

Nature Tourism Enterprises

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Internal tourism growth within Bangladesh is limited almost exclusively to Bangladeshi nationals. The strength of this growth is nowhere more evident than in the seaside resort town of Cox's Bazar which even in 2003 was virtually empty from March through October and has now become a year-round resort town, complete with ten new six story hotels added in the past five years. Nature tourism has grown rapidly with the overall tourism sector, as evidenced not least in the doubling of paying visitors to the Sundarbans between 2003 and 2005, and the increased number of visitors to the new recreational "Eco-Parks" and "Safari Parks" established by the Forest Department. The Dulahazara Safari Park and Banshkhali Eco-Park – both small sites with under 100 hectares accessible to visitors – regularly now receive over 20,000 paying visitors in a single weekend. In Lawachara National Park the number of visitors has more than tripled each year since 2004, despite only basic visitor infrastructure.

From the beginning of the experiment, Nishorgo recognized that the potential of the internal nature tourism sector was significant for generating benefits to neighboring communities. It was also realized that this same sector could grow so rapidly at Protected Areas (PAs) as to create – if not managed properly – constraints to conservation. The challenge was to capture benefits for local communities from nature tourism enterprises, while minimizing adverse natural and social impacts of such nature tourism.¹ With these challenges in mind, Nishorgo advanced and tested a number of community-based nature tourism opportunities (JOBS 2004).

Starting Assumptions and Subsequent Adaptation

Locally-Owned "Nishorgo Eco-Cottage Network"

At the time of Nishorgo's launch, the lack of clean and secure accommodation in the vicinity of pilot PAs was a recognized deterrent to attracting small group visits to the PAs. Nishorgo aimed to stimulate growth of locally owned accommodation facilities ("eco-cottages") that would attract middle- and upper-income tourists. In order to demonstrate the viability of this approach, the Project developed a "Demonstration Package" for each cottage, including those items that unfamiliar local entrepreneurs might not otherwise purchase (e.g., uninterrupted power supply, imported toilets, sinks and fixtures, cotton sheets and pillows, and a standard complement of quality bamboo or wood furniture). Nishorgo also worked with a local architectural firm (Module Architects) to design a low-cost and tourist friendly two bedroom cottage design with an estimated total construction cost of \$5,500 (Shams 2006a) (see the following photographs). A Detailed Bill of Materials accompanied these designs, and the Project team worked with interested entrepreneurs to package their projects for review and benefit-cost analysis where loans were being considered from local financial institutions. Release of the Demonstration Package to the entrepreneur was contingent upon his or her completion of structural construction of the Eco-Cottage.

¹ We follow the International Eco-tourism Society definition of nature tourism as "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people".



Computer Generated Image of Eco-cottage designed by Module Architects.



*“Nishorgo Nirob Eco-cottage” at Srimongol modified from the computer generated image and constructed by local community member, Shamsul Alam. Already it has helped him to earn money.
[Md. Tarek Murshed]*

Nishorgo’s complementary long-term objective was to stimulate growth in a recognizable locally-owned “Nishorgo Eco-Cottage Network” that would assist in capturing added economic value in the communities around pilot Protected Areas and could be replicated at other Protected Areas. Each of the Eco-Cottages in the Network would:

- Meet common performance standards for cleanliness and food service;
- Be owned and operated by individuals living in the immediate landscape of a Protected Area;
- Undergo periodic re-certification of the “Nishorgo” label by a Panel to include tour operators, the Co-Management Organization (CMO) and the Forest Department;
- Contribute a fixed percentage of earnings to the CMO of the local PA;
- Take part in common marketing of the Network.

Work began in earnest on eco-cottage development in 2005, but progressed slowly at first for two major reasons. First, at the PA level, few believed that their investment in such cottages would ever be profitable. They found it hard to imagine that visitors would pay 650 Taka per night (at that time equivalent to USD 10) to live in a nature-friendly building and setting instead of going to Government guest houses or local hotels in nearby towns. Second, while some had relatives from whom they could obtain remittances for financing, those who did not found it difficult to get capital from local financial organizations. The well-known large NGOs had little familiarity and no business plans at District level to assist them in servicing this unusual financing request. Commercial banks – when consulted – wanted airtight collateral in land rights that would scare off individuals not accustomed to such legal requirements.

