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Stakeholders' perceptions of tourism development and protected area biodiversity conservation: A case study of Sundarbans, Bangladesh.

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Introduction

The concept of eco-tourism emerged during the late 1980s, to ensure revenue streaming to support tourism conservation and community development (Stronza et al., 2019). Eco-tourism is successful at fostering environmental responsibilities and conservation efforts in addition to improving local communities (Wunder, 2000). The definitions of eco-tourism vary greatly, but they all strive to reduce negative environmental, community development, revenue generation and equitable distribution, and local participation (Conway & Cawley, 2016; Donohoe & Needham, 2006; Fennell, 2001; Stronza et al., 2019; Wunder, 2000). Wildlife counts as a major resource for the establishment of a successful ecotourism alliance because of tourists' demands on experiencing them as well (Wunder, 2000). Hence, ecotourism brings win-win scenarios for both local communities as well as bio-diversity (Bluwstein, 2017).

The tourism industry is regarded as an important source of foreign exchange in developing countries (Saufi et al., 2014). Eco-tourism is another important component of sustainable tourism development because it helps to reduce biodiversity loss and raise visitor awareness (Hassan, 2021). The role of tourism in the conservation of biodiversity and protected areas is significant due to the size of the industry (Carvalho-Junior & Desai, 2021; Mollick et al., 2021). Protected areas are an initial strategy for tourism conservation and therefore it has drawn considerable attention to the improvement of their management (Bushell & Bricker, 2017). However, there is a significant decrease noticeable in the management of the protected areas (Mollick et al., 2021). The over-reliance on government funds in both the developed and developing worlds is a major cause of the degradation of protected areas (Paul et al., 2017; Whitelaw et al., 2014). Therefore, establishing an effective protected areas management requires support for tourism conservation from all types of stakeholders (e.g. government, local community, NGOs, etc.) (Aas et al., 2005; Bushell & Bricker, 2017; Whitelaw et al., 2014).

Taking all of this into account, the current study aims to investigate stakeholders' perceptions of tourism development in the SRF, which is a protected area in Bangladesh that provides ecotourism opportunities to tourists. In addition, the study would seek to ascertain stakeholders' perspectives on the significance of Sundarbans biodiversity conservation. Based on the qualitative data from the conducted interviews, secondary documents, and the researcher's own experience during the internship period at Solimar international the following research question were formulated:

What are the perceived views of Sundarbans stakeholders as an ecotourism tourism destination, as well as their understanding of the importance of biodiversity conservation?

Context: The Sundarbans Reserve Forest (SRF)

The Sundarbans reserve forest (SRF) in Bangladesh is known as the world's largest mangrove forest in the world shared between Bangladesh and India. The SRF is covering of 6017Km2 in Bangladesh (Hassan, 2021). The forest department of Bangladesh has divided the Bangladesh Sundarbans into four parts: Satkhira (East), Khulna (West), Chandpai (North), and Sarankhola (South) (Saif et al., 2016). It is also known as the protector of Bangladesh saving cyclones and tidal surges (Nishat & Chowdhury, 2019).

The reserve forest is considered one of the most valuable resources of Bangladesh. The SRF is home to 334 species of plants, and 375 species of wildlife along with the renowned royal Bengal tiger (Hassan, 2021). The Sundarbans rainforest consists of three wildlife sanctuaries (Sundarbans East, West, and South). Due to its ecological importance and unique natural resources, the Sundarbans are categorized as a protected area of Bangladesh (M. M. Islam et al., 2018)

Sundarbans is one of the most visited destinations in Bangladesh. It remains top on the bucket list for international and domestic tourists (Hassan, 2021). As a tourist site, the SRF attracts a diverse range of visitors, including nature lovers, adventurers, and animal lovers. The SRF also features several tourist attractions where visitors can learn about the mangrove forest's distinctive characteristics. Among them, Hiron point, Katka beach, and Dublar Chor are the most famous ones (Sakib-Bin-Amin, 2021). Also, the SRF is home to the majestic Royal Bengal Tiger (Hassan, 2021).

Mangrove forests such as Sundarbans have an important impact on the livelihood of the coastal population in the southeast region of Bangladesh (Akber et al., 2018). The SRF is a vital resource for the nearly 3.5 million residents of the surrounding area (Islam et al., 2018). The Sundarbans of Bangladesh is a one-of-a-kind example of socio-ecological systems (SES), in which nature and people have coexisted since ancient times (Mollick et al., 2021).

