. The growing demands for

ecotourism present numerous opportunities for increasing sustainable, rural and national development, while still protecting tropical forests and their biodiversity. On the other hand, the present deforestation and degradation patterns for tropical forests in Asia and other countries of the South may well remove these opportunities in the very near future.

There are many important spots

Dr. M. A. BASHAR is Professor, Department of Zoology, Dhaka University and Pro-Vice Chancellor, Bangladesh Open University.

## Conserve bio-diversity of the Sundarbans



The Royal Bengal Tiger in its abode—the Sundarbans.

ZAKIA SHAMIM CHOUDHURY

BANGLADESH is blessed with a unique world heritage -- the Sundarbans, the biggest mangrove forest in the world. Sundarbans' existence in its natural and total entity is essential not only for our survival but also for that of the whole world. It inhabits a complex ecosystem including various types of animals, birds, fish, insects etc. Besides, it is the only habitat of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

The Royal Bengal Tiger is unique in its kind and is not found anywhere else around the world. So as our country is gifted with such an animal, it is the

duty of the authorities and the people to look after this animal and its habitat. The Sundarban withholds our country like a cradle: its absence would just wash away the existence of Bangladesh in other words. Other countries too are being benefited from this forest, directly or indirectly. So other countries too have the duty to look after this valuable resource as well.

One project known as the Sundarban Bio-diversity Conservation Project (SBCP) was on, but on September 04, 2003 unfortunately the South Asian Department of the ADB intimated that funding for the SBCP would remain suspended until and unless certain terms and conditions specified

by ADB were fulfilled. This US\$ 77.5 million project was conceived in 1997 and was commenced on April 01, 2000. Moreover there were external finance of US\$ 33.9 million, which was supposed to come from the ADB, then a grant of US\$ 12.2 million from the GEF and another grant of US\$ 3.1 million from the Government of the Netherlands. The reason the fund was suspended is because it could not fulfil its purpose.

The specified purpose of the project was to structure a sustainable management system for the SRF, conservation of the bio-diversity in the Sundarbans, and for eliminating the poverty of the 3.5 million people inheriting the

Impact Zone of the project. But the devastating fact is that the Forest Department was able to implement only one-third of the planned activities. Within this time span ADB released 23 percent of the approved funding. So at this point it is visible that the Forest Department had not been able to utilise the fund effectively. According to ADB there was no fault in their plan, while according to the SBCP Watch Group, the original project design itself was faulty, so ADB is obliged to bear the entire cost of redesigning the project as a grant.

At this crucial point, it certainly won't be wise to keep debating and blaming one another for what happened. It is essential that every individual and group who are involved with this conservation project, should come forward and act together to find out the reasons why this project could not fulfil its aim. Then they should take the required initiative in redesigning the project and its implementation as a whole. Moreover they should specifically assure that the local people have a stand on the overall activity of the project and that their opinion be also taken while taking any decision. The suggestion and opinions of the local people and the Local Government bodies must be taken in every step and the Forest Department should be accountable to them.

The conservation of bio-diversity of the Sundarbans is very much essential. So it won't be wise to withdraw the funds for its conservation project nor that it be cancelled over some disputes and ineffectiveness. Instead it would be wise for everyone involved with the project to take the stand to implement the project more effectively and efficiently so that it gives out a worthy result.