INTEGRATED PROTECTED AREA CO-MANAGEMENT (IPAC)

Strengths, Weaknesses Opportunities & Threats (SWOT) of Tourism in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest, Bangladesh

Integrated Protected Area Co-Management (IPAC)

Strengths, Weaknesses Opportunities, &Threats (SWOT) of Tourism in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest

International Resources Group
12 11 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036
202-289-0100 Fax 202-289-7601
www.irgltd.com

Table of Contents

Introduction

On a global basis, tourism frequently reaches and surpasses appropriate limits to growth with little notice, planning, or response from decision makers.   In recent years, policy makers have begun to advocate sustainable destination planning for tourism – with a set of management approaches that can help ensure that tourism is not environmentally damaging, contributes to conservation and local community development, and provides opportunities for enhanced conservation and sustainable development.

In 2004, the World Tourism Organization, now the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), published an important guide to *Indicators of Sustainable Development for Tourism Destinations*. This guide is the result of efforts from over 60 authors working in 20 countries, covering a wide variety of case circumstances for tourism development in both developed and developing countries. Its intent is to provide a process by which policy makers can use research based indicators to make decisions on guiding the development of sustainable tourism.

The Integrated Protected Area Co-management Project (IPAC) requested that EplerWood International perform an analysis of tourism in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest (SRF) to contribute to their program to develop a co-management system for stakeholders in the region which will garner the support of stakeholders/user groups to preserve the ecosystem.

The SRF is part of the larger Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve, a World Heritage site recognized by UNESCO, found in both India and Bangladesh, with over 23,000 square miles of mangrove ecosystem found within Bangladesh. Hundreds of endangered Bengal tigers live in the reserve, with exact populations difficult to estimate, as they are rarely observed by visitors or scientists, despite their regular man-eating attacks on local residents who harvest resources in the reserve. Other charismatic species more likely to be observed are the huge Estuarine Crocodile, abundant Spotted Deer, and Otter. Bird watching is a key attraction with 250 species among which are many wading birds that populate the banks of the mangroves. International news was recently made in 2009 when research was formally presented on a previously unknown hot spot for Irrawaddy Dolphin and the Ganges River Dolphin within reserve waters.   This will undoubtedly bring more foreign visitors in future.

The tourism industry is frequently referenced in Bangladesh as a highly important stakeholder/user group with the potential to provide extensive benefits to the Sundarbans Reserve Forest. However, there is no consistent analysis of tourism's impacts on the ecosystem or neighboring communities. And there is no existing tourism plan in effect to help measure how tourism management is functioning at present, nor is there any management authority within the reserve that has tourism management as part of its mandate.

EplerWood International recommended a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of tourism to help IPAC capture current, relevant data on tourism in its various forms – both domestic and international – in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest. This data gathering program was not intended to provide a strategy for tourism development in the SRF.   It is a preliminary study to help guide IPAC and its governmental and strategic partners towards appropriate decisions on a system of tourism planning and management in future.

> *A SWOT analysis helps tourism managers to assess tourism potential and helps managers to decide what type of indicators will be useful in monitoring trends and progress towards achieving*

goals of a tourism destination. A SWOT analysis should give a succinct analysis of a destination's assets and short comings and reveal the opportunities and challenges it faces. [1]

This SWOT analysis of the Sundarbans has been developed to guide decision making on the means to develop tourism in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest in a sustainable manner. It will reveal opportunities for further research and investigation, and help decision makers to review what options exist for improving tourism's benefits while reducing its negative impacts. It is not a strategy, but should be used by those seeking to develop a strategy with further research and investigation.

Methodology

The SWOT analysis was developed via a questionnaire based on the UNWTO 2004 Indicators for Sustaianble Tourism Development guide. The questionnaire was reviewed by Elisabeth Fahrni Mansur – an experienced researcher and environmental educator in the SRF and former CEO of The Guide Tours Ltd, the company that helped pioneer tourism in the reserve. She provided a variety of helpful suggestions and refinements.