Apart from assisting local livelihoods, the forest is also critical to the country's economy in areas such as tourism, wood and non-wood product production, natural honey collection, and so on (Islam et al., 2018). Locals in the Sundarbans region rely heavily on the forest for livelihood (Mollick et al., 2021). Locals' over-dependence on the forest, on the other hand, has been criticized for causing a biodiversity problem. (Islam et al., 2018; Mollick et al., 2021; Saif et al., 2016). The Sundarbans' biodiversity has become a major problem. Due to unsustainable forest use, woodcutting, animal hunting, and the destruction of flora and fauna, there has been a significant decline over time (Ortolano et al., 2017). Furthermore, population growth is a risky endeavour because it increases the communities' reliance on SRF's natural resources (Paul et al., 2017). As a result, numerous endangered flora and faunas of the Sundarbans are threatened with extinction (Hassan, 2021). Preventing the degradation of the Sundarbans has become a challenge for the forest department (Mollick et al., 2021). It was suggested that changing the locals' reliance on the Sundarbans could benefit the forest. (Ortolano et al., 2017). Empowering locals and involving them in the development of biodiversity conservation strategies, on the other hand, may help to achieve a favourable outcome (Md. W. Islam et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the question arises whether it is possible to find a sustainable solution for the conservation of the forest as well as benefit local communities.

Literature Review

Importance of tourism conservation

Conservation in tourism refers to tourism that uses socio-economical, cultural, and natural resources for a specific project to create local empowerment of the protected areas (Carvalho-Junior & Desai, 2021). It is also known as tourism practices that contribute to the preservation of biological diversity (Buckley, 2010). Biodiversity conservation is an important issue that has been mentioned by various social studies over the years (Carvalho-Junior & Desai, 2021; Chung et al., 2018; Kiss, 2004; Nthiga et al., 2015; Worku, 2017). Biodiversity is extremely important to humanity because it benefits us in a variety of ways, including providing food, and fuel, lowering carbon emissions, and tackling climate

change (Carvalho-Junior & Desai, 2021; Nishat & Chowdhury, 2019; Worku, 2017). Therefore, the restoration and sustainable use of biodiversity is important for local communities.

Ecotourism has received more attention in recent years, with a focus on the preservation of biodiversity and socio-cultural elements that attract travelers (Rai, 2012). Meanwhile, the loss of the world's flora and fauna is increasing at an alarming rate, putting various species of the world's ecosystem in jeopardy (Strang & Rusli, 2021). Common causes of biodiversity loss include tree cutting, animal trade, and irresponsible forest management (Strang & Rusli, 2021). Thus, eco-tourism is one suitable form that can raise awareness of biodiversity loss while also providing incentives for the conservation of the world's wilderness (Kiss, 2004; Rai, 2012; Stronza et al., 2019).

Ecotourism development has received a lot of attention in recent years in many tourist destinations (Md. W. Islam et al., 2013; Kiss, 2004; Rudianto et al., 2021). Ecotourism is regarded as an important strategy for allocating economic funding to support the conservation of protected areas and the surrounding community of a destination (Das & Chatterjee, 2015). The modern tourist's awareness of responsible tourism behavior is a significant reason for the ecotourism initiative (Rai, 2012). Activities such as hiking, birdwatching, horse riding, wildlife photography, and canoeing are considered part of ecotourism (Buckley, 2010). A successful ecotourism process requires the participation of multiple stakeholders of a destination (Buckley, 2010). Stakeholders such as tour operators, business owners, residents, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), among others, are regarded as essential for ecotourism implementation (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Kiss, 2004). The over-reliance of communities on nature reserves is viewed as a threat to biodiversity and ecology (Worku, 2017). As a result, ecotourism is a classic approach to sustainable development because it combines conservation and development while also allowing local communities to diversify their livelihoods (Stronza et al., 2019). As a result, involving host communities in ecotourism planning may help to reduce dependency on natural resources (Stronza et al., 2019). Ecotourism could benefit economic progress and nature conservation sustainability by a) profit generation that might be used to sustainably manage conservation areas, b) offering employment generation, and c) establishing a sense of shared responsibility (Jalani, 2012). Participation of locals in the tourism process is necessary for any destination. Destination planners must prioritize value creation and a sense of social responsibility in the host society (Pascoli, 2021). The additional indirect impact of ecotourism is that it fosters new or strengthened values of ownership and environmental responsibility in the local community (Stronza et al., 2019). Unplanned and unregulated tourism development, on the other hand, could have disastrous consequences for a place (Sdrali et al., 2015; Stylidis, 2018). Rapid employment opportunities and infrastructure development, for example, could encourage communities to migrate closer to protected areas, posing a threat to biodiversity (Jalani, 2012).

Stakeholders' participation in tourism

Locals who profit from the tourism industry and thus are aware of its positive influence are more inclined to appreciate its benefits than those who are unfamiliar with it and only see the negative impacts, according to Látková & Vogt (2012). Individuals having ties to tourist enterprises and a reliance on the industry are more likely to favor tourism development on an individual basis (Látková & Vogt, 2012). According to the authors, tourism development benefits a community in a variety of ways, including infrastructure development, improved quality of life, and the creation of a strong

sense of community, so tourism's viewed advantages are more likely to be approved by some residents in a destination (Látková & Vogt, 2012). Because communities are not homogeneous, some citizens support tourism growth if they benefit from it, and conversely (Garau-Vadell et al., 2014).

