

Assessing the Economic Implications of Sustainable Tourism Development in the Coastal Areas of Sundarbans, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, represent the world's largest mangrove forest, spanning the coastal regions of West Bengal, India, and Bangladesh. This study examines the interplay between sustainable tourism and economic growth in the Sundarbans, focusing on the Indian segment. The region's rich biodiversity, including the Royal Bengal Tiger and diverse avifauna, positions it as a prime ecotourism destination. However, the area faces challenges such as environmental degradation, loss of species, and pollution, which threaten its ecological balance. A SWOT analysis reveals that while the Sundarbans possess significant strengths—such as unique cultural heritage and established tourism infrastructure—there are notable weaknesses, including inadequate coordination among local communities and limited economic benefits from tourism. Opportunities exist in developing eco-friendly tourism packages, involving local populations in decision-making, and diversifying tourism products to enhance income retention within the community. Conversely, threats encompass potential environmental impacts, pollution, and increased biotic pressure due to mass tourism. The study underscores the necessity for a multi-stakeholder approach to sustainable tourism development in the Sundarbans. Additionally, promoting environmental awareness, establishing eco-friendly infrastructure, and ensuring equitable distribution of tourism-generated income are vital for the region's long-term economic growth and ecological preservation.

INTRODUCTION

The Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest straddling the border of India and Bangladesh, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its rich biodiversity, including endangered species such as the Royal Bengal Tiger and estuarine crocodiles. Coastal regions, like the Sundarbans, are increasingly exposed to multiple pressures including climate change, resource degradation, urban development, and inequality. Tourism is often debated as either a potential solution or a contributor to these threats [1].

Ecotourism in the Sundarbans has been recognized as a valuable tool for promoting environmental conservation while providing economic opportunities for local communities. This form of responsible tourism aims to minimize environmental impact, providing a balanced approach to tourism that supports both local economies and the ecosystem [2]. Sustainable tourism can offer a source of

income for local residents and preserve their cultural heritage and natural resources by investing in community-led initiatives such as homestays and local tours [3].

The economic benefits from tourism can alleviate poverty and improve the standard of living for local people, while also reducing the pressure on natural resources and helping to protect the environment [4]. However, the development of coastal tourism needs to be managed carefully, as economic benefits are often unequally distributed between tourism investors and resident communities, and can lead to negative local environmental and social impacts. The changing nature of the global tourism enterprise also raises concerns about the long-term commitment to local people and places [5].

In the broader context, sustainable tourism in coastal areas is seen as a critical strategy for integrated coastal zone management and sustainable development,

addressing both the economic and environmental challenges faced by these regions.

Local Livelihood Improvement and Poverty Reduction:

Sustainable Tourism Initiatives Improving Local Livelihoods

Sustainable tourism in the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest shared by India and Bangladesh, has been recognized as a valuable tool for promoting environmental conservation and benefiting local communities. The region, which is home to endangered species such as the Royal Bengal Tiger and estuarine crocodiles, faces significant challenges like climate change and deforestation. However, ecotourism initiatives have emerged as a crucial strategy to address these issues while providing economic opportunities for locals.

One of the key approaches in the Sundarbans is community-based ecotourism. This model promotes sustainable economic growth, sustainable consumption and production, and the sustainable use of natural resources, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals 8, 12, and 14. In Bangladesh, where tourism contributes 4.4% to the GDP, community-based tourism has been highlighted as a viable pathway for economic empowerment through employment generation [6]. This approach not only supports the local economy but also alleviates poverty and improves the standard of living for local residents.

Additionally, by investing in community-led initiatives, such as homestays and local tours, tourism in the Sundarbans can provide alternative livelihoods. This reduces the dependency on forest resources and mitigates the pressures on this delicate ecosystem. These initiatives help in preserving both the natural environment and the cultural heritage of the region, ensuring that tourism activities do not lead to environmental degradation or cultural disruption.

Furthermore, the economic benefits generated from sustainable tourism can play a significant role in conservation efforts. By offering local communities a stake in the tourism industry, there is a greater incentive to protect and conserve the natural and cultural assets of the Sundarbans. This symbiotic relationship between tourism and conservation helps in maintaining the biodiversity and ecological balance of the region, while also supporting the local economy [7].

