

# **BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION: STUDIES IN ITS ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT, MAINLY IN YUNNAN, CHINA**

**Working Paper No. 13**

**Tourism Development in India and Bangladesh:  
General Issues, and Ecotourism in the Sunderbans**

by

**Clem Tisdell**

**March 1995**



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**Clem Tisdell<sup>2</sup>**

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Rural nature reserves can have negative as well as positive spillovers to the local region and policies need to be implemented to maximise the net economic benefits obtained locally. Thus an 'open' approach to the management and development of nature conservation (biodiversity) programmes is needed. The purpose of this study is to concentrate on these economic interconnections for Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve and their implications for its management, and for rural economic development in the Xishuangbanna Dai Prefecture but with some comparative analysis for other parts of Yunnan

The Project will involve the following:

1. A relevant review relating to China and developing countries generally.
2. Cost-benefit evaluation of protection of the Reserve and/or assessment by other social evaluation techniques.
3. An examination of the growth and characteristics of tourism in and nearby the Reserve and economic opportunities generated by this will be examined.
4. The economics of pest control involving the Reserve will be considered. This involves the problem of pests straying from and into the Reserve, e.g., elephants.
5. The possibilities for limited commercial or subsistence use of the Reserve will be researched.
6. Financing the management of the Reserve will be examined. This will involve considering current sources of finance and patterns of outlays, by management of the Reserve, economic methods for increasing income from the Reserve and financial problems and issues such as degree of dependence on central funding.
7. Pressure to use the resources of the Reserve comes from nearby populations, and from villagers settled in the Reserve. Ways of coping with this problem will be considered.
8. The political economy of decision-making affecting the Reserve will be outlined.

**Commissioned Organization:** University of Queensland

**Collaborator:** Southwest Forestry College, Kunming, Yunnan, China

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# **TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA AND BANGLADESH: GENERAL ISSUES, AND ECOTOURISM IN THE SUNDERBANS**

## **Abstract**

Historically, tourism in India has been important and in fact is encouraged by Hindu scriptures. Nevertheless, international tourism to India and South Asia generally has languished in recent times in contrast to the growth of international tourism in the Asia-Pacific which has experienced the fastest tourism growth rate of any region in the world. Paying particular attention to India and Bangladesh, some of the economic and other reasons for this lack-lustre performance are outlined, e.g., government regulations, restriction of competition in the tourist and travel industry, state provision of tourist services, currency restrictions. Now that India, and to some extent, Bangladesh have embarked on economic reforms to help liberalise their economies some of their previous impediments to international tourism will be reduced.

Both in India and Bangladesh, the government has played a major role in the provision of tourist services. This not only includes the provision of transport facilities such as air and rail transport, but also hotels, lodges, guest houses and tours themselves. Although the governments of India and Bangladesh have played a major role in tourism, with the economic structural adjustments that are occurring or planned the relative role of the government in the tourism sector can be expected to decline. In India for example, greater competition is to be expected in the provision of airline services and some government owned hotels are to be sold to private industry. Some reduction in 'red tape' faced by tourists might also be anticipated.

Apart from considering general economic issues and policies involved in tourism development in India and Bangladesh, the study draws on a survey of the development of ecotourism in the Sunderbans. This is a major area for ecotourism both in West Bengal and in Bangladesh. Many of the problems encountered in this region also are encountered for ecotourism in other countries, both less developed and developed.

Amongst the economic problems encountered in operating tourism enterprises in the Sunderbans are: (1) The fact that tourism to the area is seasonal; the tourist facilities cannot be used during the hot monsoon period and so they remain idle for a large part of the year. This is a major cost component. (2) Virtually no local persons are employed in the tourist

industry in the Sunderbans, so there are very few employment benefits to locals. (3) Most commodities for tourism in the Sunderbans are sourced from outside the Sunderbans. In the case of the Indian Sunderbans, most of the supplies come from Calcutta. (4) Permits are required for entry to the Sunderbans both in Bangladesh and India. These must be issued by the Ministry of Forestry and often there are delays in their issue which can frustrate tourists. (5) Wild animals, especially tigers, are very difficult to see. Therefore, many tourists may feel disappointed. Tourism in the Indian and Bangladesh Sunderbans is compared and contrasted.

