

Ministry of Environment and Forests  
Forest Department,  
Bangladesh

# **Strategic Management Plan for the Sundarbans Reserved Forest**

Prepared with Assistance from United States Forest Service

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## Preface

This Strategic Management Plan (SMP) for the Sundarbans Reserved Forest (SRF) is the result of numerous discussions and meetings between staff of the Bangladesh Forest Department (FD), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United States Forest Service (USFS), and Integrated Protected Area Co-Management Project Staff (IPAC). These discussions led to the identification of a need for a strategic framework that will guide the development of a more detailed Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP). This SMP was developed over the past 5 months with the technical assistance provided by a Forest Planner from the USFS, through a consultative process that included (1) a review of the available information and issues affecting the management of the Sundarbans; (2) Field visits to the SRF as well as other forested areas under co-management; (3) Meetings with stakeholders in and around the SRF as well as stakeholders in Dhaka; (4) Meetings with FD staff; and (5) Formal public meetings in Khulna and at the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

The consultation process included a wide range of interests involved and interested in the SRF. The participants in the public meeting in Khulna were from different stakeholders including personnel from administration of division, district and Upazila level, GOB departments of Forest, fisheries and environment, Khulna University, journalists, NGOs, projects working in Sundarbans, law enforcement authority, coast guards and public representatives. The consultation process concluded with a briefing and discussion with the Joint Secretary from the Ministry of Environment and Forest and his staff.

In addition, Wildlife Trust for Bangladesh/Sundarbans Tiger Project provided written comments on a draft SMP. While not all of their comments are reflected in this document, the input was of great assistance in helping to shape the overall strategic vision.

Finally, this document would not have been possible without the engagement of Forest Department staff. For the past 5 months, Forest Department staff has been available and willing to participate in the development of this SMP. Most notably, Mr Ishtiaq Uddin Ahmad (CF) provided countless hours of support and counsel in its development. In addition, thanks are due to Bob Winterbottom, Chief of Party-IPAC Project who consistently provided vision and counsel to see this SMP to its completion.

## **Why a Strategic Management Plan for the Sundarbans?**

The current Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP, 1998) for the Sundarbans Reserved Forest was developed for the years 1998-2010 and is in need of revision. In addition, the Forest Master Plan that was developed in 1993 to cover the periods 1993-2012 did not provide sufficient scope to provide guidance to address the current issues the FD faces in managing the Sundarbans. Climate change, recreation and tourism, co-management, biodiversity conservation, and carbon financing are a few of the issues for which the FD lacks specific direction for incorporating into its current management practices.

One of the major conclusions from a consultative meeting on the conservation and co-management of the Sundarbans organized April 18, 2009 in Khulna was that a more effective plan was needed to conserve the Sundarbans. At that meeting, the Ministry of Environment and Forests noted the need to develop and adapt a separate approach for co-management of the unique ecosystem of the Sundarbans. In addition, the project design document for the Sundarbans Environmental And Livelihoods Security (SEALS) project underscored the need for “a major re-think in the basic strategy of its management” (p. 89, Final Report, Appendix 9, February 2009).

This Strategic Management Plan is intended to provide insight into the overall direction that the Forest Department intends to follow in developing the IRMP for the Sundarbans Reserved Forest. The desired conditions and goals outlined in this Strategic Plan will be the conditions and goals that will have corresponding management direction developed in detail in the revised IRMP. The various program direction (vegetation management, fisheries management, recreation and tourism, etc) and any necessary land use suitability determinations and management area reclassifications will be based upon moving towards compliance with the desired condition and goals described in this Strategic Forest Plan.

## **A Brief Description of the Sundarbans Reserved Forest (SRF) and Sundarbans Impact Zone (SIZ)**

The Sundarbans is the largest contiguous mangrove forest remaining in the world. A biologically diverse ecosystem, dynamic and complex, it has been used by mankind for generations. Some 60% of the forest is in Bangladesh and 40% in India. The portion in Bangladesh was declared the Sundarbans Reserved Forest (SRF) in the 1870's and is managed by the Forest Department (FD) of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). The SRF constitutes 52% of the forest estate of the country and contributes about 41% of the total forest revenue. Apart from providing timber and firewood resources, it is a source of food, fish, medicinal plants, crustaceans, palm leaves, honey, wax and shells, as well as increasing recreation and tourism demand. It provides the last remaining wildlife habitat for some species, notably for the Royal Bengal Tiger. The area is internationally recognized under the Ramsar and World Heritage conventions,

to which Bangladesh is a signatory. The area includes three wildlife sanctuaries encompassing approximately 140,000 hectares and these wildlife sanctuaries have been declared a ‘World Heritage site’ by UNESCO in 1997.

