

Ecotourism: A Study on Strengths and Weaknesses in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Ecotourism is a sustainability approach that has emerged as an alternative to the negative environmental impacts of tourism, where natural, cultural and historical values are used as sources. Ecotourism is a nature-based tourism activity that ensures the sustainability of natural resources and promotes the economic development of local populations. It also preserves socio- cultural values and protects the ecological system for future generations. However, if ecotourism is well-controlled, it can positively affect nature, natural life, local people and the local and national economy. This study highlights the Strengths and Weaknesses of ecotourism for sustainability in the tourism industry. It examines ways to deal with the ecotourism phenomenon. In this direction, the study defines the concepts of ecotourism and Strengths and Weaknesses of ecotourism in Bangladesh. It describes the principles of ecotourism and ecotourism destinations and the developing and potential environmental impacts associated with them. This research is mainly descriptive analysis. The researcher collects information from Google, Google Scholar, Research Gate, BTB, ATAB, BPC, Wikipedia, and other trustworthy resources. The researcher mainly follows previous published research and Wikipedia results. Published research articles, journal articles, conference papers, books, reports, magazines, brochures, government websites, and other open-access materials were read for the purpose of collecting secondary data.

Keywords: Tourism, Ecotourism, Strengths, Weaknesses, Destinations.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the largest economic sectors in the contemporary world. The contributions of the tourism sector in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment creation are increasing consecutively (Bhuiyan and Darda, 2021). According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2016), international tourism outpaced world trade during the last several years. Therefore, tourism as an industry adds a lot to the local or national economy as a whole. In most cases, tourism refers to the travel of maximum or less than one year from one place to another purely for recreation, leisure activities or purposes, medical or business purposes. The tourism sector contributed to world GDP in the sum of \$8.9 trillion in the year 2019, about 10.3% of the world economy (WTTC, 2020). Ecotourism is a sub-branch of tourism, which involves travel to experience nature. Ecotourism involves several sets of activities such as nature trail walking, wildlife watching, zip-lining, and cultural tourism among other activities all aimed at experiencing nature. The concept of ecotourism was proposed in the mid-1980s by Héctor Ceballos, a Mexican environmentalist. Ecotourism has grown so much, especially after the formation of the International

Ecotourism Society (TIES) in 1990, a body that governs ecotourism development and activities. Consequently, ecotourism helps in the preservation of the environment, job creation, and infrastructure development and improves cultural preservation for the host communities. However, ecotourism comes with sets of disadvantages to the environment and the host community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of tourism can contribute to both socio economic development and environmental benefits for the people within rural areas. It plays a vital role in society, fostering business growth, generating employment, and ensuring a better livelihood for rural inhabitants. Bangladesh is a land of natural beauty (Islam, 2023). The widely growing dilemma of tourism is especially ecotourism and sustainable development, in the context of Bangladesh. The researchers attempted to provide an insight into how ecotourism destinations come core to the sustainable development of Bangladesh (Rahman and Shahid, 2012). Bangladesh is enriched with natural beauties and the simple attractive lifestyle of the rural community. This creates an amazing potential for ecotourism development. Most of the people in rural

areas of Bangladesh depend on agriculture-based occupations. Ecotourism has immense potential to offer new segments of working opportunities in rural areas. Nations abound with historical landmarks and natural beauty spots, providing opportunities to generate foreign currency through tourism (Madden *et al.*, 2017). Ecotourism is basically sustaining the places for the future generations, so that the ones which have been more or less untouched by man can also be seen by them. Like-wise, ecotourism is fast becoming important in many developing countries to generate foreign income while preserving some of their most fragile environments (Hossain *et al.*, 2025). A study in Sitakunda eco-park in Chittagong division in Bangladesh, researchers investigated ecotourism opportunities in the sub urban setting. They refer to the due attempts of Bangladesh to develop several eco-parks for maintaining the natural balance, half a dozen of eco-parks being existent in Bangladesh at the time of study (Shamsuddoha and Nasir, 2011). Sustainable tourism development can ensure long-term social, economic, and environmental benefits to all stakeholders to contribute a sustainable development in Bangladesh (Bhuiyan and Darda, 2021). Ecotourism, or nature-based tourism, is a form of travel that focuses on appreciating and conserving natural and cultural resources (Blamey, 2001). Sustainable tourism minimizes the negative impacts on the environment and local communities while maximizing the benefits for all stakeholders (Wan & Li, 2013). The concept of ecotourism has recently gained popularity as global awareness of the need to protect the environment for future generations has grown (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). Ecotourism has the potential to play a critical role in creating a sustainable future for both people and the environment (Erdem Baydeniz *et al.*, 2024). According to the World Conservation Union, ecotourism is "Environmentally responsible for travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed areas, in order to enjoy, study and appreciate nature that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations." Ecotourism came into prominence in the eighties as a strategy for reconciling conservation with development in ecologically rich areas (Ahsan, 2008). 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 conversation of natural resources beneficial to local people' it can, if successful, bring social and economic benefit to the country of the target destination (Siddiqua, 2005).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the ecotourism destinations, Strengths and weaknesses to these destinations in Bangladesh.