Examples of Poverty Reduction through Sustainable Tourism in Sundarbans

Sustainable tourism in the Sundarbans has played a pivotal role in improving local livelihoods and reducing poverty. By adhering to the principles laid out by the United Nations World Tourism Organization, the Sundarbans have managed to conserve environmental resources, protect biodiversity, and respect the cultural heritage of host communities. One specific example is the controlled tourism initiatives which ensure that tourism activities do not disrupt the delicate ecosystem of the region, thereby conserving the natural resources that the local communities rely on for their livelihood [8].

These sustainable tourism models have also facilitated socio-economic benefits for the local population by creating job opportunities in eco-tourism and related sectors, thereby providing a stable source of income for many families. The influx of tourists, managed in an environmentally conscious manner, has allowed local artisans and businesses to thrive, promoting traditional crafts and cultural experiences unique to the Sundarbans [9]. This holistic approach not only addresses the needs of visitors and the tourism industry but also significantly contributes to poverty reduction by ensuring that economic benefits are equitably distributed among the community members.

Mangrove Ecosystem Preservation and Climate Change Mitigation

Sustainable tourism initiatives in the Sundarbans play a crucial role in preserving the unique mangrove ecosystems and contributing to climate change mitigation. The Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the

largest mangrove forests globally, stretches across the border between India and Bangladesh, covering approximately 10,000 square kilometres of mangrove forest [10]. This vast area is home to diverse flora and fauna, including endangered species such as the Royal Bengal Tiger, estuarine crocodiles, and hundreds of bird species.

Ecotourism in the Sundarbans aims to minimize environmental impact while promoting economic opportunities for local communities. By implementing responsible tourism practices, ecotourism supports conservation efforts and enhances environmental awareness among visitors. Additionally, sustainable tourism provides alternative livelihoods for local populations, reducing the pressure on natural resources and promoting the protection of the environment.

Key initiatives in place to promote sustainable tourism in the Sundarbans include community-led projects such as homestays and local tours, which foster cultural exchange and create employment opportunities. These initiatives help alleviate poverty and improve the standard of living for local communities by providing a source of income that does not rely on exploiting natural resources [11].

Furthermore, the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans play a vital role in climate change mitigation. They act as natural barriers against coastal erosion and cyclones, protecting millions of people living in the surrounding regions. The preservation of these mangrove ecosystems is crucial for maintaining their ecological functions and the biodiversity they support.

Minimizing Environmental Footprint:

Minimizing the environmental footprint in the Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is crucial for preserving its unique ecosystem and supporting sustainable tourism. The Sundarbans, renowned for its vast mangrove forests, tidal waterways, and rich biodiversity, including the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger and estuarine crocodiles, requires careful management to protect its delicate balance.

Implementing sustainable tourism practices in the Sundarbans involves several key strategies. First, choosing eco-friendly accommodations that utilize renewable energy sources and water conservation techniques can significantly reduce the environmental impact of visitors [12]. These accommodations should also focus on waste management practices such as recycling and composting to minimize pollution.

Second, promoting responsible travel behavior among tourists is essential. Visitors should be educated on the importance of preserving the natural environment and adhering to guidelines that minimize disturbances to wildlife. This includes staying on designated paths, avoiding the use of single-use plastics, and respecting local wildlife by maintaining a safe distance.

Furthermore, involving local communities in ecotourism initiatives can enhance conservation efforts and provide economic benefits. By offering community-led tours and employing locals in various roles within the tourism sector, the reliance on external resources can be reduced, thus fostering a sense of stewardship among the residents [13]. These initiatives not only support the local economy but also ensure that the cultural heritage of the region is preserved and promoted.

Lastly, the development and management of ecotourism in the Sundarbans should include regular monitoring and assessment of environmental impacts. This allows for the identification of areas where further improvements are needed and ensures that tourism activities remain sustainable in the long term.

By integrating these sustainable practices, the Sundarbans can continue to thrive as a premier ecotourism destination while safeguarding its environmental integrity for future generations [14].

Community Involvement

Community involvement in sustainable tourism development in the Sundarbans is crucial for ensuring that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed and that the needs of the local populations are addressed. Ecotourism in the Sundarbans, which is shared by India and Bangladesh, has been recognized as a valuable tool for promoting environmental conservation and benefiting local communities. This region covering 10,000 km² of mangrove forest, is home to endangered species such as the Royal Bengal Tiger and estuarine crocodiles.