The SMP and the IRMP for the SRF will take account of uses and pressures on the SRF originating with human populations residing in the so-called Sundarbans Impact Zone (SIZ) as well as recognize that influences (water flow, water quality ) from beyond the SIZ also need to be addressed with the appropriate Ministries and Departments in order to address effects upon the SRF. The people who depend upon the SRF resources for a significant proportion of their livelihoods live in the SIZ, a band extending 20km outside the SRF boundary. The SIZ area comprises 5 districts and 17 upazilas thereof, which are as follows.

### **Sundarbans Impact Zone Areas**

District	UZ
Bagerhat	Rampal, Mongla, Morrelganj, Sharankhola
Khulna	Daccop, Koyra, Paikgacha, Batiaghata
Satkhira	Shymnagar, Assasuni, Kaliganj
Pirojpur	Matbaria, Bhandaria
Barguna	Patharghata, Bamna, Barguna Sadar
ALL (5 Dist)	17 (UZ)

When one considers the populations from portions of a few additional upazillas that fall within 20km of the SRF boundary, the estimated population for the SIZ is likely to exceed 3 million (p. 7, World Bank Concept Note).

The SRF serves as coastal protection from cyclones and tidal surges. The SRF interfaces with cultivated lands intersected by tidal rivers, canals and streams. The waves and tides with changes in water depth and its biochemical constituents, and fresh water from rivers are the basis on which life and ecosystems depend. The SRF also represents the largest single carbon asset pool for the GOB to market in carbon markets. Timber

harvested from the SRF has in the past been a major resource, but currently a logging ban is in place. A variety of non-timber forest products such as honey, wax, medicinal plants, golpata, cane, and grass are extracted from the SRF. The 12000 km of river in the SRF produce a large quantity of fish, shrimp, and crabs. In addition, the Bay of Bengal is home to an important marine fishing industry whose stocks originate in the Sundarbans.

The ecological importance of the SRF is associated with its rich biodiversity and the ecosystem's valuable ecological services. It is estimated that the SRF is home to 425 species of wildlife, including 300 species of birds and 42 species of mammals. The area serves a vital role in a variety of ecosystem functions including (1) trapping of sediment and land formation, (2) protection of human lives and habitation from regular cyclones, (3) acting as a nursery for fish and other aquatic life, (4) oxygen production, (5) waste recycling, (6) timber production, (7) supply of food and building materials, and (8) carbon cycling (Biswas et al. 2007; Islam and Peterson 2008).. These functions are increasingly at risk from the effects associated with climate change and sea level rise. The ecological importance of the SRF has been recognized and its conservation and management an obligation under a number of international treaties and conventions to which Bangladesh is signatory.

## **Resources Trends and Major Threats**

There is no shortage of documentation that describes the concerns related to the sustainability of the resources within the Sundarbans. However, for the most part, the documentation has not conclusively determined the trend information for many of the key habitats, resources and populations. For management purposes, the SRF has been delineated into four ranges and 55 compartments, guarded by over 90 FD posts. The Sundarbans is classified as a Reserved Forest, in which some forms of resource extraction are allowed, but it is illegal for anyone to live, cultivate land, or graze livestock in the forest. To ensure additional protection for wildlife habitat and natural resources, three areas within the forest have been designated as Wildlife Sanctuaries: Sundarbans West (715 km<sup>2</sup>), Sundarbans South (370 km<sup>2</sup>), and Sundarbans East (312 km<sup>2</sup>). These Wildlife Sanctuaries are closed to any extraction of vegetation or wildlife and have been collectively declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Fig. 3) (Iftekhara and Islam 2004).