2. To describe broadly tourism, ecotourism and principles of ecotourism.
3. To suggest effective recommendations to overcome the drawbacks of ecotourism in Bangladesh.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is mainly descriptive analysis. Initially, researchers collect more than 100 research papers and read them attentively. Then, the researcher develops a concept in mind and follows Google, Google Scholar, Research Gate, BTB, ATAB, BPC, Wikipedia, and other trustworthy resources. Then, the researcher searches for the destination and performs strengths and weaknesses on the basis of collected information from various trusted sources. The researcher mainly follows previous published research and Wikipedia results. Published research articles, journal articles, conference papers, books, reports, magazines, brochures, government websites, and other open-access materials were read for the purpose of collecting secondary data. All the relevant data were collected from the Sundarbans, Kuakata, Chittagong hill-tracks and St. Martin Island along with a number of secondary sources.

Conceptual Framework Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a form of tourism that involves observing and appreciating nature and local cultures in natural areas while minimizing negative impacts and supporting conservation efforts. Ecotourism can generate economic, social and environmental benefits for host communities, tourists and natural areas. However, it also poses challenges and risks if not well-managed. Understanding ecotourists perceptions, preferences, satisfaction and loyalty is essential. Ecotourism involves visiting natural areas such as national parks, wildlife reserves and UNESCO World Heritage sites and participating in hiking, bird watching and wildlife safaris (Hvenegaard & Dearden, 1998). Ecotourism is financially beneficial to the host community or as making conservation financially possible (UN Tourism, 2024). Ecotourism in general engages living natural environments, whereas geo-tourism connects the latter with geology. Ecotourism is also commonly intended to enhance the appreciation of tourists for the natural habitats and their threats, as well as the local culture. Responsible ecotourism programs are those that minimize the adverse impacts of conventional tourism on the ecology and enhance the cultural integrity of the communities. Therefore, along with environmental and cultural evaluation, recycling promotion, energy efficiency, water conservation, and providing economic opportunities for local communities are an integral part of ecotourism (Hossain *et al.*, 2025).