# **TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA AND BANGLADESH: GENERAL ISSUES, AND ECOTOURISM IN THE SUNDERBANS**

## **1. Introduction**

Tourism has always been important in India and in fact is encouraged by the Hindu scriptures (Richter, 1989). Even in the earliest of times, rulers such as Ashoka built rest houses for travellers and tourists. Despite this, international tourism to India and to South Asia generally has languished in recent times in contrast to that in the Asia-Pacific which in the last decade has experienced the fastest tourism growth rate of any region in the world. In the period 1985-1990, international tourist arrivals in South Asia increased by 23.3% compared to 93.2% for Oceania and 72.1% for Asia and South Asia (World Tourism Organisation, 1992). The disparity in growth of receipts from tourism was even greater. Receipts from foreign tourists increased by 52.1% for South Asia, by 287.5% for Oceania and by 181.1% for East Asia, that is east and southeast Asia combined (World Tourism Organisation, 1992).

Take the case of Bangladesh. In the case of Bangladesh, the number of international visitors actually showed a downward trend between 1985 and 1992. In 1985, the number of international visitors was in round terms 146,000 and fell back to 110,000 in 1992, with a decline being evident in most years. The Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation reports that the major sources of Bangladesh foreign arrivals were Japan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Korea, UK, USA, Canada, France, Singapore and Australia. It is estimated that 45% of visitors came for business, 20% for pleasure, 18% official business, and 17% for other purposes. Available tourism accommodation remained considerably underutilised due to lack of demand. For 1991, the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation reported an average occupancy rate in its hotel/guest houses of 45% and Dhaka Sheraton had an average occupancy rate of 51%.

Let us consider some of the factors that may have led to the slow growth in the number of international visitors to India [for more details see White and Inbakaran (1994)] and the decline observed in the case of Bangladesh and follow this by a case study of tourism development in the Sunderbans, a deltaic region which occurs in both Bangladesh and West

Bengal, India. This case study highlights some of the difficulties involved in developing ecotourism in Bangladesh and in India, difficulties that are also liable to occur in other tropical developing countries.

## **2. Factors Constraining International Arrivals in Bangladesh and India**

Very often tourism development authorities in developing countries (and sometimes developed ones) attribute lack of growth of tourism to inadequacies in available infrastructure such as facilities for transport, telecommunications and accommodation. In addition, man-made tourist attractions are often thought to be insufficient as well as tourist facilities to complement natural tourist attractions (Sikder, 1991). This often leads to proposals to invest more in the infrastructure for tourism. The case studies for the Sunderbans given later illustrate this point.

Many of those who stress lack of infrastructure as the main impediment to growth of tourism adopt the view that tourism needs to be supply-led, that is developed by the supply of infrastructure, sometimes on a large scale. While there are occasions on which provision of tourism infrastructure is essential for developing economically worthwhile-tourism, supply of such infrastructure does not always lead to a substantial rise in tourism or it may be that the costs involved in supplying the infrastructure exceed the (social) economic benefits obtained.

Given the theory of bureaucracy as propounded by Downs (1957), it is not surprising that tourism agencies tend to favour the inadequate infrastructure hypothesis as an explanation of lack of tourism growth. Especially if they administer or are closely associated with investment in such infrastructure, this investment will tend to increase the size of their organization. This is true for example of the West Bengal Department of Tourism. In addition, most government organizations need 'client groups' to provide them with greater political security. Those benefiting from the provision of tourism infrastructure are one such possible client group. Political support rarely depends upon a project being economic from a social point of view. It is often enough if a tourism project has the support of politically powerful special interest groups which expect to gain from it. Given the degree of government involvement in the past in the tourism sector in India and in Bangladesh, the scope for political decision-making in relation to tourism has been considerable.