Once entrepreneurs began to commit to the cottage projects and line up financing, it became clear that they had little familiarity with tourist service provision. At about this time in 2006, both the Radisson Water Garden Hotel and Guide Tours (the leading responsible nature tourism company in Bangladesh) showed interest in training and otherwise raising the capacity of the Cottage Network.

In October of 2007, Nishorgo brought six Eco-Cottage entrepreneurs to a six-day intensive training course at the Guide Tours' Bandarban eco-tourist facility. During the week, the Cottage owners and their managers learned practical lessons from Radisson's chefs, housekeeping staff and others about quality hotel management. All the owners today recognize that this intensive training was essential to their success.

Initially, our objective was to see at least one Eco-Cottage operating per Co-Management Organization area, making a total of eight functioning cottages. By project end, only five cottages were in operation. One site (Whykeong), it was recognized, was not sufficiently attractive for tourists, as it had no other destination attractions in the vicinity. At another site (Satchuri), it turned out that the entrepreneur was in fact expecting a donation from the Project that exceeded the stated support that all Eco-Cottage owners received under their Memoranda of Understanding with the Project. His



A six day intensive Training Course at the Guide Tours' Bandarban eco-tourist facility where the Radisson Housing Staff trained the Eco-Cottage entrepreneurs on hotel management starting from making the bed to cooking.
[Md. Tarek Murshed]

cottage has still not been completed. At a third site (Shilkhali), the cottage is nearly complete, but the location, it is now clear, is not at present attractive for tourism, not only because of its more remote location but also because it was located near a bustling and loud market. However, today, five of the cottages are fully operational and receiving tourists. The most financially successful Eco-Cottages are at Lawachara National Park, one of which is meeting 90 percent occupancy rates even in the low season.

Youth Eco-Guides

Recognizing that youth unemployment rates were high at all the PAs, and also that visitors would have little familiarity with the nature areas or wildlife, a program of youth "Eco-Guide" development was begun as an additional service enterprise in three PAs. Beginning with a first group of 50 young people, each took part in an intensive five day training course in 2006. A second batch of 24 Guides was added in 2007. In addition to generating revenue for local youth and assisting in nature interpretation for visitors, the Guides were also to provide a measure of visitor management and security.

In late 2007, all the active Eco-Guides were evaluated in formal oral and written tests conducted by a Panel including the Chief Executive Officer of Guide Tours, members of Co-Management Organizations and the Forest Department. Guides were ranked at three levels: pass with distinction (green), pass (blue) and fail. Of the 74 initially trained, the 40 remaining active in guiding work took the exam, with 31 achieving blue ranking and 9 achieving green.

The Eco-Guiding service enterprise has created a steady income for the best guides at Lawachara NP and Satchuri NP (visitor numbers to Teknaf GR remain low). The highest performing guides have been regularly hired for field research support and to support VIP delegations. At the more visited sites such as Lawachara, other young people from the area, including young women, are now presenting themselves requesting permission to be trained to work as Guides, one indication of the profitability of the enterprise at that site.



Eco-guide leading a group of Imams through a forest trail in Lawachara.
[Nishorgo Support Project]

The processes for training and supply of Eco-Guides have been well developed, but sustained demand for their services requires also a measure of compulsion on groups visiting PAs requiring that when moving into the forest (other than short and localized trails) they hire a Guide. This is important on longer trails for safety and security (particularly in areas with wild elephants) and for environmental protection (through education of visitors about appropriate PA etiquette).

Elephant Rides

Nature tourists have demonstrated a high willingness to pay to avail elephant rides in nature areas, paying Tk 2,750 (US\$ 40) per person for a 90 minute ride in Bali, Thailand and elsewhere. In Bangladesh, most domesticated elephants have been used either for hauling logs in timber operations or for circuses or other recreational uses. The steady decline in available timber in Bangladesh has created a situation where a large number of elephants are under-employed and their owners are seeking other productive uses for them. At the same time, the increase in visitation to Protected Areas suggested that – if properly managed – elephant rides might provide a service to visitors and sustainable revenue for local communities. In light of the low level of recognition of the Protected Areas as a unified system, it was also thought that elephant rides could raise awareness of the System.