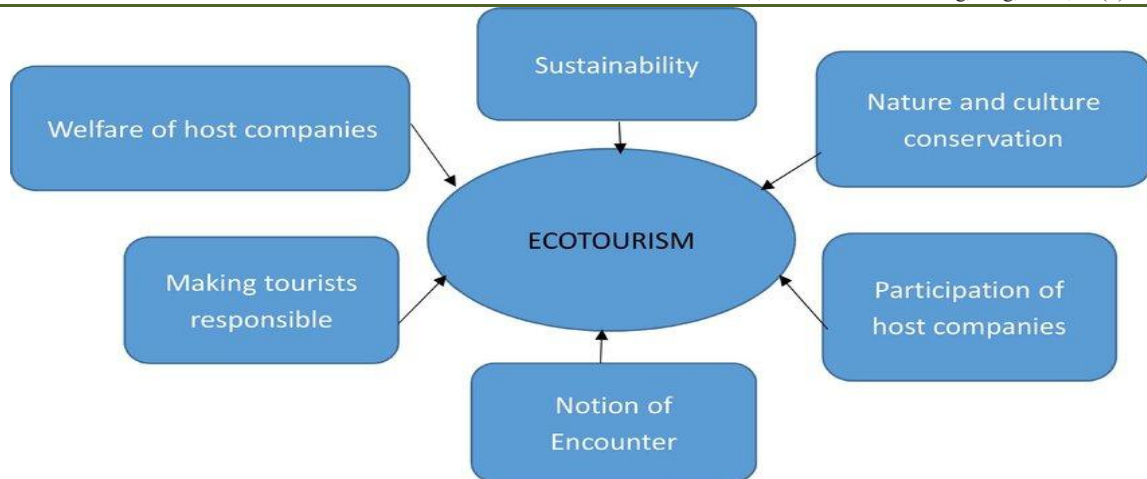


Figure 1: Components of ecotourism (Atchombou *et al.*, 2023)

For many years, ecotourism has been a source of employment for many people around the globe. This, therefore, brings in a lot of economic boosts to the host communities where ecotourism is being practiced. The jobs created for the local communities range from technical, manual, and menial jobs. The ecotourism destinations employ tour guides, language translators, drivers, game wardens, ecology researchers, and grounds men among other forms of employment created by the hospitality facilities build in the ecotourism destinations. The money generated through such employment helps in the eradication of poverty, especially in the Third World countries where many ecotourism destinations are located. Many tourists today are concerned with environmental conservation, and ecotourism helps in

ensuring is achieved by minimizing pollution. Ecotourism bodies around the globe advocate for nature-friendly tourism activities such as hiking and biking; these help in ensuring that there is minimal interference with nature by humans. If ecotourism is well managed, it is a major revenue generator and will contribute too many countries' positive development.

Principles of Ecotourism

Ecotourism is where sustainable travel and conservation meet. If you look at ecotourism activities, you will notice they all have something in common (Reali, 2025). These “things” are called ecotourism principles, and they include:



Figure 2: Principles of Ecotourism

Minimizing impacts: Tourists and operators are encouraged to minimize their physical, social, and environmental impacts. This includes following guidelines for responsible behavior in natural areas, such as staying on marked trails and avoiding disturbances to wildlife.

Environmental conservation: At the core of ecotourism is the commitment to preserving natural environments and biodiversity. This involves minimizing the ecological footprint of tourism activities, protecting wildlife habitats, and promoting sustainable practices that reduce pollution and waste.

Community involvement: Ecotourism emphasizes the importance of involving local communities in tourism activities. This means ensuring that local residents benefit economically from tourism and have a say in how tourism is developed in their areas. Empowering communities fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their natural and cultural resources.

Education and awareness: A fundamental aspect of ecotourism is educating travelers about the environment, conservation issues, and local cultures. This can be achieved through interpretive programs, guided tours, and interactive experiences that enhance visitors' understanding and appreciation of the places they visit.

Sustainable practices: Ecotourism promotes the use of sustainable practices in all aspects of tourism, including transportation, accommodation, and activities. This includes using renewable energy sources, reducing waste, and supporting local businesses that prioritize sustainability.

Respect for local cultures: Ecotourism encourages respect for the cultural heritage and traditions of local communities. This involves recognizing the rights and beliefs of indigenous peoples and ensuring that tourism activities do not disrupt their way of life.

Financial benefits for conservation: Ecotourism should provide direct financial benefits for conservation efforts. This means that a portion of the revenue generated from tourism activities is reinvested into local conservation projects and initiatives that protect the environment. By adhering to these principles, ecotourism aims to create a sustainable model of tourism that not only preserves the environment but also enhances the wellbeing of local communities, ensuring that both can thrive for future generations.

Types of Ecotourism

There are four unique types of ecotourism. The types come from the kind of activities that tourists can engage in (Real, 2025).