The current management situation includes a moratorium on timber extraction. For fishing, recreation and non-timber forest products, the use is regulated through permits, fees, and forest patrols. Extraction is prohibited in the wildlife sanctuaries and rivers identified as key breeding grounds have been restricted as well. A systematic monitoring and evaluation was identified in the 1998 IRMP to ensure timber and non-timber forest products were being maintained but the inventory was not implemented. Currently, a monitoring and evaluation framework is not being implemented to ensure

that resource conditions and uses are within sustainable limits. Given the combination of the intense demand for the resources of the SRF, unsustainable management practices (e.g., shrimp fry collection, use of poison for fishing), the lack of adequate forest protection, lack of appropriate monitoring and evaluation information, and rising sea levels and increased salinity associated with climate change, it is reasonable to assume that the current and continued extraction represents a significant threat to the ecological sustainability of the SRF as well as to the economic and social conditions of the communities who depend upon the SRF.

In the past 15 years, land use in the SIZ has been affected by a significant transformation from rice-based farming systems to shrimp aquaculture, with numerous adverse social and environmental effects, including increased pressure from non-sustainable extraction of resources from the Sundarbans (World Bank, Draft Concept Note on Climate Change Adaptation, Biodiversity Conservation and Socio-economic sustainable development for the Sundarbans Area of Bangladesh, Feb, 2010, p. 11). However, some Districts have recognized the adverse economic and ecological effects of these practices and restricted further shrimp aquaculture.

The Sundarbans ecosystem is extremely important both ecologically and economically as a nursery and breeding area for key fisheries including those of the Bay of Bengal. In recent years, concerns have been voiced by fishermen over the apparent declining stocks and productivity of fisheries in and around the Sundarbans. There are also indications of widespread illegal collection of crustacean larvae. Although there is inadequate monitoring of fish stocks, fishermen have noted that they are spending more time and effort to capture fewer and smaller fish. The resource conditions as well as increasing numbers of resource users are a condition that must be reconciled.

The increasing demand for recreation and tourism activities is expected to continue and a system for more effective administration of these activities is necessary. The revenues associated with these activities represent a significant opportunity for community organizations and to increase awareness of the ecological importance of the SRF.

According to Bangladesh's Tiger Action Plan 2009-2017, the Sundarbans mangrove forests support one of the largest populations of tigers in the world with an estimated 300-500 tigers. Among many of the factors affecting the tiger populations worldwide, tigers are also threatened in Bangladesh by direct loss, prey depletion, and habitat degradation. These threats may not be as significant in the Sundarbans ecosystem but still exist to a certain degree. Tigers are directly threatened by poaching to supply the increasing demand for tiger products. In addition, Bangladesh suffers high levels of tiger-human conflict, manifested in human-killing, livestock depredation, and ultimately the retribution killings of tigers by affected local communities.

## Vision for the Future-Desired Management Condition

The IRMP developed in 1998 included a long term vision for the SRF. While many of the previous descriptions are still appropriate, there are changes needed or further emphases needed to better reflect the current situation. The following vision statements are proposed by the Forest Department as the long term vision for the management of the SRF:

- The Sundarbans shall continue to provide subsistence resources at a level in which the sustainability of the resource is ensured, though emphases will be on reducing dependency and improving current management practices.
- Traditional users will acquire a greater awareness and shared responsibility and a share in the financial benefits as a result of co-managing the resources and will act accordingly to help conserve them.
- The Forest Department will involve local people in SRF management.
- The FD will develop its capacity including infrastructure, logistics and technical capacities and seek technical assistance where appropriate in SRF management.
- Development and efficient operation of alternative income enterprises in the SIZ will help depress the demand for resources currently obtained from the Sundarbans Reserved Forest.
- Wildlife resources will prosper throughout the SRF where populations will thrive at optimum carrying capacity. The SRF landscape will be managed to ensure that essential ecological services are maintained. The wildlife sanctuaries will be managed to provide secure habitat for wildlife resources.
- Specific sites, infrastructure and routes in designated areas of the SRF will be developed and/or maintained to provide for quality ecotourism experiences.
- In order to take advantage of the increasing tourism, the Forest Department will seek public/private partnerships consistent with the guidelines and principles established by the GOB to improve the ecotourism services and facilities.