The local communities play a significant role in the management and development of ecotourism initiatives [15]. By being actively involved in decision-making processes, they can ensure that the development strategies are aligned with their cultural, economic, and environmental needs. This community-based approach to tourism not only promotes environmental awareness and supports conservation efforts but also creates employment opportunities, enhances food security, and facilitates cultural exchanges.

Moreover, community-based ecotourism has been identified as a viable pathway to achieve economic empowerment through employment generation, thus contributing to the region's GDP. It enables local communities to participate actively in the tourism economy, ensuring that the financial benefits directly improve their livelihoods [16].

To further these goals, ecotourism initiatives in the Sundarbans focus on sustainable practices that minimize environmental impact while maximizing socio-economic benefits for local communities. These initiatives include training local guides, developing eco-friendly accommodations, and engaging residents in conservation efforts, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their natural and cultural heritage.

Role of Local Communities

Local communities play a crucial role in the successful implementation of sustainable tourism practices in the Sundarbans. As the primary custodians of this unique ecosystem, their active participation and involvement are essential for ensuring long-term benefits for both the environment and the economy. The Sundarbans, spanning across India and Bangladesh, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its biodiversity, including endangered species such as the Royal Bengal Tiger and estuarine crocodiles.

Ecotourism in the Sundarbans has been recognized as a valuable tool for promoting environmental conservation and providing economic opportunities for local communities. By engaging in ecotourism, local residents can support conservation efforts, promote environmental awareness, and benefit economically through employment opportunities created by tourism activities [17]. This form of sustainable tourism also facilitates cultural exchange and enhances food security for the local population.

To further enhance local community involvement, initiatives such as community-based tourism have been promoted as a viable pathway to achieve economic empowerment through employment generation. These initiatives align with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth and the sustainable use of natural resources.

Local heroes and conservation champions within the community are pivotal in raising awareness, implementing protection measures, and promoting sustainable livelihoods. Their efforts are instrumental in preserving the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans and ensuring that tourism practices remain environmentally responsible and beneficial to the local population. Through these combined efforts, the role of local communities in sustainable tourism not only helps protect the Sundarbans but also enhances the overall well-being of its inhabitants [18].

Socio-Cultural and Environmental Impacts

Sustainable tourism in the Sundarbans has profound socio-cultural and environmental implications. It helps preserve local heritage by promoting traditional crafts, folklore, and indigenous knowledge, while also creating employment opportunities that improve local livelihoods. Women, in particular, benefit from increased participation in tourism-driven activities, fostering gender equity and social empowerment. Furthermore, cultural exchange between tourists and locals enhances mutual understanding and appreciation of diverse traditions. However, excessive tourism can lead to the commercialization of traditions and loss of indigenous practices, posing cultural sustainability challenges.

On the environmental front, sustainable tourism contributes to biodiversity conservation and habitat protection. Eco-friendly practices, such as controlled visitor access and sustainable accommodations, support the preservation of the Sundarbans' fragile ecosystem. Revenue from tourism often funds conservation projects and anti-poaching initiatives. However, increased human activity generates waste and pollution, requiring stringent waste management measures [19]. Additionally, transportation emissions and human-wildlife interactions pose ecological risks, emphasizing the need for responsible tourism policies.

A balanced approach integrating community participation, conservation strategies, and regulatory frameworks is essential to ensuring that tourism contributes positively to both economic growth and environmental sustainability in the Sundarbans.

Impact of tourism on the socio-cultural dynamics of local communities:

Tourism in the Sundarbans has significantly influenced local socio-cultural dynamics. On the positive side, it has fostered cultural exchange, enhancing appreciation for local traditions and indigenous knowledge. Economic opportunities from tourism incentivize the preservation of heritage, including traditional crafts and performances. Moreover, the sector has provided employment, particularly for women and marginalized groups, promoting economic independence and social inclusion. However, challenges arise with cultural commodification, where traditions may be altered to suit tourist preferences, leading to the erosion of authentic practices. The influx of external influences can also disrupt traditional values and lifestyles, potentially causing cultural conflicts within communities. Rapid tourism development may result in the displacement of local populations and shifts in social structures. Therefore, a balanced approach that integrates community participation and regulatory frameworks is essential to ensure tourism contributes positively to both economic growth and cultural preservation in the Sundarbans.