Initial plans were to establish elephant ride operations at three PAs –Lawachara NP, Satchuri NP and Teknaf GR – all areas with high potential or actual tourist visitation. The specific objective was to provide opportunities for long (more than 1 hour) and more expensive rides within the PAs. So as to reduce impact in any one area, rides would be spread out along multiple trails covering half-hour, one hour and three hour circuits. One hour rides were to cost Tk 350 (US\$ 5), a price considered by most involved to be extremely high and unlikely

to be paid by visitors. A fixed proportion of elephant income would be directed to the Co-Management Organizations for use in conservation.

The Nishorgo team worked through a number of challenges in developing the enterprise. Perhaps most importantly, virtually all key actors involved with this enterprise (CMOs, the Forest Department, tourists and even the elephant “mahout” operators) were only familiar with short recreational elephant rides. Accordingly, they expected that rides would be no more than five minutes and cost less than Tk 20 (US\$ 0.25). The idea of elephant trekking was unfamiliar to all involved except those that had traveled to observe it in India or elsewhere. In the first year of this operation at Lawachara, the undesirable situation occurred in which too many tourists entered the center of the Park, elephants overate nearby vegetation and the CMO for all this earned virtually no revenue (Shams 2006b). The operation, in short, had failed to achieve its objectives. What is more, the “howdah” consisted essentially of a blanket thrown over the elephants’ backs, making a ride of more than 5 minutes extremely uncomfortable in any case.

Adaptations were subsequently made to the approach. CMOs agreed to move elephant rides outside core areas. Longer rides have been required rather than the short rides. CMOs sell tickets themselves, to ensure that a fixed proportion of income comes to them from the elephant owner’s earnings. At Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary wild elephants are present as both individuals and in herds. While some felt that the wild elephants would keep their distance from the tame elephants, sufficient expertise did not exist in-country to be absolutely sure of this, and so it was considered safer not to proceed without better information. Accordingly, elephant ride operations were stopped at that PA.

The greatest hurdles to continued expansion of sustainable elephant ride enterprise operations is the lack of firm control of the process by the CMO or the Forest Department, combined with tourists who expect to pay much less than the stated price for the longer rides. The CMOs have yet to realize that elephant enterprises can generate significant revenue for them. They have also failed to take seriously the damage that elephants can quickly cause to the vegetation where they operate.

The experiences gained in pricing, revenue collection processes, howdah development and business models have made it possible to expand the approach to other sites in the future. One remaining issue to be worked out is the supply of elephants. Today, they come from two sources: private elephant owners and the FD, which has maintained elephants for its logging operations for years. While privately owned elephants are easily available in the Sylhet area, the Chittagong area by contrast has few privately



The final Howdah design which made elephant riding convenient and safer on longer trails. [Md. Tarek Murshed]

owned elephants. Rather, most are owned by the FD for use in the Hill Tracts. Employing these Government-owned elephants in private enterprise operations requires overcoming some obvious bureaucratic obstacles.

Sale of Tourist Souvenirs and Refreshments within the Protected Areas

Recognizing that nature tourist visitor numbers would increase, it was evident that they would want to buy small food items (such as tea and biscuits) and some sort of souvenirs during their visits. Initially, the Project team focused on design and provision of a range of items assumed to be of interest to tourists as souvenirs, including t-shirts, polo shirts, hats and postcards, as well as a range of written information, including annotated hiking trail guides and a book on all the PAs of Bangladesh. These items would all be sold by “official” stores to be operated directly by the CMOs. As in official PA tourist shops in many parts of the world, products generally tended toward higher quality while also being of higher price than similar products in the local market. The assumption was that visitors would be willing (for clothing items and souvenirs at least) to pay a premium for buying the tourist items while within the PA itself.

While product development was considered attractive and modern (shorts, hats, etc.), sales of these clothing souvenirs was extremely low. The same was true for sales of English and Bangla hiking guides, PA visitor guides and similar written materials. It became apparent over the period that visitors perceived that they could get the “same stuff” in the local market (e.g., a hat) for much less than the Nishorgo hat being sold in the PA, and so were unwilling to pay extra for it. The same perspective applied to other products. Written products were also considered too expensive to be sold sustainably.