The inadequate-infrastructure hypothesis may also divert attention from more fundamental problems for tourism development, some of a natural type and others of institutional type. The images of poverty and health risks associated with India and Bangladesh undoubtedly deter many would-be foreign travellers from visiting these countries for pleasure. These images seem stronger for these two countries than for China. Secondly, as far as international tourists from the developed countries of the Northern Hemisphere are concerned, humid monsoonal conditions occur in India and Bangladesh during their main holiday season. South Asia is not a suitable tourist destination during this period. This reduces the number of potential international visitors. In addition, because tourism facilities in some areas remain unutilised or considerably underutilised due to the monsoon, this adds to the cost of tourism operations. Conditions for tourism can be unfavourable for 6-8 months of the year in South Asia.

In the case of India and Bangladesh, there have also been institutional constraints on growth of tourism. These include

1. Considerable regulation of industry with restrictions on foreign investment.
2. A widespread system of regulation of large business investments involving the public bureaucracy.
3. The extensive use of visas and permits for foreign visitors. For example, both Bangladesh and India require Australian tourists to have visas and these must normally be applied for in advance of travel. By contrast, neither Thailand nor the Philippines require this. Most Australian tourists can visit these countries with no visa formalities being required. Furthermore, India has an extensive system of permits for visiting particular parts. As mentioned later, permits are required to visit the Sunderbans both in India and Bangladesh. Visits to Northeast India require special permits which should be applied for six months in advance and restrictions apply on places for visits. While some of these regulations play a useful role in safeguarding tourists and local people, sometimes they appear to be excessive and discourage tourism.
4. A number of tourist facilities are operated by the government and in the past many have lacked business competition or have not been disciplined by it. This, for example, was true of the national airline in India and is still the case in Bangladesh. In several cases, hotels are operated by the government. As a result poor business



practices have been followed in many cases and customer service has suffered.

5. Until August 1994, India managed its exchange rate in a way which meant that its currency was overvalued. The same has been true for Bangladesh.
6. Checking of international visitors at international airports tends to be slow and labour-intensive. In the latter respect a considerable amount of featherbedding seems to be involved.

In the last two years or so, partly under pressure from the IMF and the World Bank, both India and Bangladesh have started a process of structural adjustment designed to reduce the size of the public sector and to increase the role for markets and the private sector. This will undoubtedly impact on the tourism sector of both countries. Already some changes have occurred. For example, exchange controls have been virtually eliminated, conditions on foreign investment in India have been relaxed, increased competition with the Indian government airline in India is being allowed and some hotels are either being sold to private industry or are to be operated as joint ventures with private industry. The latter is for example true of the Great Eastern in Calcutta which has in the past been owned and operated by the West Bengal Tourist Corporation. There is increasing pressure on the government from travel agencies to reduce bureaucratic procedures which hamper foreign tourists. However, reform is slow and, as will be seen from the case studies of tourism and its development in the Sunderbans, liberal market-oriented proposals have yet to have a major impact on tourism planners both in India and Bangladesh. Let us consider tourism in the Sunderbans.

### **3. The Sunderbans and Ecotourism in the Indian Sunderbans**

The Sunderbans is a part of the deltaic tidal region of the Brahmaputra-Ganges river system and covers a large area of southwestern Bangladesh and southeastern W. Bengal. In Bangladesh, the main large town from which journeys to the Sunderbans commence is Khulna it is Calcutta. The region has distinctive intertidal vegetation of which mangroves and gajari trees form a part. Animals such as tigers, chital deer and wild boar occur on the Bangladeshi side, most of the transport in the region is by water and although this is also true on the Indian side, road transport to points closer to the forests of the Sunderbans than Calcutta is readily available e.g. to Port Canning. The activities of the local people are easily

observed from a boat in this region because many activities such as the catching of fish, collection of prawn larvae and transport of produce are centred on the waterways, and because the banks of the waterway are low (unless a levee bank has been built as a protection against cyclones), any activities in the areas cleared for agriculture are Furthermore, many of the local people, particularly fisherfolk, live on their boats

Both Bangladesh and West Bengal have attempted to develop tourism in the Sunderbans. It is worthwhile considering tourism development in each and then compare economic and institutional aspects of tourism on the Bangladeshi side and the Indian side. In both cases, governments have played a major role in the development of tourism but this is most marked in West Bengal.