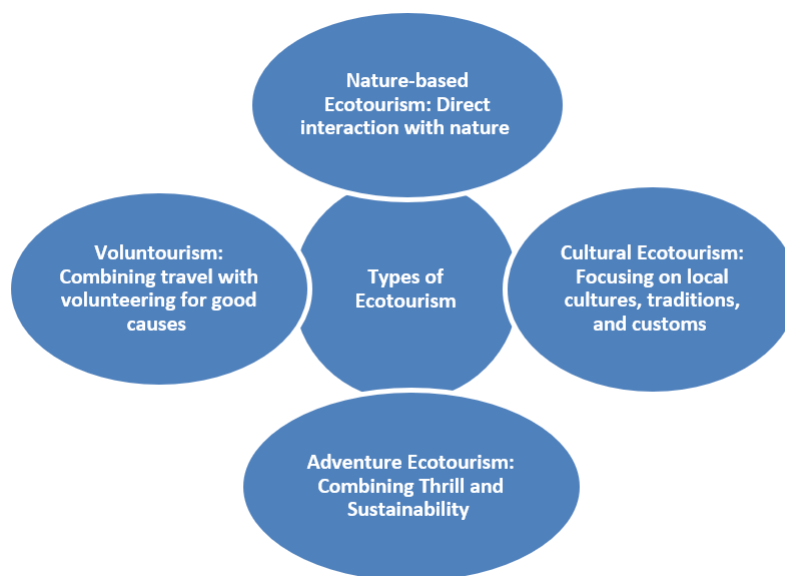


Figure 3: Types of Ecotourism

Nature-based ecotourism: Direct interaction with nature

As the name implies, nature-based ecotourism is all about enabling people to directly interact with nature. The imperative is to allow consumers to experience nature firsthand while ensuring nothing is disturbed. The most common nature-based ecotourism activities include wildlife viewing and nature photography.

Cultural ecotourism: Focusing on local cultures, traditions, and customs

Some destinations have to offer more than natural attractions. Some places are attractive to tourists because of the local communities that live there. Many things can make a community unique, but in this case, its culture. Many consumers want to experience unique cultures and engage with community-based tourism activities and cultural tours.

Adventure ecotourism: Combining thrill and sustainability

Adventure tourism is as old as tourism itself. Adventure ecotourism is one of its newest sub-components. Destinations can attract responsible consumers if they market their activities as eco-friendly. Some examples include sustainable trekking activities and eco-friendly adventure sports. Adventure ecotourism is also attractive to businesses looking for eco-friendly alternatives to traditional team-building meet up.

Voluntourism: Combining travel with volunteering for good causes

Consumers who are deeply devoted to preserving nature are interested in a specific type of ecotourism called voluntourism. Look at it as a combination of travel and volunteering centered around a good cause. Some examples of voluntourism include participating in conservation projects, taking an active role in community development, or teaming up with local activists to clean the environment.

Ecotourism Destinations

Bangladesh is endowed with various tourist attractions, including beaches, forests, waterfalls, sanctuaries, rivers, lakes etc as follows by the World Tourism Organization (WTO).

Sundarbans:

One of the most popular sites for ecotourism in Bangladesh is the Sundarbans. The Sundarbans is the world's largest mangrove forest and is also famous for its wildlife, especially the Royal Bengal Tiger. It is also designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1987. It offers opportunities to see diverse wildlife, including the Royal Bengal Tiger, and experience natural waterways. The area is known for its wide range of fauna, including 260 bird species, the Bengal tiger and other threatened species such as the estuarine crocodile and the Indian python.

Cox's Bazar:

Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh is world-renowned for its longest natural sea beach, stretching over 120 kilometers of golden sand along the Bay of Bengal. This picturesque destination is a popular tourism center, offering golden sands, beautiful sunsets, and clear waters for visitors to enjoy a range of activities like swimming and surfing. The beach is famous for its soft golden sands and the serene, inviting waters of the Bay of Bengal.

Ratargul Swamp Forest:

The only swamp forest in Bangladesh, known for its unique water plants and aquatic species. Ratargul Swamp Forest is a freshwater swamp forest located in Gowain River, Fatehpur Union, Gowainghat, Sylhet, Bangladesh. Ratargul was once thought to be the only

swamp forest in Bangladesh and one of the few freshwater swamp forests in the world.

Chittagong Hill Tracts (Rangamati, Bandarban, Khagrachari):

The three Hilly Districts of Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban are home to several tribes with discrete cultures and rituals. A mountainous region offering breath taking views of hills, valleys, waterfalls, and diverse tribal cultures. Saka Haphong, the highest peak of Bangladesh, is located here. Though officially Tazing Dong is declared as the highest peak, it is also located here. Keokradong is another famous peak in this area.