Tourism continues to advance numerous sectors of society (e.g., transportation system, communication, entertainment, and extracurricular opportunities) that may not be accessible to the public without the development of the tourist industry (Ritchie & Inkari, 2006), making them accessible to both residents and visitors alike (Tovar & Lockwood, 2008). Community members' beliefs and opinions on tourism growth can also be influenced by the destination's geographical location, societal lifestyle, and financial positioning. Residents in a mass-developed tourism destination may be irritated by tourism development (Martínez-Garcia et al., 2017), whereas the situation may be reversed in a far less developed destination where the tourist industry is viewed as a potential source of income for the community (Eyisi et al., 2021).

Stakeholder Theory

Because all stakeholders have a significant impact on a destination, some are portrayed as more valued than others based on particular roles (Nicolaides, 2015). Nonetheless, in order to grow a destination, authorities must consider involving diverse stakeholders in decision-making and tourism projects (Waligo et al., 2013). The success of a tourism destination not only depends on the government or higher authorities such as Destination management organizations (DMOs), and tourism planners but also it is the duty of all sectors (public, and private) of organizations (Bornhorst et al., 2010). Because managing various stakeholders and achieving their expectations can be sensitive and difficult for tourist authorities (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Byrd, 2007), some important stakeholders are given priority in terms of their economic and societal contributions. The importance of multiple stakeholders' immersion has been explored in various publications on sustainable tourism management (Dodds, 2007; Rebelo et al., 2015; Waligo et al., 2013).

Despite the fact that numerous studies have called for the involvement of multiple stakeholders, other researchers have criticized this approach, believing it is hard to reconcile the diverse perspectives of all actors engaged (Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002; Saito & Ruhanen, 2017).

DMOs find it challenging to incorporate stakeholders in destination planning due to the complexities and lack of desire of various tourist actors. As a result, a critical debate arises about who should be identified as critical stakeholders and how their interests should be incorporated into a destination's tourism development policies. According to Byrd (2007), it is necessary to authorize and clarify stakeholders' roles and the importance of their participation in the decision-making process. He went on to say that three methods could be used to engage stakeholders: collaboration, partnership, and collaborative learning.

Multiple stakeholders can offer their viewpoints on a destination's policy development process based on mutually agreed-upon objectives through the collaborative governance approach (Barandiarán et al., 2019). Collaboration is a critical aspect of the growth of a destination in tourism (Barandiarán et al., 2019), as it brings together numerous actors and stakeholders to promote improved tourism governance decision-making (Jamal & Getz, 1995). It also suggests that destinations remain competitive and developed centered on policymaking, therefore ignoring community participation, as

well as limiting local stakeholders' involvement (Bichler, 2021). Nevertheless, the authorities must assure stakeholders of showing consideration for the public interest (Hall, 1999).

Tourism stakeholders are individuals or communities who are strongly influenced positively or negatively by tourism activities (Aas et al., 2005). According to Nicolaides (2015), tourism organizations must consider the impact of different steps and policies on the community level and urges organizations to involve multiple stakeholders in strategic planning. It is essential that all destination stakeholders are well aware of what is expected from them and how they will be obliged to contribute in a way that will serve both their society and the relevant tourism businesses (Nicolaides, 2015).

Nicolaides (2015), provides a classification of tourism stakeholders according to their power and interest in the tourism industry:

High Power, High Interest: these participants have immense influence and consider the outcome of the organizations. Therefore, they are the one who needs more attention and effort to meet their expectations. Hence, they need to be included in projects to establish successful planning. They are also the promoters of the destination.

High Power, Low interest: They are also known as latent stakeholders. Although they need to be involved in projects, however, they are not very concerned about the outcomes. As a result, they tend to take less time and effort from a management perspective.

Low Power, High Interest: This group of stakeholders requires communication and needs to be satisfied to prevent any potential threats or issues. Although they have less influence on projects, they have vast influence on the other participants.

Low Power, Low Interest: They tend to have less interest and less concern. As a reason, it is recommended to monitor them and not bore them with excessive information. (Based on Nicolaides, 2015, p. 5).

 The notion of stakeholders is important in tourism development because communities are both guardians and representatives of heritage sites (Aas et al., 2005). Furthermore, in tourism development management rules and regulations may conflict with the interests of stakeholders if they fail to meet the interests of the community, so it is best to conduct a pre-assessment of identifying relevant stakeholders (Byrd, 2007).

Methodology

This section of the paper discusses the methods used for this study and the methodological considerations that led to its design. The author was inspired by his experiences throughout the internship at Solimar International. Also, working as a collaborator for Sundarbans Reserve Forest motivated the author to understand this particular context from the perspectives of the stakeholders of the forest.