The protected forested area of the Indian Sunderbans is under the control of the Department of Forestry of West Bengal. All visitors to the Sunderbans must obtain permits from this Department and foreigners must obtain their permits from the forestry headquarters in Calcutta. A small fee must be paid for the permit. Passports with valid visas must be presented by foreigners for the issue of the permit and there are sometimes frustrating delays in its issue. This is especially annoying to foreign visitors who are likely to have a very limited time budget.

The main facilities for tourism in the Sunderbans are under the control of the Department of Tourism of the Government of West Bengal (WBTD) which had its genesis in 1961 in the Home Transport Department which at that time entered the business of arranging tours, mainly in West Bengal. The Department of Tourism developed from this. In 1974, the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation (WBTDTC) was set up as a corporate commercial wing of WBTD. This public corporation was intended to reduce "red tape" in business operations and to achieve a positive economic return on funds used by it for tourism. In 1993, it had about 30 tourist lodges under its control including one in the Sunderbans and transport facilities including a cruise boat plying the Sunderbans route. However, apart from the WBTDTC cruise boat, an older boat directly under the control of West Bengal Tourism Department (WBTD) also specialises in tours to the Sunderbans. Most tourists to the Sunderbans arrive by one of these boats but private boat transport can also be arranged. It has been reported that "the tourists usually take the Government tours as they are safer, comfortable and reliable compared to private operators" (P. Saba, B. Bhattacharya and R.K. Sen, pers. comm. 23/5/93). It is believed that the percentages of foreign tourists to the

Sunderbans in relation to total tourists is about 2-5% on average. The overwhelming proportion of tourists to the Indian Sunderbans are on average Indians, but the composition varies considerably by individual tours.

Information about the number of tourists to the Sunderbans is difficult to obtain. However, some data for the 1992-93 season are available. WBTC carried 823 tourist passengers to the Sunderbans in the 1992-93 season and it is estimated that WBTD carried about 340, making a total of 1,163 tourists. In addition a number of tourists cruise by alternative means. For example, during my visit in January 1993, I met a group from a Calcutta television factory which had chartered a boat for a visit to the Sunderbans. Possibly 100 persons were on this cruise which included families. It is probably reasonable to suggest that in 1992-93 the number of tourists to the Indian Sunderbans would have been of the order of 2,000.

An aspect of particular interest to me is the impact of seasonality in tourism on the economics of ecotourism operations. Seasonality can be influenced by many factors. These include institutional arrangements for the timing of annual holidays. In developed countries in the Northern Hemisphere, holidays are normally taken the June-August period for example. Another important influence can be seasonality in weather conditions. This is especially important in many tropical countries which experience monsoons. In the case of the Sunderbans, the monsoon occurs from towards the end of March and continues to the end of September. It is hot, humid and wet in this period and all tourism operations in the Sunderbans are suspended for a 6-7 month period.

This means that Tourist Lodge operated by WBTDC at Sajnekhali in the Sunderbans is not utilised by tourists during this period. However, its 15 full-time employees continue to be employed. The short period of its utilisation by tourists adds to costs for guests calculated on an annual basis. During the monsoon season (in which tours are suspended) the crews of the boats owned by WBTDC and WBTD are engaged in maintenance of these and the WBTDC boat is sometimes used for tours to other areas. Nevertheless, it is clear that this seasonality element adds to the cost per passenger carried per year.

As noted above, foreigners appear to constitute only 2-5% of tourists to the Sunderbans. One contributing factor to this is likely to be the fact that summer holidays in developed northern countries occur during the monsoon in the Sunderbans when tourism is suspended.

Although government boat tours operate on a relatively regular schedule, they are sometimes

cancelled because of insufficient demand. Furthermore, they may be cancelled occasionally to accommodate politicians. For example, the WBTDC tour scheduled for 4-5 January 1993 was cancelled due to the visit of the Chief Minister of West Bengal. Cancellations are always of concern to tourists on a limited time budget.