Sajek Valley:

Sajek Valley is a popular tourist spot in Bangladesh, situated among the hills of the Kasalong range of mountains in the northern area of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Referred to as the "Queen of Hills" and the "Roof of Rangamati", the valley is known for its greenery and dense forests. Located in the hills, it's famous for its scenic beauty, cloud-covered landscapes, and wilderness.

St. Martin's Island:

Saint Martin's Island is Bangladesh's sole coral island, located in the Bay of Bengal, known locally as Narikel Jinjira (Coconut Island). This small, 8 sq km island is a popular tourist destination for its natural beauty, including crystal-clear waters, coral reefs, and diverse marine life. Visitors can enjoy activities like swimming, snorkeling, and walking, and the island offers fresh seafood and local accommodation.

Srimangal:

Srimangal is known as the tea capital of Bangladesh. Srimangal's tea gardens can be seen for miles and miles. The town is surrounded by more than 40 tea gardens, lakes, lofty hills, dense jungles, lemon and pineapple gardens and rubber gardens. Srimangal's lush greenery and beautiful trees promise to create a unique impression on all visitors. It's renowned for its lush green tea gardens, rich biodiversity, and other natural attractions.

Kuakata:

Kuakata is a town of Patuakhali located in southern Bangladesh known for its panoramic sea beach. Kuakata beach is a sandy expanse 18 kilometres (11 mi) long and 3 kilometres (1.9 mi) wide. The beach offers unobstructed views of both the sunrise and sunset over the Bay of Bengal.

Strengths of Ecotourism in Bangladesh

Ecotourism encourages responsible resource use and helps fund conservation efforts, creating a direct incentive for communities to protect their natural assets.



Figure 4: Strengths and weaknesses of ecotourism in Bangladesh

Environmental strengths

Diverse natural attractions: Bangladesh possesses rich and diverse natural landscapes, including the Sundarbans mangrove forest, wetlands, rivers, forests, beaches, and hilly areas, which are excellent ecotourism products.

Conservation and protection: Ecotourism directly supports the protection of natural areas, wildlife, and ecosystems by providing an economic incentive for conservation. By generating revenue from nature-based tourism, ecotourism can create strong incentives for the conservation of the natural resources on which it depends.

Reduced environmental impact: It promotes responsible use of natural resources, encouraging practices like reducing waste and pollution, limiting energy consumption, and using renewable energy sources.

Increased awareness: Ecotourism educates travelers about environmental issues and the importance of conservation, spreading awareness beyond the destination.

Socio-economic strengths

Economic growth and job creation: Ecotourism can act as a catalyst for economic growth, providing employment opportunities for local communities and

creating income through activities like producing and selling souvenirs.

Poverty alleviation: Ecotourism can be a tool for poverty alleviation by providing livelihood opportunities to the poor, reducing migration from rural areas.

Local economic benefits: It generates income and jobs for local communities through activities such as guiding, hospitality, and selling local handicrafts.

Community empowerment: Ecotourism often involves local populations in decision-making processes, giving them more control and benefit from tourism development.

Cultural preservation: It encourages the preservation of local cultures, traditions, and heritage by showcasing them to visitors rather than altering them for mass tourism.

Traveler experience strengths

Enriching experiences: Ecotourism offers unique and authentic travel experiences, including genuine cultural interactions and educational programs about nature.

Positive impact: Travelers can feel good knowing their travel choices contribute positively to the environment and local communities.

Sustainable choices: Ecotourism offers a way to explore the world responsibly, minimizing the negative impacts often associated with mass tourism.

Weaknesses of Ecotourism in Bangladesh

Inadequate infrastructure: Many ecotourism sites lack proper infrastructure, including transportation, accommodation, and basic amenities, which discourages both tourists and investors.

Weak Governance and policies: There is a lack of consistent policy implementation and poor coordination between government departments, hindering effective ecotourism development.

Unregulated tourism and environmental degradation: Without strict guidelines, tourist activities can lead to environmental harm, such as pollution from littering, destruction of habitats through over-tourism, and damage to ecosystems.

Lack of skilled manpower: A shortage of trained guides, conservation experts, and hospitality workers skilled in eco-friendly practices poses a challenge for quality ecotourism services.