Hermeneutics and interpretivism concerns are justified since the study sought to find local stakeholders' ideas about their participation in tourist development initiatives. The stakeholders' opinions are based on their various socioeconomic backgrounds and links to the tourism business.

The study acknowledges hermeneutics as another philosophical approach to understanding how the perceptions of tourism impact and the rationale for such opinions among the local community because interviews are the primary method of data collection in the study, and it is important to analyze all the transcribed interviews as well as documents thoroughly for better analysis of the subject.

Philosophy of Science

Research philosophy is a distinguished process that helps authors in the creation of knowledge and in creating pathways for conducting a particular study (Saunders et al., 2015). In social research, two types of philosophies are vastly followed Epistemology and Ontology (Bryman, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015).

The term "ontology" relates to beliefs about the nature of reality (Saunders et al., 2015). The focal concern of preference becomes whether perceived knowledge should be considered factual entities with a reality outward to social actors, or even if they should be viewed as social conceptual frameworks built up from constructivists' perceptions and experiences (Bryman, 2012).

Meanwhile, epistemology also referred to as knowing philosophy, focuses on presumptions regarding what qualifies as legitimate, valid, and acceptable knowledge as well as the transmission of knowledge (Saunders et al., 2015). In other words, epistemology provides a broad language for selecting from and using, as well as for questioning and creating information or ideas (Wagenknecht, 2016). As the study uses a qualitative research method for data collection thus it also reflects upon another epistemological dimension of interpretivism. Interpretivism enables the understanding of studied phenomena from participants' views (Bryman, 2012). However, the interpretivism paradigm also seeks to explain how individuals see social phenomena, while also recognizing that these concepts can be viewed from a variety of perspectives (Paterson & Higgs, 2015). The use of interpretivism is suitable for the current study as it tried to understand the perspectives of stakeholders by conducting interviews.

Research Design

This study uses an inductive case study analysis to acquire new knowledge and develop our understanding of the subject area, but not definitely to conclude (Saunders et al., 2015). As the study attempts to study an in-depth understanding of Sundarbans, Bangladesh, a case study analysis is crucial in the comprehension of a particular location. A case study investigation looks at a specific community, organization, or area to examine a single case in great depth (Bryman, 2012). An in-depth investigation can be carried out to establish what is happening and why, as well as to comprehend the situation's effects and implications, and case study research can result in an exhaustive and detailed examination of a specific occurrence. For primary data collecting, this thesis paper employs a qualitative approach. To collect and analyze data, a qualitative research technique typically emphasizes words rather than numerical metrics (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative research is frequently used to gain a deeper understanding of a study and to develop trust, participation, access to meanings, and in-depth comprehension. Qualitative research is referred to as naturalistic since the researchers work in a natural context (Bryman, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015).

The study also undertakes inductive reasoning for the creation of theory based on the data, also inductive reasoning is suitable for a study that has a small number of participants (Bryman, 2012).

Data Collection

The study uses both primary and secondary data for a better understanding of the study's topic, the uses of both primary and secondary data allow researchers to conduct and thorough investigation of a topic (Bryman, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015).

Secondary data consist of the documents related to Solimar international's tourism alliance project on Sundarbans Bangladesh and other related tourism project reports of the organization which were facilitated by the author of this study during the internship period.

As for primary data the study conducted four semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders from the Sundarbans Bangladesh region. By interviewing respondents in-depth, a semi-structured interview enables researchers to explore several facets of a topic under study (Saunders et al., 2015). Interviewers can ask questions that are not in the first interview guide using semi-structured interviews if they notice something the participant mentioned (Bryman, 2012). Because the current study employs an inductive approach, semi-structured interviews will be used to help unravel the discussed topic and answer the research question (Saunders et al., 2015). This study used a semistructured interview method to keep the focus on the primary research objectives.

Sampling

The study employs non-probable sampling to select participants for the interviewing process. Nonprobability sampling provides alternatives to probability sampling, the majority of which include subjective assessment (Saunders et al., 2015). This research paper also employs volunteer snowball sampling to engage Sundarbans stakeholders. The volunteer snowball sampling method assists researchers in locating relevant participants through the initial respondents (Bryman, 2012). The author also used social media pages for travel groups in Bangladesh to find interview participants.

Respondents	Occupation	Location
1	Fisherman	Sundarbans, Bangladesh
2	Businessman	Sundarbans, Bangladesh
3	Fisherman	Sundarbans, Bangladesh

4	Volunteer	Sundarbans, Bangladesh

Ethical Consideration

In social research, ethical consideration is a crucial aspect that researchers must address to preserve personal information and knowledge offered by study participants or responding bodies (Bryman, 2012). Ethical considerations are vital when collecting primary data from humans or secondary data from any organization since it must be kept confidential to protect responders (Saunders et al., 2015). Because respondents' personal information and social backgrounds must be preserved, Bryman (2012) underlines the importance of ethical considerations in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012). In this particular study, the author informed the studied organization (Solimar International) and the Sundarbans project's coordinator about the intention of the project. Also, the author ensured the respondents' organization only used materials which are not confidential. As for the interview respondents, the participants were assured to keep their identity and information private as well as confidential.