**Accessibility and time involved in tours:** As indicated earlier, the Sunderbans is reasonably accessible from Calcutta. The government boat tours take 2-3 days including a bus trip between Calcutta and Sonakhali which is located approximately 90 km from Calcutta. In May 1993, a direct launch service began between Sonakhali and Sajnekhali, the site in the Sunderbans where the tourist lodge is located. This will enable easier access than in the past. The launch journey takes 2 hours from Sonakhali to Sajnekhali.

**Attractions:** The main attractions are the river scenery, the forests and wild animals. While tigers occur in the Sunderbans they are rarely seen. Chital deer and wild boar are most frequently sighted. Viewing platforms exist at Sudhanyakhali and at Sajnekhali, and at Bhagabatpur it is possible to visit the WWF crocodile and Olive ridley turtle breeding projects. These projects are being undertaken to rear progeny to release to the wild for restocking purposes. At this site, there are also some spotted deer. If one is lucky, one may experience a festival in the Sunderbans such as that to honour the Goddess of the Forest, involving the acting out of an epic.

It is less easy to see wildlife in the Sunderbans than in Africa or even Northern America. Furthermore, local people are also often quite noisy when using viewing platforms and this scares some wildlife away. In addition, picnic-parties produce loud music from boats fitted with loudspeakers and this disturbs wildlife.

**Local economic benefits of tourism:** The Sunderbans is considered to be an area of low incomes and it is therefore worthwhile asking whether tourism has brought economic benefits to the region. It seems that these are very few. The tour boats take on provisions in Calcutta and their crews are not from the Sunderbans. Tourists sometimes buy local produce such as green coconuts for drinking the juice when transferring between their boat and the bus but those on the government boat tours have virtually no contact with local people. Individuals employed full-time at the Tourist Lodge at Sajnekhali are not from Sunderbans and the policy of the WBDC is to move its employees over time between the lodges operated by it. It is reported that only a little casual work is obtained by locals e.g. gardening. Some supplies are

obtained locally by the Lodge but it seems that these purchases do not involve a major injection into the local economy. Thus overall, tourism seems to have brought only very marginal economic benefits to the local people of the Sunderbans. At the same time, it seems that no serious economic loss to locals has been occasioned by development of tourism in the Sunderbans.

**Further proposed tourism development in the Indian Sunderbans:** The West Bengal Minister for Tourism has announced that the Sunderbans has been selected "as a major thrust area for development of tourism in the State. It has also been proposed to be included in the scheme for Special Tourism Areas now being formulated by the Government of India on the basis of recommendations of the State Tourism Ministers' Conference recently held at New Delhi. Other Central Sector Schemes such as the scheme for construction of tourist lodges at Piyali and Kaihali in the Sunderbans and on Sagar Island are in the process of execution. With the completion of the scheme the infrastructure for tourist accommodation in the Sunderbans will be considerably developed." (Chakraborty, 1992, p.2)

The Minister has announced that two more cruise boats were under construction for cruises in the Sunderbans (Chakraborty, 1992, p.3). This seems to be happening even though the capacity of existing boats is usually not fully utilised. Furthermore, there are long-term plans to develop a tourism complex at Dhamakhali in the Sunderbans and to introduce water sports activities such as kayaking, canoeing and boating at Piyali in the Sunderbans (Chakraborty, 1992, p.5). The extent to which these decisions are based on economic analysis is unclear but they may be more politically than economically inspired.

**Costs of tours:** There is some variation in the cost of taking government boat tours. These vary by type of accommodation required and other conditions. Rates for the WBTDC tour are higher than for that of the WBTD. In January 1993, the cost of a 2-day tour by the WBTDC boat was reported to be 1,500 Rp. or about US\$50 whereas a 2-day tour on the WBTD boat was about half of this cost. A two nights three full days tour by the WBTD boat cost 1,170 Rp. (US\$41) from Calcutta with bedroll and food provided as well as the return bus trip from Basanti to Calcutta. Persons taking these tours usually sleep in the boats.

#### **4. Tourism in the Bangladesh Sunderbans**

The area of the Sunderbans in Bangladesh is considerably larger than in India. While some of the area has been developed for agriculture, as in India, a large portion (mostly the Very low-lying sections which are unsuitable for agriculture) are tinder natural vegetation and controlled by the Department of Forestry. Because of more favourable environmental conditions, vegetation cover tends to be more luxuriant in the Bangladesh Sunderbans compared to this forest in India.