Field data was collected March 24-31, 2009 by a team of 4 local data gatherers from the Sundarbans region, an intern to gather data in Dhaka, 3 IPAC cluster team members from the Khulna office, one research associate to manage the data and field notes, one research coordinator, and principal investigator Megan Epler Wood. See *Acknowledgements* in Appendix B for full details on the team members.

The team visited Khulna, Mongla, Chandpai, Karamjal, Katka, Burigoalini, and Kolagachia.   See Figure 1 for map of the SRF and sites visited in the reserve. One intern collected data in Dhaka.

A SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) is a qualitative not quantitative program for gathering data. Epler Wood therefore made the decision to create a participatory, consensus oriented data evaluation program with all the researchers involved. The research team was quite varied in terms of educational background, experience, urban vs. rural backgrounds, and age group. Both genders were also represented. This unusual diversity of thought and perspective in the data review team was a converted into an advantage by allowing the team to learn from each others' perspectives.

Each day during the research program the team collected data in the field and subsequently gathered to share their results. In this manner, the entire team was able to discuss the data together to fully grasp what the data gatherers had experienced or observed and come to a consensus on how to interpret the data. This ensured that the more subtle observations of each data gatherer were not lost, but rather fully shared. Detailed notes were maintained throughout the discussion, which are part of the final presentation of results in this report.

Data interpretation was therefore a participatory exercise with daily exchanges from within in the team, each sharing their different viewpoints. These interchanges resulted in a consensus based set of results based on different educational, cultural, age, experience, and gender viewpoints. The process worked well with a highly engaged team, all involved in debating the results and learning throughout the process. The SWOT process created an excellent learning environment for all involved. A process similar to this could be replicated now with existing expertise in Bangladesh in other regions.

---

[1] UNWTO, 2004, *Indicators for Sustainable Tourism Development for Tourism Destinations: A Guidebook,* Madrid, Spain

The final results of data evaluation can be found in the completed questionnaire in Appendix A. Interpretation of these results will be broken down according to the survey format in the following sections.

- o Information Accessibility on the Sundarbans
- o Boat Transportation
- o Visitor Management
- o Community Benefits
- o Cultural Impacts
- o Conservation Awareness
- o Revenue Generation
- o Community Benefits
- o Physical Impacts – Entire Sundarbans region
- o Unmanaged Tourism- Site Specific
- o Socio-cultural impacts in tourism areas

The charts presented are a simple quantification of the number of check marks received in each section of the survey in the categories of Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, and Not Applicable, based on the consensus rating of the data collecting team after each field day, not the individual interview reports. For this reason, these charts are illustrative only and provided to give a simple visual presentation of how the team rated each survey category, based on their own field results, observations, and final consensus review. The discussion and recommendations provide important background on how these ratings were decided upon.

A chart with Strengths and Weaknesses is provided to summarize the interpreted results in each section. A summary of the opportunities identified via this research, and threats where relevant, are also summarized.

The conclusion provides the master chart for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats with action points recommended by the Principal Investigator. A full review and set of comments and edits by expert Elizabeth Fahrni Mansur, an experienced researcher and environmental educator in the SRF and former CEO of The Guide Tours Ltd – one of the pioneer tour operators in the Sundarbans, has greatly enhanced the final document. Visitation to the Sundarbans Reserve Forest

Visitation Data for the Sundarbans Reserve Forest

The total number of visitors to the Sundarbans Reserve Forest is close to 100,000 visitors per year according to Forest Department records. Foreign visitors make up less than 2% of this total. Management of tourism in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest is therefore largely a matter of managing visitors from Bangladesh. The SWOT team gathered visitation data from the Forest Department via contact with their offices in both Khulna and Karamjal. These figures reflect some variability in visitor numbers over the last 5 years, with the highest numbers in 2008/2009.