Trustworthiness

In Social Research, trustworthiness is vital for assuring the quality of the study (Bryman, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015). The credibility of a study is important as the knowledge of social studies can contribute to social change (Collier-Reed et al., 2009). One way to establish trustworthiness is by informing participants about the research topic and objectives as it helps to identify specific bodies of respondents and information (Bryman, 2012). Hence, the author offered to share the interview transcripts with the participants of this study. Also, the author would share the findings of this study with Solimar International for better validity of the study.

Transcription

The translation process of interviews is time-consuming and necessitates adequate time allocation for the researchers (Bryman, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015). However, one of the advantages of transcription is that it aids authors in developing themes for the findings section (Saunders et al., 2015). Although qualitative interview transcribing can be time-consuming, it aids researchers in familiarizing themselves with the data and making notes on each interview that are helpful throughout the analysis phase (Bryman, 2012; Saunders et al., 2015). The interviews were conducted in Bengali and later translated into English. However, side notes were also taken during interviews to avoid missing any important information.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is one of the widespread methods for analyzing qualitative data (Bryman, 2012). It allows researchers to generate themes related to the research objectives (Saunders et al., 2015). Coding requires researchers to allocate respondents' opinions on specific colors for aligning them with the findings (Saunders et al., 2015). All interview transcripts were coded in this current thesis paper to find correlations to arrange equivalent responses from interviewees. This also aided in the segmentation of themes for research findings (Bryman, 2012).

Findings

In this chapter, the data collected via interviews and secondary document analysis are presented. To facilitate a better understanding four themes were created:

- Sundarbans as a tourist destination
- Tourism impacts on Sundarbans

- Importance of Bio-diversity conservation
- Stakeholders' involvement in Sundarbans

Sundarbans as a tourist destination

The first theme was highly relevant to comprehending the Sundarbans as a tourist destination. It also provides a hint about stakeholders' perceptions of tourism activities in their area. When asked about their perception of Cox's Bazar as a tourism destination, all respondents said it was a popular destination in Bangladesh.

> *The Sundarbans is a very popular tourist place. Sundarbans is famous for mangrove trees. The forest is busy with tourists all over the years. (Respondent 1, 2022)*
>
> *The Sundarbans is a very beautiful place. Its full of nature and nice places. (………). . Lots of people visit Sundarbans every day. Specially we have lots of foreigners visit Sundarbans. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

> *we have so many tourists coming here every day. Because it is a mangrove forest and people from the rest of the country visits here. Specially people from big cities comes with family in holidays to enjoy the nature and park. (Respondent 3, 2022)*
>
> *Sundarbans is the biggest mangrove forest of the world. Its really nice. (….). It's a really beautiful tourist place. (…..). We have so many tourists coming here every day. (Respondent 4, 2022).*

 To assess stakeholders' knowledge of the destinations, respondents were asked to describe the SRF's tourism attractions and facilities. The main attractions of Sundarbans, according to almost all of them, are nature, mangrove trees, and wildlife. Furthermore, participants also mentioned one of the most intriguing aspects of the SRF is a brief glimpse of a Royal Bengal tiger.

> *It is famous for our national animal the Royal Bengal Tiger. We also have deer, elephants, monkeys, and other animals. (Respondent 1, 2022)*
>
> *We have a big forest and if you go deep inside the forest and if you are lucky, you can see tigers, deer, and tortoises. (…..). And the specialty of Sundarbans is we have Royal Bengal Tiger and Mangrove trees. (Respondent 2, 2022).*
>
> *We have Royal Bengal tigers in the forest. (….). It is also known for the mangrove trees. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

However, it was addressed by some participants that the SRF is visited by international visitors also. Besides, domestic tourists count as the majority in the visitors' statistics.

> *Sometimes we see a group of foreigners coming to our village and they take pictures, and we also perform our traditional cultural activities on special occasions for them. (Respondent 1, 2022)*

> *Actually, we have both types of tourists. But like 70 to 80% are domestic and the rest are foreigners. But we get some groups of foreigners visiting. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

While talking about the tourism products and services the interviewees also mentioned the accommodation and other tourists services at the SRF. To their view, the destination offers a good quality service to tourists.

> *Also, there are some resorts available for tourists. They are very good in quality. Also, we have some nice restaurants. You can eat local dishes and other seafood there. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

> *We have some good resorts and restaurants in the SRF. Also, we have a local market, and we sell fresh fish, and honey and people also try local fish. There is a tourist guide, and tourist police available. Also, there is a tall watch tower in the forest, and you can see the whole forest from it. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

Taking that into account, it is possible to conclude that Sundarbans is a popular tourist destination among the study participants. According to the participants, the SRF's most important attractions are the mangrove forest and the unique biodiversity.

