

Ecotourism can be a boom for the industry

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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 Organisation 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 ecotourists worldwide.

Ecotourism strives to minimise the adverse effects of hotels, trails, and other infrastructure by using either recycled materials or plenti-



Children ride an all-terrain vehicle at the world's largest uncut beach at Cox's Bazar in the port city.

fully available local building materials, renewable sources of energy, recycling and safe disposal of waste and garbage, and environmentally and culturally sensitive architectural design. Minimisation of impact also requires that the numbers and mode of behaviour 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 travellers with reading material about the country, environment and local people, as well as a code of conduct for both the traveller 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 minimise 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 emphasise 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 emphasises 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 revitalise 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 programmes. 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 neighbouring 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.

The writer works for Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation.

Developing Asia to rebound but recovery fragile: ADB

AFP, Hong Kong

THE Asian Development Bank said Tuesday the region's emerging economies would pick up this year but warned that the recovery remained fragile due to the eurozone crisis and tensions in Asia.

The Manila-based lender said in its latest forecast that the uptick in China's economy and "robust growth" in Southeast Asia would lead expansion, which would be also boosted by strong domestic consumption.

The ADB estimated that gross domestic product (GDP) for developing Asia, which covers 45 nations, was set to grow 6.6 percent this year before

edging up to 6.7 percent in 2014.

Growth slowed to 6.1 percent last year -- the lowest since 2009 when it saw 6.0 percent expansion.

"Developing Asia's recovery phase remains vulnerable to shocks," the bank said in its Asian Development Outlook report.

"Strong capital inflows could feed asset bubbles. Political discord surrounding fiscal debates in the United States, austerity fatigue in the euro area, and border disputes in Asia could jeopardise macroeconomic stability."

"Continued sluggishness in the United States, euro area, and Japan suggests that developing Asia must continue to shift toward more

domestic demand and trade with emerging markets," the ADB said.

The ADB forecast China's economy to expand 8.2 percent this year, up from 7.8 percent last year, thanks to strong domestic demand and a better export performance.

South Asia's growth would turn around after two years of softening, it said, with India tipped to see GDP rise 6.0 percent this year from last year's 5.0 percent.

"India has considerable potential, but its future performance relies on resolving contentious structural and policy issues that inhibit investment," the bank said.

The stronger economic activity expected for this year however would spur renewed price pressure, with inflation expected to rise from 3.7 percent in 2012 to 4.0 percent this year and 4.2 percent next year.

"These pressures remain manageable for now, but will need to be monitored closely, especially as strong capital inflows raise the spectre of potential asset market bubbles," the report said.

Southeast Asia would continue to shine on robust private consumption and increased intra-regional trade. Its GDP is set to expand 5.4 percent this year.

An ambitious plan by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations regional bloc to create a common, barrier-free market by 2015 would encourage even higher growth and help to diversify its market, the ADB report noted.

The bank also warned that Asia's growth ambitions could be jeopardised unless the region secures enough supply of clean and affordable energy to support its rapid expansion.

Asia's consumption in energy could rise from barely a third in 2010 to more than half by 2035, when the high polluting coal consumption is set to rise by a whopping 81 percent.

ADB said the region could face "costly and devastating environmental impacts" unless radical changes to the way it uses energy is carried out.

The battle to protect patent in India



REUTERS

A man buys cancer drug Glivec at a pharmacy in a government-run hospital in Ahmedabad in India.

DH PAI PANANDIKER, for Reuters

THE Supreme Court verdict on Glivec brought to an end the battle by Swiss drugmaker Novartis to exclusively market the cancer medicine. In doing so, the bench enunciated a principle to justify a patent only by its intrinsic worth of innovation.

The exclusive marketing right for Glivec was granted in 2003 for a period of five years. Once a drug is off-patent, the product/process can be freely copied. But many companies try to extend the life of the patent further by making marginal changes which are not relevant to the product's effectiveness. To what extent these devious changes amount to innovation becomes a matter of judgment.

The Supreme Court verdict focuses on this issue. It is certainly not against protection to innovation. But insignificant changes to a product which do not enhance its therapeutic efficacy do not make it a new invention. There is no 'novelty' in the change, the

court said, and no new substances are used in the drug.

Intellectual property rights are fundamental to innovation. Protection is necessary to recover the cost and make profits. Surely, the cost can be quite high. In the pharmaceutical industry, it is estimated that a genuinely new drug costs over \$1 billion for research and clinical tests. But the major unaccounted cost is the cost of failure. That can push up the overall cost of research quite substantially, possibly three to four times.

Research is the key to business leadership. The top 20 pharma companies spend, on average, over \$4 billion a year and the very large ones such as Novartis, Roche and Pfizer more than \$6 billion a year. When they innovate a drug, the money spent on research has to be recovered, for which countries recognise and grant protection under the Patents Act. Initially the drug remains costly; once the tenure of the patent is over, the drug price drops to the cost of production and marketing.

Drugs which are still under pat-

ent protection are relatively few, possibly about 10 percent of the pharma market. The bulk market is for generics in which India is progressing rapidly and tops the world market with exports exceeding a fifth of the world's total. The major markets are the United States, Russia and South Africa. Even developed countries are moving towards unbranded generics to reduce the cost of health care.

The pharma industry in India is growing at more than 15 percent per year. With foreign direct investment now permitted up to 100 percent equity and the spate of mergers and acquisitions, the share of MNCs in the pharma industry has substantially increased.

India is going to be an excellent hub for the pharma industry as a destination for phase III clinical trials. The industry should now invest more in research using protection under the patents law, which is in tune with the TRIPS Agreement since 2005.

The writer is the president of RPG Foundation, a private think tank.



AFP

The Asian Development Bank in the Philippines is pictured.