- The effects anticipated to result from climate change will be recognized and adaptive management strategies developed and implemented in order to ensure the maintenance of ecosystem goods and services.
- Restoration and maintenance of essential ecological functions including restoring streamflows will be recognized.
- The Sundarbans, as the largest contiguous mangrove system in the world and befitting its world heritage site designation, will become the international recognized example of collaborative management of a mangrove ecosystem, with provisions for sustainable financing for more effective conservation efforts in the SRF in tandem with a broad range of programs supporting poverty reduction and sustainable socio-economic development in the SIZ.

## **Emerging Opportunities and Anticipated Demands**

The Sundarbans Environmental and Livelihoods Security (SEALS, 2009-2013) project, the Integrated Protected Area Co-management (IPAC, 2008-2013), the World Bank non-lending technical assistance, in combination with the full support of the GOB MoEF and Forest Department provide an opportunity to address some of the significant issues (forest and aquatic resource and habitat management, alternative income generation, resource dependency, tourism, climate change and sea level rise, upstream use of water resources, land use and demographic trends in the SIZ) that are currently affecting the SRF. Discussions are underway for reinforcing cooperation between Bangladesh and West Bengal / India with a view toward enhanced collaboration in the management of this globally important transboundary ecosystem. There is also the prospect of increased investment by the World Bank and others in the SIZ to help address the infrastructure needs and structural challenges inherent in the threats to the conservation of the Sundarbans.

Forest protection must respond to the modern means available to timber thieves and poachers with a protection strategy and equipment to match. A protection strategy that enlists the support of fringe communities for rational management to plug the gaps in the forest's defenses will have a far greater chance of success than the present confrontational approach. A change of protection strategy is required, backed with a substantial improvement in operating conditions for FD staff, particularly those who actually implement policy – those actively operating on patrol, etc. Co-management committees must be empowered in order to play a more active role in establishing adequate enforcement of protection and management provisions. Involving the communities in these decisions and giving them a stake or share of the benefits is expected to result in higher levels of ownership and compliance.

The GOB and the FD stands ready to capitalize on the continued successful management of the Sunderbans. Global carbon markets have the potential to assist in a sustainable financing mechanism for the management of the Sunderbans. This Strategic Plan followed up by the revised Integrated Resource Management Plan are expected to be the basis for developing carbon market financing proposals and could help to reinforce the important role of the Sunderbans in mitigating and adapting to global climate change.

The continued and increasing demand for recreation and tourism in and around the Sunderbans is an opportunity for the FD to showcase its world class management situation. Integrating communities into co-management systems, combined with international carbon financing, tourism revenue, and species and habitat protection and education represents an outstanding opportunity to secure sustainable financing for the long term conservation of the Sunderbans ecosystem.

In addition, the conservation programs envisioned by the Strategic Plan and adopted in the revised IRMP are expected to result in a more formal approach to achieving long-term conservation of tigers and other threatened and endangered species in Bangladesh. The SMP and IRMP vision is to ensure protected tiger landscapes in the Sunderbans, where wild tigers thrive at optimum carrying capacities and by doing so the essential ecological products and services available in the SRF are sustained.

## **Necessary Strategic Management Shifts**

In order to begin moving in the direction of the desired condition, it is envisioned that the Forest Department will embrace the following management strategies:

- To an agency with the capacity to plan, implement and monitor a biodiversity conservation and resource management program that includes subsistence use of its natural resources.
- To participatory, collaborative approaches to management with increased coordination and cooperation with Dept of Fisheries, Coast Guard, other agencies, local government, private sector, local communities, tour operators, etc.
- To mobilization of sustainable financing for conservation through innovative mechanisms and partnerships.
- To a management system and approach that embraces new opportunities and needs related to tourism, recreation, biodiversity conservation, sustainable livelihood, carbon sequestration and other ecosystem services.