Tourism Impacts on Sundarbans

Participants in every case noted both the positive and negative effects of tourism. The most significant impact that the study respondents alluded to in terms of the positive one is its economic advantages. They contend that the community has become heavily reliant on tourism and has a tourist-centric culture.

> *For example, grocery shops, village market, boat business gets benefit when we have tourists. Our community changed a lot because of tourism people are opening lots of businesses and try make profit by offering tourism service. My youngest son works at resort in Sundarbans. So, we are benefitted. (Respondent 1, 2022)*

> *Because it is sort of rural area, so we get so many financial advantages because of tourism. Tourists spend money on local shops, restaurant and they buy handmade products from village. (…..). We have fisherman, sailors and honey collectors so they make daily money by selling products and offering services to the tourists. So yeah we are really beneficial due tourism. (Respondent 2,2022).*

> *They even buy fresh fish us and sometimes they tell us to take them for sightseeing so they give us money also. (Respondent 3, 2022)*

> *We are a poor community; our businesses are depending on tourism. (Respondent 4, 2022).*

Furthermore, according to two of the interviewees, the expansion of roads and other community services is a result of the growth in tourism.

> *The government also made new roads and other constructions, so it is helpful for tourists also for locals. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

> *We have a hospital, library and police station now here and I think it is for the tourists we got them here. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

However, the participants mentioned some significant negative impacts of tourism. According to the interviewees, the most dangerous threats are biodiversity loss and animal hunting for tourism product purposes. Respondents also questioned the role of tourists, claiming that they do not practice waste management and that littering pollutes the environment.

> *Like sometimes tourists left their waste and used stuff inside the forest and in the open spaces. So, what happens is it becomes dirty. (…..). at our village markets, some people sell birds and other animals after capturing them from the forest. Because it is popular, and tourists pay lots of money that's why some people haunt the wild animals (Respondent 1, 2022)*

> *Like in the forest there is not available waste management or bins always available. So, people litter waste and other plastic things in the forest so which makes the place dirty. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

> *Also, some people give services like deer hunting and bird killing services to tourists and we don't like it's not good. (Respondent 3, 2022)*

> *Tourists leave their used stuff, waste, and plastic in the forest. Sometimes it smells. And during the rainy season, it comes over our canals and ponds, so it pollutes the water. Sometimes we see dead fish. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

Furthermore, respondents stated that as a result of tourism development, hotel and restaurant owners are occupying land and causing deforestation in order to expand their businesses, both of which are considered severe negative impacts of tourism at the SRF.

> *Because of tourism progress, lots of businesses are opening illegally by occupying local lands. (Respondent 1, 2022)*

> *there are lots of businesses opening and they are building hotel restaurants it kind of started looking like a town. (Respondent 3, 2022)*

> *For instance, because of restaurants and hotels are cutting down trees and using forest land. So, the forest is becoming smaller because they are only trying to make money from tourism. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

It was also mentioned by the respondent one of the negative aspects of tourism they face is an invasion of privacy by tourists sometimes which creates slight discomfort to the locals.

> *Also, locals sometimes feels dissatisfied because of visitors roaming around their homes. Sometimes we feel it goes against our privacy. So even we want to support tourism but we can be unhappy sometimes. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

Overall, this chapter shows that respondents are aware of the overall tourism impact on their community. Despite the fact that the positives are highlighted the most, the threat to biodiversity and animal killings are serious concerns.

Importance of Bio-diversity Conservation

 The SRF is recognized as an important part of the community not only because it is one of Bangladesh's most protected areas, but also because local communities rely on the forest for their daily livelihood.

> *As I said it is full of natural resources lots of kinds of trees and various animals. So it is a very useful resource for our country. (Respondent 1, 2022)*

> *Because our life depends on Sundarbans. It gives us food, shelter, and other necessary support. And the most important thing is it saves from natural disasters. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

> *we are a poor community, and it is a rural area. So we depend on the forest. Yes, it's a protected area of Bangladesh but we also get our food, and shelter from it. (Respondent 4, 2022).*

However, some of the participants expressed a great deal of concern that the locals' overuse of the resources caused damage to the biodiversity of the forest.

> *But we have people that misuse the forest like they cut trees and kill animals for their livelihood and it is not good. (Respondent 1, 2022)*

> *we have locals who illegally kill animals. For example, we have a Royal Bengal tiger in the forest and it is our national animal. But people kill it and now we have very few numbers of tigers (….). people cut down some trees and some of them are very rare and expensive. some greedy people try to make a profit by harming the forest. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

> *people cut trees a lot and they kill animals like tigers, deer, foxes, and tortoises. Some do it for a hobby and most of them try to sell their skin and organs to make money. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

The author discovered a troubling issue about the killing of animals, specifically the national animal (the Royal Bengal Tiger), and as a follow-up, questions were put to several participants to ascertain the cause. In response, one interviewee indicated:

> *And it is expensive, people buy the skin for a huge price, especially the rich people who keep it for making their house nice. (……). For example, three months ago we lost at least 2 fishermen and tigers took them and kill them. It's even difficult to find dead bodies sometimes. So there is also anger in locals so they also kill tigers because of that. (Respondent 3, 2022)*

The respondents also cited the irresponsibility of the law enforcement officials and the forest authority as a cause of the community's uncontrollable behaviors toward the forest's wildlife.