Positive and negative environmental consequences of tourism activities

Positive Impacts:

- **Economic Development:** Tourism provides income opportunities for local communities, reducing dependence on forest resources and promoting sustainable livelihoods.
- **Environmental Awareness:** Exposure to the unique ecosystem fosters appreciation and support for conservation efforts among visitors and residents.
- **Negative Impacts:**
- **Habitat Degradation:** Infrastructure development, such as hotel construction and boat operations, leads to habitat destruction and fragmentation, adversely affecting wildlife.
- **Pollution:** Tourist activities contribute to pollution through waste disposal, sewage, and noise from mechanized boats, compromising water quality and disturbing wildlife.
- **Overexploitation:** Increased demand for resources like fish and prawns can result in overfishing and depletion of local species.
- **Ecosystem Disturbance:** Uncontrolled tourism can lead to erosion of peat banks and changes in substrate structure, affecting seedling distribution and faunal diversity.

Challenges and Threats

The Sundarbans, a vast expanse of mangrove forest straddling the borders of India and Bangladesh, faces numerous challenges and threats that jeopardize its delicate ecosystem. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it stands as a testament to nature's resilience and complexity, covering approximately 10,000 square kilometers of tidal waterways, mudflats, and small islands predominantly in Bangladesh with a smaller portion in India. However, sustainable tourism, although beneficial in many respects, poses significant threats to this unique environment.

One of the primary challenges is the unsustainable and unjustifiable utilization of natural resources. This exploitation threatens the intricate balance of the Sundarbans' ecosystem. The region's vulnerability to climate change, including sea-level rise, coastline erosion, and increased frequency of cyclones and floods, further exacerbates these threats [20]. The mangrove forest acts as a critical natural barrier against these elements, protecting millions of people living in surrounding areas, and any degradation to this barrier can have severe consequences. Ecotourism initiatives aim to mitigate these challenges by promoting responsible tourism practices that minimize environmental impact while providing economic benefits to local communities. These efforts include strict regulations on resource use and focused conservation activities to preserve both the natural and cultural heritage of the Sundarbans. Despite these initiatives, balancing the economic gains from tourism with the need to maintain the environmental integrity of the mangrove ecosystems remains a daunting task.

The Sundarbans' rich biodiversity, including species such as the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger and estuarine crocodiles, underscores the importance of effective conservation strategies. Sustainable tourism development must prioritize the protection of these species and their habitats to ensure long-term ecological balance and sustainability.

Suggestions and recommendations

The idea of conservation, sustainability and their yield in the preservation of traditional forests are an integral part of natural ecosystem. The set of laws to govern the forest resources should be drafted in a manner that follows bottom-up approach instead of top-down approach. Locals must be trained through capacity building programs to boost eco-friendly tourism activities in Sundarbans. Government officials at the top of the policy-maker should keep local's grievances in their mind, whenever they are framing any policy for them like construction of safe passage in wildlife dominated areas to avoid wildlife-human conflict. The foundation of forest laws in Sundarbans states that multiple natural resources are found in abundance and these resources should be utilized sustainably [21]. Those who are not abiding forest laws shouldn't be allowed in any case into the forest premises. Only local dwellers should be permitted to cut down the needed trees because these are their vital source of livelihood since the ages. Any developmental plan should be participatory in nature from all walks of lives including roof builders, harvesters and *Nypa* palm collectors, honey collectors, lime makers, snail gatherers and many others. The wisdom and traditional knowledge of indigenous people and local community should be respected, promoted, and responsibly disseminated as these are playing crucial role in promoting tourism in Sundarbans.

CONCLUSION

Sundarbans is blessed with limitless potential, besides abode of several species of amphibians, reptiles, mammals, vegetation and trees. The Royal Bengal tigers renowned as swamp tigers are found in no other mangrove forest on the earth except Sundarbans. The region is under pressure and facing a lot of extreme weather events with increased intensity over the last few years. The protection of these wild animals lies in the hands of the present generation so that the entire world can acknowledge the beauty of such rare species of wild flora and fauna. However, mismanagement, over-exploitation and corruption have threatened the forest and the communities dwelling there. Killing

and exploitation of any of the species are wrong and illegal whether it may be for the cure of any kind of a deadly disease or any other purpose. Human being tends to provoke everything and their consequences will be faced by the entire community. The development work in the region must ensure equity, feasibility, accessibility, accountability and affordability for people from all walks of life. The management of Sundarbans resources to be sustainable to support livelihood that includes means of living and making them resilient to any natural hazards. There is need for more secure ecosystem to preserve and protect all the stakeholder residing in the region. We should do our work keeping in mind resilient, synergy and sustainability of the nature and they will do their own work.

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