- To an emphasis on co-management and facilitation of responsible stewardship by concerned stakeholders.
- To a forest protection strategy that improves FD patrolling, monitoring, staffing, work incentives and staff living conditions.
- To a framework that reinforces participatory governance and equitable benefit sharing.
- To a system based on upgraded equipment provisions and improved human resource utilization designed to efficiently ensure more effective protection and support for participatory, collaborative management and conservation.
- To a system of financial and economic incentives that support behavior change consistent with increased investment in Natural Resource Management, habitat restoration, long term increases in resources productivity and sustainable use.
- To a landscape scale management perspective that includes the entire SRF as well as considers the effects and impacts of the SIZ.

## **Goals for the Sundarbans Reserved Forests**

The shifts identified above are expected to contribute to the achievement of the following goals and objectives:

### **Goal 1. Restore, Sustain, and Enhance the Biodiversity of the Sundarbans Reserved Forest.**

**Outcome: Forest and Aquatic Resources with the capacity to maintain their health, productivity, diversity, and resistance to unnaturally severe disturbance.**

The Sundarbans Reserved Forest was established to protect the land, provide security for neighboring communities from catastrophic disturbances, and provide a sustainable supply of goods and services. Over the past century, the Forest Department has strived to achieve a balance between providing land stewardship services and meeting public demands for various uses of the Sundarbans. In recent years, people have become more aware of catastrophic disturbances such as Sidr and Aila and the role that the Sundarbans has in mitigating the effects of these disturbances on neighboring communities. The increasing extent and frequency of uncharacteristically severe cyclones and rising salinity have been of particular concern to the affected communities, the political administration, NGO's and the Forest Department. A much broader conservation program must be implemented in the SRF and led by the Forest Department, in order to ensure the ecosystem structure and processes are able to adapt to unnaturally severe disturbances and the anthropogenic pressures that are continually exerting

pressure on the ecosystem. Appropriate planning, capacity building and organizational changes must be recognized and planned for in order for biodiversity conservation, sustainable resource management, recreation, and co-management to become institutional throughout the FD in the SRF.

**Goal 2. Provide for a variety of subsistent uses, values, benefits, products, and services, while ensuring the sustainable supply of these resources for future generations.**

**Outcome: Extraction of resources is managed on the basis of sustainability through the consultation of best available science and stakeholders.**

This strategic goal focuses on the portion of the Ministry of Environment and Forest's mission related to sustaining the productivity of the Sundarbans to meet the needs of present and future generations. The Sundarbans Reserved Forest contain abundant natural resources and opportunities that help meet the demands and needs of the Bangladeshi people. Sustainable management of these resources ensures that the availability of goods and services continues into the future and that land productivity is maintained.

The forest reserves that formed the base of the Sundarbans were created in 1875 for the purposes of regulating the yield of forest products. Human habituation has been prohibited in the reserve. The Bangladesh Wildlife Preservation Act 1973 provided for the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries where extraction of resources is not allowed. Forest and fisheries management provides a variety of use opportunities while maintaining wildlife diversity, supplies of wood products, energy sources and, wildlife forage, water supplies, and other goods and services.

Primarily through the direction outlined in the Integrated Resource Management Plan and implemented through permit administration, community co-management, and forest protection strategies, the Forest Department provides for natural resource management and the sustainable use of resources within the Sundarbans Reserved Forest. International technical assistance is also provided. Research provides a solid scientific foundation for the sustainable management of forests and aquatic resources and improvements in the use and marketing of forest products and services.

**Goal 3. Provide for and enhance tourism and recreation opportunities.**

**Outcome: Tourism revenues are sufficient to provide enhanced alternative incomes as well as provide for increased emphases on biodiversity conservation.**

The Forest Department is challenged with sustaining sufficient quality and quantity of tourism and recreational experiences to meet the Nation's needs while maintaining the ecological integrity of the Sundarbans Reserved Forest and associated Protected Areas. The Nation's population is projected to continue to increase. The combination of increasing populations and the continued increase in demand for its recreational and tourism experiences creates extensive pressure on Forest Department to provide more and improved recreational opportunities.

If the Sundarbans Reserved Forest is to provide additional recreational benefits without unacceptable resource impacts, we must emphasize effective management solutions that have a

solid scientific and financial foundation. The condition of the land (especially the habitat for the keynote species-Royal Bengal Tiger), recreation facilities, and transportation infrastructure, must be considered if we expect to preserve and enhance recreation experiences. Coordination with partners, nongovernmental organizations, other agencies, and the private sector is essential to achieve acceptable results.