> *we have forest police and local chairmen (Councillor) and sometimes they find the people killing and selling animals. But you will see after one is made, they are again selling them in the village market. (….). some people also pay a bribe to the village market authority for their businesses, so nobody really stops them from selling animals. (Respondent 1, 2022)*

> *we have some government officers and police who often capture people for hunting animals and then give them a penalty for it. But still, some people do not care about that because the forest is so big it is not possible for police to control everyone. (Respondent 2, 2022).*

> *We have forest police, but they are not that serious. In deep of the forest, we have some group goons they kill animals, cut trees and sell those to India. (Respondent 3, 2022)*

The current chapter describes the contemptible state of the SRF's ecosystem. The participants in this study expressed great concern about the loss of their resources in the forest. They cited too much reliance on the forest as a reason, posing the threat of wildlife extinction. This chapter also resonates that the local communities are liable for the long-term harm to the forest, even though tourists are partially to blame for their ignorance of basic waste ethics.

Stakeholders' Involvement in Sundarbans

The study's primary goal is to understand stakeholders' opinions on the importance of biodiversity in the conservation of SRF. However, it is also significantly important whether the stakeholders have any platform and whether they have the opportunities for expressing their perceptions. Thus, the present theme has shown to be relevant.

> *I think it is important for us as locals to have our responsibilities for saving our forest. (…..). So if we all act together then we can reduce the negative impact on the forest. And it's important because this forest helps us a lot it gives us food, and saves us during cyclones and other natural disasters so we need to save it. But it is only possible if the authorities are strict and people support the projects. (Respondent 1, 2022).*

> *I think it will really helpful for everyone if we can work together. We have hotels and restaurants that are operating here and we have lots of young students who are mostly unemployed. So if someone could take steps and get them a part-time job it would help them financially as well as they can get some professional experience. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

> *sometimes we have some seminars they call us we go. Our chairman also attends. They guide and tell us be good with tourist. Not to cut trees and stop killing animals. (Respondent 3, 2022)*

> *I think if the government take steps and we work together than we help everyone. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

Respondents, on the other hand, believe that the communities' reliance on the forest for daily livelihood is an issue that needs to be addressed. As a result, two participants suggested that the responsible authorities assist them in finding alternative employment.

> *If they invite all of the locals and businesses to work together they we can reduce so many problems. Also we use the forest a lot and it is not good for the forest. So if we are given different way of earning or different jobs like in tourism industry so people will fine alternative income ways. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

> *Maybe if the locals can get some other job they will stop killing animals and cutting trees. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

One respondent stated that international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other volunteer organizations are more connected with local communities than the government. To his statement, the participant expressed as:

> *we have more foreign organizations working with locals than the government. For instance, we have NGOs and other foreign organizations that train us on community-based tourism businesses. They also tell us the importance of our forests and animals. (Respondent 1, 2022)*

> *We sometimes see foreign NGOs and researchers visit Sundarbans, they make documentaries and write articles on the mangrove forest (Respondent 2, 2022)*

Nonetheless, the interviewees recognize the importance of such a unique SRF ecosystem. Almost all of the participants expressed an interest in collaborating with responsible authorities to improve forests' environment and tourism development.

> *But I think if the authorities take good rules and encourage lots of communities will help (Respondent 1, 2022)*

> *it will really help if we can guidance from authorities on how to have our responsibilities towards the forest. (.....). maybe if authority help us may be can do more practice and more involve. It will help us financially and also make everyone careful towards saving the forest. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

> *I feel we need strict rules and they should listen our problems and help us finding other occupations so we don't harm our forest. (Respondent 3, 2022)*

> *I think it is important we all work to save our forest. We can be aware and the tourist need to be careful of their activities. (Respondent 4, 2022)*

Moreover, respondent 2 hinted at the necessity of nature protection as it is the prime attraction of Sundarbans

> *Also tourist visit Sundarbans because of the wildlife and nature. so if we do not save the forest then they will not travel us. (Respondent 2, 2022)*

To summarize this theme, the study respondents are interested in stakeholders' involvement in the SRF's tourism development. They believe it is possible if the authorities also take the necessary steps.

Discussion

The initial study goal was to determine the perceptions of stakeholders and whether they have an opportunity for inclusion in tourism development that could benefit the biodiversity and communities of the Sundarbans Reserve Forest. However, respondents expressed a lack of involvement in the destination's tourism industry. The lack of collaboration among local and relevant participants creates negative impressions among stakeholders in the destination (Byrd, 2007).