Sunderbans Reserve Forest Total Visitors Registered
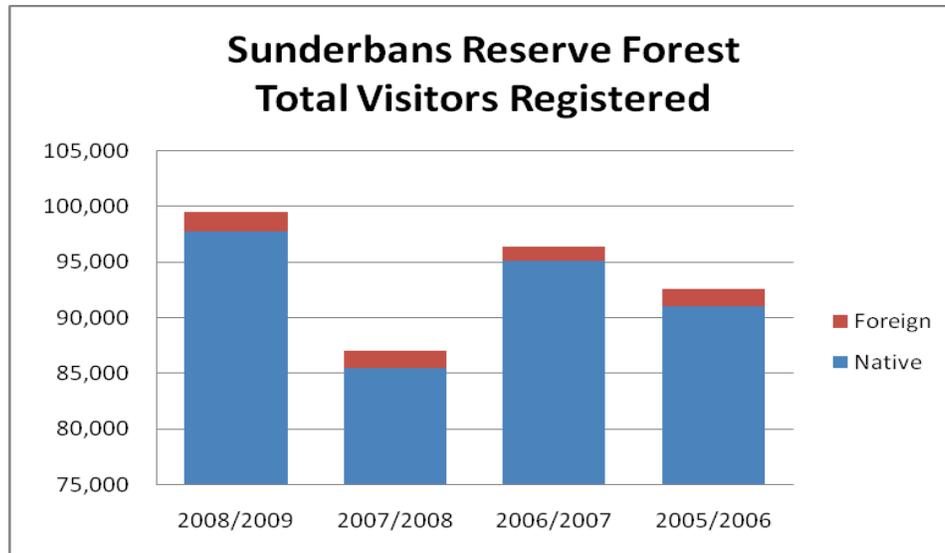
|	2008/2009	2007/2008	2006/2007	2005/2006
Native				
	97,721	85,473	95,102	91,039
Foreign	1,745	1,540	1,257	1,581
Total	**99,466**	**87,013**	**96,359**	**92,620**

Given that a global recession is transpiring, it is important to recognize that the tourism economy of Bangladesh is not contracting in a year when the global tourism economy has receded by approximately 2% according to the UN World Tourism Organization.   Total numbers in the SRF, one of the most well-known destinations in the country, increased by 14% between 2007/8 and 2008/9 reflecting a vibrant tourism economy that is growing primarily due to domestic travelers. Given that Bangladesh is ranked as 127th out of 130 countries in the Tourism Competitiveness Report by the World Economic Forum, just 3 from the bottom- with only Burundi, Lesotho and Chad ranked lower -there is every indication that more could be done to enhance the economic benefits of tourism to the country and certainly to the Sundarbans Reserve Forest.

The visitation numbers show a very, high and burgeoning number of domestic tourists to the Sundarbans Reserve Forest. However little is being done to manage these visitors who have distinct needs, there are no economic benefits flowing to the reserve as a result of this growth in domestic interest, and social/ community benefits are very small indeed. If this were not problematic enough, environmental damage is increasing rapidly. **These statistics therefore should be considered a warning signal, given that the tourism industry is presently causing increasing negative impacts to the SRF.**