Insufficient community involvement: Local communities are often not adequately involved in the planning and decision-making processes of tourism, leading to conflicts and undermining sustainability.

Marketing and image issues: Bangladesh faces challenges in counteracting negative perceptions abroad related to poverty and natural disasters, and there is a need for better marketing initiatives to promote its ecotourism potential.

Role of Ecotourism on Bangladesh

Bangladesh has great prospects in ecotourism industry. The economic impact can increase this industry. Protecting areas and nature conservation generally provide many benefits to society, including preservation of biodiversity, maintenance of watersheds, and so on. However, the benefits associated with recreation and tourism in protected areas tends to be tangible. For example, explorers at the ecotourism spots spend money on food lodging and for other goods and services, thereby providing employment for local and non-local residents (Hasan, 2004).

Currently Bangladesh attracts about 4.5% of tourists who visit South Asian countries (Firoz, 2003). Over 50% of the tourists travel to India, from where 62-65 % visits in Bangladesh. This statistics indicates the prospect of well-designed and appropriately-maintained ecotourism in Bangladesh. A World Tourism Organization (WTO) reported that in developing countries, particularly in the least developed countries like Bangladesh, ecotourism is almost universally the leading source of economic growth, foreign exchange, investment and job creation. Job creation in remote locality: In rural areas even a few new jobs can make a big difference (Lindberg and Enriquez, 1996). Ecotourism-related goods and services can not only provide local people with additional income but also create new jobs. So, ecotourism provides employment opportunities by diversifying and increasing incomes that help reduce the vulnerability of the poor.

FINDINGS

1. It is found in this study that eco-tourism can be not only for poverty alleviation but also for the economic emancipation of the local communities and the country as a whole.
2. This study reveals that the future of eco-tourism in Bangladesh is very positive and it will bring benefits for the locals as well as the whole country.
3. This study suggests that public-private partnership (PPP) is necessary for the development of eco-tourism in Bangladesh.
4. At present 45000 tourists visit ecotourism spots annually. On the other hand, 300000 people are indirectly dependent on ecotourism resources.

Recommendations

There is shown the finding from two sides of studies on the strengths and weaknesses of eco-tourism above. Now after considering every matter from fields and policy levels some recommendations can be set to establish ecotourism in Bangladesh.

1. As it is a new idea in Bangladesh, so at first a very pragmatic policy of ecotourism is a crying need at this moment.
2. To make this policy, govt. can take the help from the neighbor countries Nepal or Maldives.
3. Effective strategy is needed to go ahead for the progress of eco-tourism.
4. Cooperation among related department of govt. should be established on this issue.
5. Experts on eco-tourism can be hired from countries rich in eco-tourism and visiting our natural sites with them to understand potentiality.
6. Bangladesh government should start to conserve the forest and natural sites in Bangladesh.
7. Public Private Partnership (PPP) needs to get priority on this issue.
8. Strong rules and regulation for tourists should be set by the government.
9. Encouragement of growing eco resort can be the way to spread ecotourism.
10. Govt. should invite the eco tourists to our country through advertisement in the prominent tourist spots of the world.
11. In term of infrastructures in tourist areas need to be well planned and should maintain some codes and conducts which will save the environment.

CONCLUSION

Since ecotourism provides for conservation of nature, includes meaningful community participation, makes profit and can sustain itself, it keeps the natural environment of the concerned spots sound, maintains social and cultural integrity, and promotes economic well-being. As the main characteristic of ecotourism is sustainable tourism, it can be a tool to create public

support for conservation. Eco-tourism can generate economic benefits at local and national levels and thus promote incentives to conserve the resources on which it depends. In this context, the focus should be given on sustainable planning to flourish eco-tourism as a great potential for the economic development. The goal of eco-tourism development in Bangladesh should be to capture apportion of the enormous global tourism market by attracting visitors to natural areas and by using the revenues, it is possible to fund local conservation and fuel economic development. Eco-tourism can be a tool not only for poverty alleviation but also for the economic emancipation of local communities and the country as a whole. It can also help addressing various dimensions of poverty and complement conservation efforts. Bangladesh, being easily accessible from many popular destinations in South Asia, enjoys a unique position to attract eco-tourists and can change the socio-economic scenario of the nation in near future.

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