Facilities for tourism in the Bangladesh Sunderbans are little developed. Tours are conducted by Paijatan (Bangladesh Paijatan Corporation), the national tourism organization of Bangladesh, a government body. It does not own its own boats but hires these from private operators or occasionally from the Chalna Port Authority or the Forestry Department. Some hotels in Khulna will also arrange tours as will private tour operators in Dhaka. e.g. INTRACO (BD) Limited. There are no regular timetabled tours unlike in the Indian Sunderbans.

Permits are required to visit the Sunderbans and these are issued by the office of the Forestry Department in Khulna. Foreigners must produce their passport (with valid visa) for this purpose. On Paijatan tours to the Sunderbans most of the tourists are foreigners (over 90%). However, the number of foreigners visiting the Bangladesh Sunderbans is extremely low. The Tourist Department reported that 210 permits to visit this area were issued to foreigners in 1991 and 291 in 1992. Furthermore, it is unlikely that all of these visitors went there for tourism purposes. For example, some would have gone for scientific research purposes. By comparison 4,595 permits were issued to locals in 1992 for visiting the Sunderbans. The proportion of non-tourists in this group is likely to have been even higher. For example, a number of Bangladeshis would have visited for business purposes. The number of tourist visits in the area is in reality very low.

The brochure of the Paijatan Corporation entitled "Bangladesh Sunderbans" puts some emphasis on the difficulties which a tourist could face in visiting this forest. It says: "Permission from the Divisional Forest Officer, Khulna, is required to visit the forest. Cholera vaccine is to be taken well in advance. Anti-malarial and anti-diarrhoeal, insect repellent cream, drinking water, green coconuts, medical kit, light tropical dress, thick rubber soled boots etc. are to be carried with the tourist. It will be wise to take the help of an experienced

guide to make the journey fruitful." Such information may daunt some tourists.

Parjatan does not operate a guest house in the Sunderbans but the Chalna Port Authority operates a guest house at Hiron Point. Although this may sometimes be used by tourists to the Sunderbans, it primarily caters for the needs of the Port Authority and government officials, including departmental heads and ministers.

**Seasonality of tourism:** The tourist season lasts from September to about mid-March because of monsoonal conditions in the remainder of the year. The guest house of the Chalna Port Authority remains open throughout the year because it does not cater primarily for tourists.

**Accessibility and time involved in tours:** The Bangladesh Sunderbans is less easily accessible to foreign tourists than the Indian Sunderbans because it is some distance from Dhaka. For example, one package tour (that of INTRACO (BD) Limited) involves 2 nights in Khulna and 3 nights in the Sunderbans. A return air flight between Dhaka and Jessore is involved as is road transport between Jessore and Khulna. Six days are involved, about twice as long as required for a visit to the Indian Sunderbans from Calcutta.

**Local economic benefits of tourism:** Because tourism is on such a small scale in the Bangladesh Sunderbans, its economic impact can be expected to be very small. No reliable estimates are available of the regional distribution of benefits. However, Khulna benefits through the provision of accommodation and the provision of boat services. Furthermore, a compulsory fee of Tk. 50/- per guard must be paid to the Forestry Department and at least two guards usually accompany tourists. Tourists sometimes hire local non-mechanised boats to explore creeks, canals and small rivers in the Sunderbans so as to better view flora and fauna and this can provide a little extra income to individuals located in or near the forest. Only a small proportion of food consumed by tourists in the Sunderbans appears to be obtained from the Sunderbans itself. -

**Further proposed tourism development in the Bangladesh Sunderbans:** Tourism authorities in Bangladesh consider lack of facilities such as transport/communication facilities, accommodation, infrastructure for games and recreation, to be major impediments to the growth of tourism in the Sunderbans. While this is undoubtedly a drawback, what is less clear is how economic it is to supply most of these facilities. Nevertheless, the government of Bangladesh is considering an investment project costing Tk 120 million for the construction of a boatel at a suitable place inside the Sunderbans, procurement of modern

vessels for cruises in the Sunderbans, the construction of drinking water facilities, the completion of tree-top lodge/motel towers, the building of a recreation centre/boat club at Mongla with games facilities and the establishment of duty free/souvenir shops.