Peak season is in March, with 30% of the visitors coming in this one month. High season is February-April, and shoulder season is October-February.
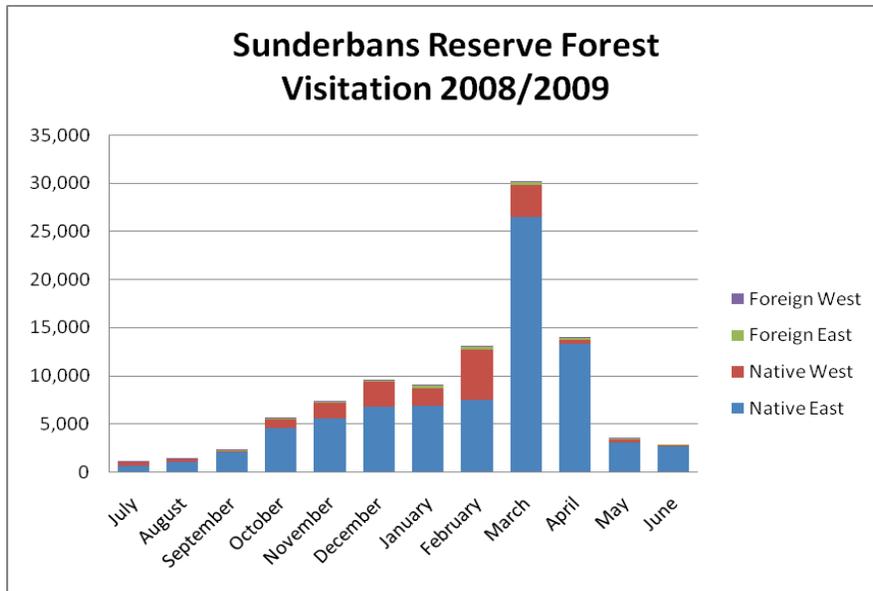
The most visited site in the park is Karamjal, in the Eastern Sundarbans, with 81% of total visitors to the reserve visiting this one area
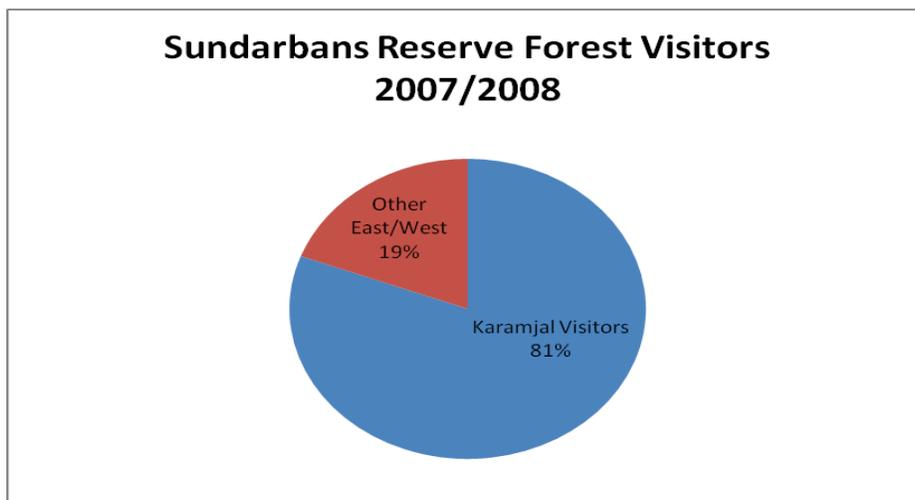
This total visitation pattern indicates heavy pressure on certain sites, particularly Karamjal where a small visitor center, trails, and a captive breeding program for endangered crocodiles are located. This visitor center is an easy day trip from Mongla, making it the most accessible site for day trips by Bengalis.

 Full Excel charts with Visitation Statistics for the SRF are found in Appendix C.

As will be presented in this document, the flow of visitors, the information they receive about the Sundarbans ecosystem, and the revenues available to manage visitors have a crucial effect on how tourism will impact the reserve, now and in future.

In this SWOT, the team looked at information provided on the Sundarbans Reserve Forest from information providers in Dhaka, Khulna, and Mongla. The team also reviewed interpretative and visitor center information provided at Karamjal and Katka.

- Dhaka is the capital of Bangladesh and the main departure point for the majority of overnight visitors, domestic and international.

- Khulna is the gateway city to the Sundarbans, where buses, boats and hotels are found for travelers preparing for overnight tour departure. Khulna is the main departure port for international visitors boarding overnight ships heading to the forest – located just outside the reserve forest.

- Mongla is a small port city where a wide variety of small boats are available for day trips which serve a domestic market to the most accessible parts of the forest as well as a boarding port for overnight ships.

- Karamjal is the primary domestic tourism destination in the park, which is an easy day trip from Mongla.

- Katka is one of the most popular destinations for overnight visitors traveling on ships with accommodations. It is a nearly a full day boat trip from Mongla on boats outfitted for overnight passengers, and it is a full day from Khulna.

Figure 1 provides a map of visitor sites in the SRF.