As the Nishorgo project was ending, work was under way to put in place an initial single concession to a private supply firm to sell tourist items directly to the CMOs, and to redesign Nishorgo-branded products to more market-friendly specifications. A similar process was under way to identify a private re-supplier of the written Nishorgo materials (trail guides, etc.). It remains to be seen if these concessions and tourist products will be financially viable.



The CMO shop at Teknaf GR guest house. [Quamrul Ahsan]

By 2006, the need for more common tourist items, especially simple refreshments (tea, chips, etc.) arose, especially at Satchuri NP and Lawachara NP. In the interests of ensuring benefits for those directly involved in protection (in this case the Community Patrol Group members), the right to establish such small tea shops in the core zones was unofficially allotted to the patrol groups themselves, or their immediate relatives. Community tourist tea shops have operated for two years now at Satchuri NP and Lawachara

NP, and are generating considerable benefits for ethnic minority community members, including patrollers. However, the terms of establishing these stores and their responsibilities to the PA itself, have not yet been sufficiently clarified. The store managers have generally not paid sufficient effort to litter collection, nor have they allocated a portion of profits to the CMO for conservation work.

In 2008, proposals were made by all eight of the CMO for using Nishorgo Landscape Development Fund grant resources to increase the number of such community-managed tourist tea shops. All these shops were blocked by the relevant DFOs on the grounds that there was no precedent for anyone from outside the Government putting in place community constructed and operated stores on Government land. This issue is still being addressed.

Picnic Sites

The pressure of picnic parties during the winter season has grown steadily in the past three years. In this period on any Saturday morning in the dry season, 6-8 buses arrive at the entrance to Lawachara National Park, each with 50-70 people going to a group picnic. The need for designated picnic sites outside the core zone of PAs has been evident for some time, but it has taken longer to implement this and to recognize the enterprise service opportunities associated with this tourist demand.

On a cross-visit to West Bengal State in India in 2006, several members of the CMOs observed community-operated picnic sites outside PAs (where communities kept the areas clean and provide cooking services). A number of these sites were managed by local women. This experience helped in stimulating greater interest in Bangladesh.

Accordingly, picnic sites have been identified, prepared and numbered around the fringe of Lawachara National Park while sites have been identified in nature tourism plans for other sites. Tickets have been allocated for the pre-designated picnic sites just outside the PA, allowing picnickers to come back inside the core zones in smaller groups.

In spite of these efforts, the management of picnic sites for community and visitor benefit has not developed quickly. Obstacles to the growth of this enterprise have been principally the combination of lack of interest by the CMOs and lack of support by the FD, again because of reticence to allow communities to benefit from activities within the boundaries of either Reserve Forest or Protected Areas. CMOs have been less interested in this particular activity, it appears, because the elite members of those Committees do not see any way they can benefit from them, as the service is to be provided by lower-income stakeholders. Additionally, strong enforcement structures required to direct picnic groups (often better educated young people from national universities) outside core zones to designated picnic sites are not yet in place.

Operation of Student Dormitories

The construction plans for Nishorgo called for five 10-14 bed Student Dormitories, one at each of the Nishorgo pilot sites. The objective was to provide an additional means of engaging both young students and researchers as partners to Nishorgo. As the Project progressed, it was recognized that such dormitories would be extremely difficult for the Forest Department

to maintain (because of the lack of a maintenance allocation in FD revenue budget and the difficulty for FD accepting fees for accommodation outside the official Government rules). Accordingly, it was proposed to have the dormitories operated by the CMOs themselves – or their delegates – so as to provide accommodation for youth groups in a way that would also generate income for the community.

The first CMO to take over a dormitory was the Teknaf CMO, which received authority to manage the Mochoni Student Dormitory in July 2008. Other dormitories were intended to be handed to CMOs when completed. It is too early to assess whether this enterprise will be viable, but could become an important example of the Government engaging community members in a public-private partnership aimed at generating benefits from the PAs at the same time as service provision is improved.

Community-based Nature Tourism Planning

Lessons have been progressively learned concerning the process of engaging communities in nature tourism planning. When Nishorgo began, it was envisioned that project staff would work with sections of the communities to facilitate joint community-based nature tourism planning.