**Goal 4. Support and improve participatory co-management approaches for the activities taking place in the SRF.**

**Outcome: The Forest Department facilitates and engages with SIZ communities and stakeholders in determining appropriate management practices and financial benefits.**

The strategy of the Forest Department in the SRF must change from its current strategy of forest protection to one that works in collaboration with communities and stakeholders to achieve its conservation and custodial responsibilities. The CMC's, in collaboration with FD, develop and implement management plans and annual operating plans as well as ensuring forest resources are protected.

## **Management Principles**

The strategic plan outlined above is guided by the understanding of the relationships of the different types of planning. The types of planning are defined below:

- *Strategic planning* takes place at the highest level and identifies strategic priorities identified by the GOB and the Forest Department that are implemented over a period of time through annual agency budgets, foreign assistance and non-government organization assistance. These priorities reflect social, economic and ecological conditions and trends as well as lessons learned from previous management direction. The strategic priorities are responsive to the goals outlined in the Forestry Master Plan (1993-2012).
- *IRMP planning* (e.g., an adaptive and integrated land and resource management plan for the Sundarbans) provides an inventory of resources, and specific management direction and land use classification (ie., Tiger Action Plan) for particular resources and/.or areas. This information, coupled with the desired future condition for the resources, is the basis for permitting resource extraction, annual work planning and budgeting and projections over a 10-15 year timeframe. The IRMP Planning for the SRF is expected to integrate the various resource management plans, land use zoning, prescriptions and best management practices. The IRMP planning should be considered as an adaptive or "living" document with necessary amendments (i.e., Cetacean Action Plan,) to be included after the appropriate involvement of communities and other stakeholders. IRMP planning consists of resource-specific goals, objectives, management guidelines, management area delineations and suitability determinations, and monitoring and evaluation criteria.

- *Annual Development planning* identifies the projects proposed for funding within a fiscal year. This level of planning involves the final application of strategic direction into a unit's annual budget to move its resources toward its desired future condition.

## **Adoption and Implementation of the Sundarbans SMP**

Following the review and revision of the draft SMP by the Forest Department in consultation with key stakeholders, it has been finalized for adoption by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. It is being made available to key stakeholders in Bangla, and will be made accessible on the web ([www.nishorgo.org](http://www.nishorgo.org)) and shared with local communities and the leadership of co-management organizations now being formed.

The SMP has been prepared to guide the preparation and implementation of the SRF Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP) for the period of 2010-2020. The IRMP will include further assessments of the conditions and trends of the resources within the SRF and an elaboration of appropriate spatial and resource specific management directions needed to address the desired conditions and goals described above. The IRMP assessments and associated management directions, guidelines and best practices are expected to integrate climate change considerations, changes in salinity regimes (resulting from further water development projects), reduced freshwater inflows, increased sedimentation rates into the plan direction and address projected future scenarios and necessary management implications and changes if these continue to occur.

The IRMP is expected to be prepared over the next 9-12 months by a multi-disciplinary team of resource specialists. The IRMP specialist team will work closely with the Forest Dept, and also consult with the Dept of Fisheries, Khulna University, research organizations, interested NGOS, projects and other stakeholders and resource persons. In addition to making use of the large body of existing studies and information about the Sundarbans, including the existing IRMP prepared in 1998 as its basis, the preparation of the IRMP would incorporate additional information being generated by the ongoing carbon pool assessment and forest inventory, a study of the principal marketed value chains derived from the SRF, a study of the fisheries resources of the Sundarbans, a SWOT analysis of ecotourism development opportunities in the Sundarbans, the preparation of the Infrastructure Master Plan for the SRF (with assistance from the US Forest Service), as well as the Protection Assessment and other recent studies funded by the EU in connection with the preparation of the SEALS project, as well as recent research on cetacean biodiversity compiled by WCS/BCDP and on tigers by the WTB/Tiger Action Plan team. The IRMP will make provision for coordination among the different agencies and stakeholders committed to the conservation of the Sundarbans, and will be vetted by the appropriate authorities prior to its final approval.