Furthermore, the findings indicate that respondents viewed the SRF as one of the most valuable resources for the country. Respondents believe the SRF is valuable not only for tourism purposes but also because the communities rely on it. As a result, rather than visitors, locals are more responsible for the declining state of the ecosystem (Paul et al., 2017; Saif et al., 2016).

Overreliance on natural resources, as noted in the literature review, poses a threat to several protected places around the world (Worku, 2017), and eco-tourism is seen as the most sustainable method of conserving the protected regions (Rai, 2012; Rudianto et al., 2021). The findings are in contradiction to the literature in the instance of Bangladesh's SRF-protected lands, though. Tourists come to the SRF for its exceptional biodiversity and wildlife, but they are unaware of the inhabitants' hostility against the forest, their threatening actions toward animal hunting, and their role in driving flora and fauna to extinction (M. M. Islam et al., 2018; Karmoker & Ahmed, 2021; Paul et al., 2017; Saif et al., 2016).

There are concerns raised about the role of local council members and government representatives in preventing deforestation and the shooting of animals. However, the study's findings show that inattention from the government and corruption make the situation more troublesome for the destination (Mollick et al., 2021). Furthermore, some participants mentioned the SRF's visitors' code of conduct ethics. In relation to this topic, interviewees mentioned irresponsible waste management and the use of plastic, which harms the ecosystem as well as local communities. As a result, the respondents endorse the inclusion of all participants in the destination's overall development. According to the findings, locals receive very little attention from authorities regarding their thoughts and opinions on the development of SRF, and it is critical that stakeholders' perspectives on tourism activities in their community be considered (Aas et al., 2005; S. M. N. Islam, 2019). The locals' and stakeholders has high interest and power in a destinations tourism development (Nicolaides, 2015) but the currents findings contradicts with the statement.

It is worth noting that communities benefit greatly from tourism, but the negative effects cannot be ignored. As a result, the success of a tourist destination greatly depends on the support of the various stakeholders (GarauVadell et al., 2014), and it is crucial that the relevant authorities devote the appropriate resources for the inclusion of community interest (Hall, 1999).

Conclusion

This report sought to comprehend stakeholders' perspectives on SRF as well as the conservation of forest biodiversity. Throughout the course of this research, it became clear that stakeholders have differing perspectives on the importance of biodiversity. Despite their positive feelings about the subject, they advocate for the preservation of the SRF's ecosystem. However, the communities' overdependence on the forest's wildlife and radical attitudes reflect images that contradict their statements. To this, the study finds a lack of understanding among locals of the immense value of the Sundarbans ecosystem. Whereas, the forest is considered the "lunge of Bangladesh" (Mamun, 2019). Also, the SRF works as a shield against natural disasters (e.g. cyclones, tidal surges) and have been protecting coastal communities over the years (Raju & Rahman, 2020). The Study believes that the SRF requires awareness from all types of actors (e.g. locals, shareholders, government, volunteers) of the destination. Although the study was primarily intended to understand the shareholders' perspectives, the use of the semi-structured interview process was evident as respondents reflected on the role of visitors and their responsibility while visiting the forest. According to the study, it is critical that responsible organizations demonstrate concern and take the necessary steps to raise awareness among all types of tourism actors about the importance of protecting SRF's biodiversity.

Nonetheless, as a developing country, Bangladesh has a number of social and basic issues that have yet to be resolved. As a result, the government always welcomes foreign organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to assist them in various projects. This project's findings also include evidence of NGOs and other volunteer organizations working at the SRF for the development of the community as well as the tourism industry (Hassan, 2021; Rahman & Hassan, 2020). Thus it leaves room for various international organizations for involving themselves in the tourism development of Bangladesh.

Limitation

There are several limitations to the current paper. To begin, there is a scarcity of literature on stakeholders' perceptions of the Sundarbans' biodiversity. As a result, the current author found it difficult to select appropriate theories for the study. Furthermore, the author inquired with the Bangladesh Tourism Board about current SRF tourism statistics. However, no success was found in obtaining adequate information about the Sundarbans from the authorities.

Furthermore, the interview process is carried out with a very small number of participants in the study. As a result, it was difficult for the data finding section to allocate precise information related to the study objective. Another significant challenge the author faced was gathering more interview participants. Although some businesses have their own official websites, the majority of businesses do not have digital website services or a social media platform. Further to that, the author encountered a significant language barrier while conducting the interview. Although Bengali is the official language of Bangladesh, each locality and community has its own language. As a result, translating the interview recordings was a little difficult for the author.

Despite the limitations stated, the study hopes to add to the literature on stakeholders' perceptions of Sundarbans tourism and biodiversity. It is suggested that future research allocate a larger sample size and investigate this issue more thoroughly.

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