It became apparent over time, however, that such community-based planning approaches were neither appropriate nor feasible for Nishorgo-associated communities. Most importantly, members of the CMOs in the pilot PAs had little idea of what nature tourism might mean, and how they might benefit from it. They did not see many visitors to the PAs, and thus had no idea what sorts of future interest might be expressed for service industries. They were so unfamiliar with the possibilities (not having seen it anywhere), that initial sessions conducted on such planning were not sufficiently grounded to provide a basis to get started. The second major obstacle to community-based tourism planning was the difficulty of screening and including those that were more likely to be actual entrepreneurs.



Two week long training program for Assistant Conservators of Forests (ACF) on “Development of Eco-tourism Micro Plans for Protected Forest Areas” held by Nishorgo Support Project. [Md. Tarek Murshed]

These two problems affected the initial startup of small nature tourism enterprises. Once those enterprises did start up (cottages, sale items, etc.), then a new and more complicated problem presented itself: setting the framework at a given PA for what enterprises within that PA would be allowed and encouraged. This second planning problem directly involved the government, since it would be government that would approve or reject proposals to undertake community enterprises in the PAs.

Recognizing this need, and the lack of planning interest and capacity on the part of the CMOs themselves, the Nishorgo Support Project organized a dedicated 10-day intensive “Nature Tourism Micro-Planning” Course in 2007. The course, designed for Assistant Conservators of Forests, allowed framework micro-plans to be developed for each of the pilot PAs. Such planning has helped to set the stage for communities themselves to more organically and fluidly engage in enterprise development around (and sometimes inside) the PAs. To date, by stimulating a number of specific nature tourism enterprises, the Project is putting in place the tangible awareness of potential that will help the communities to more clearly reflect on what they would, and would not, like to see from the area in the future.

Lessons Learned

A number of general lessons can be drawn from the process under Nishorgo of stimulating growth in nature tourism enterprises in ways consistent with conservation of the Nishorgo pilot PAs.

The special challenge at PA sites is to increase the community revenues from tourism without compromising the environment. Nishorgo’s experience to date has shown that increasing the number of tourists is easy. Put up some trails and a nice visitor center and toilets, and publicize the site, and the people will come. But increasing visitation – as Satchuri NP and Lawachara NP have shown – does not directly lead to greater benefits for the local community nor to more effective conservation. In the future, planners need to reflect carefully on the type of tourist that is being attracted to the PAs. In order for this process to work, the PA-level framework for nature tourism needs to be clearer and more rigidly enforced.

Review and approval of enterprise opportunities within PAs – including the framework plans for nature tourism development – needs to be led by experienced central FD staff members, preferably in partnership with experts from the nature tourism industry. Neither the CMO nor local Forest Department staff at PA level have the necessary experience in tourism operations to identify, review and approve opportunities within the sensitive confines of the PA itself. The trial operation of elephant rides within the core zone made it apparent that while attractive to the CMOs as an enterprise, the elephants had a negative impact on the environment in the way they were being operated. For such enterprise opportunities, it is essential to undertake careful planning including private tour operators along with senior FD staff in order to develop appropriate protocols to meet both conservation and benefits sharing needs. The nature tourism enterprise plans for each PA need careful vetting and input from a similarly high level of expertise.

It would be of great assistance to conservation if complementary nature tourism development planning processes were led by private tour operators, perhaps with involvement of Government tourism support agencies. Although Nishorgo pilot sites are now recognized by the leading nature tourism operators, visits to only some Nishorgo sites are part of advertised tourism circuits for different parts of the country. The development of new visiting circuits requires a process led by the tour operators themselves, ideally with involvement of regional or national tourism agencies. While forays were made in engaging the Parjatan Corporation (Government tourism agency) under Nishorgo, it became clear that Parjatan is almost exclusively engaged

in visits by foreigners to Bangladesh rather than in internal tourism, which is the primary target group for growth under Nishorgo. Regional private tourism support organizations such as that of Sylhet Division may be a more productive partner. In any case, the Forest Department needs to recognize that it has neither the expertise nor the time to support this larger circuit planning and tourism planning process without leadership from private sector operators.