A related proposal being considered by the government is the procuring of vessels from other organizations for conducting package tours during the tourist season. The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) may also be urged to fly a regular tourist vessel on the Mongla-Katka-Hiron Point-Mongla route during the tourist season. If required, the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation or privately owned tour organizations could lease or hire the vessel. In addition, the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation is considering the building of a 40-bed three star hotel at Mongla with restaurant, bar, video games and other facilities.

There may also be the possibility of greater involvement of the private sector in tourism in the Bangladesh Sunderbans. Already a number of privately owned tourism companies conduct tours to this area. A group of private tour operators have approached the government with a proposal to lease 5 acres of land at Katka and at Hiron Point to establish their own accommodation and recreational facilities. It might be noted that under Bangladesh's National Tourism Policy private tourist developers are eligible for a number of economic concessions for investment in land, buildings and other assets to be used for tourism purposes. These include availability of finance on favourable terms and tax-holidays. The economic rationale for such concessions appears not to have been spelt out.

In order to integrate public and private sector initiatives in planning, implementation, financing and management of tourism development in the Sunderbans, the government of Bangladesh is contemplating setting up a similar committee to the Cox's Bazar Tourism Development Committee. It would be established at the national level.

**Cost of tours:** A number of private tour operators conduct tours in the Sunderbans at much the same price. For example INTRACO (BD) Limited operates a package tour out of Dhaka which involves two nights in Khulna and three nights in the Sunderbans. The cost is US\$385 per person and includes the return air ticket between Dhaka and Jessore (the nearest airport to Khulna) and domestic taxes. The minimum number of persons for this tour is 15. Parjatan offers a shorter tour of 3 days and 2 nights ex Dhaka at US\$167 and according to their brochures it is all inclusive including return air fare to Jessore. The Hotel Royal in Khulna operates a two-day and one-night tour from Khulna to the Sunderbans at Tk 3500/- per person



(around US\$100 given an exchange rate of Tk 38.5/- = US\$1.00) and is all inclusive. The minimum number of tourists is 10.

## **5. Some Comparisons between Tourism in the Indian Sunderbans and the Bangladesh Sunderbans**

Tourism in the Bangladesh Sunderbans is uncompetitive from an economic point of view with that in the Indian Sunderbans. For the tourist visiting either Calcutta or Dhaka, it is considerably cheaper to take the tour from Calcutta and it takes less time. Furthermore, Indian tours are comparatively regular and predictable whereas those in Bangladesh are not conducted on a regularly scheduled basis.

A part of the difference in the cost is due to the greater distance which must be travelled from Dhaka to visit the Sunderbans compared to that from Calcutta. However, even a tour from Khulna in Bangladesh is not competitive with that from Calcutta. According to the figures given above, a comparable tour costs at least twice as much from Khulna as from Calcutta. Furthermore, the available tourism facilities in the Indian Sunderbans are much greater than in the Bangladesh Sunderbans.

One reason why the tours from Khulna compared to those from Calcutta are more expensive is likely to be the fact that the former are often privately operated. Therefore, all costs must at least be covered and a profit is aimed for. In the case of the West Bengal Tourism Department which operates at a loss, full cost recovery does not appear to be the rule. Nevertheless, this is not the only factor. Vessels operated by WBTC and WBTD are larger and carry more passengers and some economies of scale may be realised.

In both the Indian and the Bangladesh cases, armed forest guards are required to accompany passengers and visitor permits are needed. While the actual extra costs to tourists of such measures are comparatively small from a Western perspective, these requirements can result in delays. In most cases, the guards have nothing to do, particularly if tourists keep to regular tourist sites. However, there is naturally a risk, for example from tigers, if tourists wander off the beaten track.