The need for leadership by tourism sector specialists is nowhere more evident than in the future growth of the Nishorgo Eco-Cottage network. One of the lessons emerging from the eco-cottage development process is the recognition that, when it comes to designing, building and operating such “bed and breakfast” type accommodation facilities, every person involved considers him- or herself an expert, including those NGO and FD staff that have been involved. Progress on the construction and finalization of the cottages proceeded most effectively once they had advice from individuals (e.g., ex-employees of Guide Tours and staff of the Radisson Hotel) with real practical experience in the tourism sector.

A more systematic effort is required to orient PA visitors to the necessity of supporting local enterprises. The vast majority of visitors to Nishorgo pilot sites understand that they are visiting a Government-owned facility. With this assumption, it is commonly believed that access to and use of the site should be either free or nearly free. Fees for services offered at the Nishorgo PAs have been a complaint of many tourists. While revealed willingness to pay for PA visitation is high (as revealed through actual travel costs), the stated willingness to pay for basic services is extremely low (Haque and Bakht 2008). The assumption of most visitors is that forests belong to the Government, and the Government should allow us to use them for free, or for only small payments. This attitude of entitlement undermines the community’s efforts to charge fair prices for providing those services that can sustain the PAs. In the future, greater efforts can be made to state clearly to visitors that they are expected to pay fair rates for services, not only entry fees but other services as well (eco-guides, elephant rides, etc.).

CMOs need to shift focus from direct operation of tourism enterprises to concession management. During the Nishorgo pilot, the CMOs have shown much more interest in operating enterprises themselves rather than allowing other local stakeholders to operate. The focus of the CMOs needs to shift towards allocating clear concession agreements with local stakeholders to operate tourism enterprises, rather than trying to manage operations themselves. As part of these agreements, the CMOs need to negotiate fair and strong clauses for benefiting from a percentage of the enterprise revenues or profits. During Nishorgo, the CMOs did not pay much attention to negotiating agreements with elephant ride operators. CMOs generally showed little interest in those enterprises that they managed directly (e.g., sales of tourist items).

CMOs must perceive nature tourism enterprise opportunities as a central strategy for their own sustainable financing. Generally, the CMO members have not recognized that tourism enterprise growth in and around PAs can provide a significant boost to cover future CMO operational costs. The CMOs are providing a protected forest to entrepreneurs, and should be justly compensated for that service. In the pilot, this was done through agreements with entrepreneurs under which they were to provide a percentage of revenues to the CMOs. To date, the CMOs have been weak in enforcing these agreements.

Establish still more clearly within the FD that Co-Management Organizations – and associated stakeholders – have a basic right to benefit from forest conservation through nature tourism enterprises undertaken in core PA areas. Throughout the Forest Department, the perspective remains common that their role is to keep people out of the PAs. One corollary to this is an unwillingness to allow any economic activity within Government lands, including community-based nature tourism enterprises. This unwillingness was translated into cancellation or slowing of a number of community enterprise activities under Nishorgo. As a result, CMOs are now hesitant to even propose services that might be offered within the PAs. And yet, without a clear understanding that the community can benefit from conservation – including with managed enterprises in core zones – then conservation is not likely to succeed. Of course, the location, type and number of enterprises should be consistent with a conservation based PA management plan agreed by all members of the respective CMO, but the first and most urgent challenge is to make the local poorer CMO members understand categorically that they and the people they represent have a right to benefit from conservation enterprises and other prescribed activities, and for the CMO as a whole to see enterprises as a way of generating funds to protect and manage their PA.

Any enterprises affecting, or involving, ethnic minorities should be developed by those minority groups alone, without outside interference. We have noted under Nishorgo a readiness by those outside the ethnic community to propose new enterprises involving the minorities, even when those minorities do not support the idea. It was proposed that ethnic dance groups be formed at one site, although that community was not consulted. It was proposed that Eco-Cottages might be developed within another community, but that community later rejected the idea. For cultural reasons unique to these areas, it is particularly important to give primacy of voice to the ethnic minority groups themselves in developing any tourism enterprises.

Conclusions

Under Nishorgo, it has been demonstrated that nature tourism can create real and tangible opportunities for members of neighboring communities to benefit directly from their conservation efforts. While the concept of a number of new enterprises has been successfully demonstrated, much less progress has taken place in having the CMOs recognize the importance of these enterprises for their own future sustainability, and in putting in place a disciplined and clear framework under which such enterprises are conducted.

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