While tigers and other wild animals are an attraction, tigers are rarely seen and particularly on

the Bangladesh side, where illegal hunting continues, it is rare to see any animals. In fact, even few birds are to be seen. Some foresters themselves are so poorly paid that they shoot protected animals for food. Furthermore, with local people living within the forest or nearby, it is difficult to control hunting and similar pressures on resources. Squatting by local people occurs in some parts of the Sunderbans and is a continuing risk to its conservation.

It has been observed by McNeely *et al.* (1992) that it is often difficult to view wildlife in forested tropical areas. The Sunderbans is no exception. Furthermore, local tourists are often noisy which frightens animals away.

Both in the Indian and the Bangladesh case, tourism appears to provide few economic benefits to people actually living in the Sunderbans but nearby larger towns and cities obtain some economic benefits e.g. Calcutta and Khulna (UNDP/WTO, 1987). A similar situation has been observed for ecotourism elsewhere, e.g., in Cape York Peninsula, Australia (Hohl and Tisdell, 1995).

Tourism is seasonal due to the monsoon. This results in a cost disadvantage for tourism in this region compared to areas which do not experience such seasonal conditions. Especially in the Indian case, there is little opportunity to switch assets used for tourism to other uses during the monsoon season.

Table 1 provides a simplified comparison of tourism characteristics in the Indian and Bangladesh Sunderbans.

**Table 1: Some Comparative Characteristics of ‘Ecotourism’ in the Indian (I) and the Bangladesh (B) Sunderbans**

Characteristic	Indian	Bangladesh
<b>Accessibility and required time for tour</b>	More accessible than B. Tours of 2-3 days from Calcutta	Less accessible than I. Tours of 5-6 days from Dhaka
<b>Attractions</b>	Wildlife, landscapes and cultural aspects. Fauna more abundant than B but flora less luxuriant than in B. Fauna difficult to spot.	Wildlife, landscapes and cultural aspects. Fauna appears to be more difficult to spot than in I. Flora more luxuriant than I.
<b>Seasonality of tourism</b>	Similar to B. No tourism for 6-8 months due to monsoon.	Similar to B. No tourism for 6-8 months due to monsoon.
<b>Local economic benefits</b>	Low	Low
<b>Cost of tours</b>	Lower than for B. US\$40 – 50 ex Calcutta	Higher than for I. US\$167 ex Dhaka. US\$100 ex Khulna.
<b>Regularity of tours</b>	Reasonably regular	Not regular
<b>Permits/guards required</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>Tourism facilities</b>	More than B	Less than I
<b>Expansion of tourism infrastructure</b>	Plans to expand – not necessarily nature-friendly, e.g. the water sports complex at Piyali.	Plans to expand – not necessarily nature-based, e.g., games facility on Mongla and boating facilities.

## 6. Concluding Comments

The rate of growth of international tourism to India and Bangladesh has been slow and in fact Bangladesh has recorded a decline in tourism numbers in recent years. Partly this slow growth is due to 'natural' conditions in these countries but institutional factors have also played a role. The extent of involvement of the public sector in tourism in India and Bangladesh has not been an unmixed blessing particularly from an economics point of view. In many instances, tourism development appears to have been guided more by political sentiment than economic rationality. It is common in India and Bangladesh to look upon tourism development as a Cinderella industry which will undergo magical transformation to an economically viable industry if only sufficient infrastructure and supporting services can be provided by the

government. Furthermore, in the past, government regulations and restrictions on foreign tourists have hampered the growth of the industry. While a few of these restrictions have been relaxed, there is still a long way to go in reducing these, for example to the levels prevailing in a number of Southeast Asian countries. Now that the governments of India and Bangladesh have at least in principle embraced the philosophy of structural adjustment, changes in tourism policy can also be expected. Some indications of the type of changes already underway have been given. However, as the studies of the Sunderbans indicate, such reforms may take a long while to percolate into the socio-economic system. This is particularly so in the case of India where the states have considerable control over tourism. One would expect West Bengal for example to move rather slowly down this track given that the Communist Party is in power.

The case studies of the Sunderbans also indicate the economic difficulties faced by tropical developing countries in promoting ecotourism. (See also Tisdell, 1993). Considerable care is needed if economic losses are to be avoided in developing ecotourism in such countries.

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