

Sitakunda Eco Park

Sitakunda Eco Park (SEP), established in 2001, is situated under the Chittagong District. The botanical garden and eco-park area, comprising 808 ha, consists of a multitude of hills ranging from 25 meters to 400 meters. The popular religious site of the Chandranth Mondir (Temple) is also located on one of these hills, attracting many devotees and tourists. Home to many gushing waterfalls, the Eco Park was developed for the set purpose of conserving biodiversity and encouraging tourism.

Biodiversity

The terrain is undulating with natural forests of rich diversity in flora & fauna, and numerous creeks and streams. This eco-park also houses a nursery and a garden with roses of varied kinds, hybrid and natural ones. The nurseries contain around 412 exotic plant species, 156 tree species, 110 kinds of Shrubs, 119 different herbs, 27 types of Climber and Bamboo species, various orchids and cactus plants. Akasmoni *Acacia auriculiformis* is the dominant tree species along with its associate, namely Chalmorga *Taraktogenes kurzii*. Other important wild life includes Jungle Cat *Felis chaus*.

Local communities

SEP is surrounded by settlements of Bangali and Tripura communities, of about 14,612 households. The communities reside on the outskirts of the Eco-park area and over the years since its inception, have lessened their dependency on the park's resources considerably. They mainly engage in homestead gardening, horticulture and aquaculture based activities. During religious festivals, they are somewhat dependent upon the tourism generated from the visitors to the renowned Chandranath Mondir, a Hindu temple situated on the northern range of hills.

Park Threats

SEP faces a range of threats, a major one being the presence of ship breaking industries in the vicinity. They have adversely impacted the Eco-park and its surrounding landscape and the levels of pollution have escalated over the years. Other threats include illegal felling, forest fires, livestock grazing, forestland encroachment, and timber extraction for home and commercial use. Conservation of the sanctuary requires effective co-management initiatives between the local communities, amongst themselves as well as with Government and forest officials.

Nishorgo Network

SEP is a valued member of the Nishorgo Network, Bangladesh's growing group of forest and wetland Protected Areas (PAs) being conserved through co-management. Co-management brings together community, government and other stakeholders to work together to conserve Bangladesh's rich natural heritage and eco-system services in a manner that contributes to long-term sustainable development, increased food security, and integrated climate change adaptation and mitigation. Nishorgo Network co-management shares roles and responsibilities between communities and government, demonstrating economic benefits of PA conservation to local communities through eco-tourism and sustainable alternative income generation activities, as well as by actively involving them in conservation management of PAs through participation in co-management organizations and joint patrol initiatives. The Nishorgo Network actively engages women, youth and ethnic minorities in co-management, and provides a foundation of good governance.

Co-Management and Sitakunda Eco Park:

Sitakunda Eco Park is a leader of co-management for effective conservation, with support from USAID's Integrated Protected Area Co-Management (IPAC) project implemented in collaboration with the Government of Bangladesh's Ministry of Environment and Forests and Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock. Co-management highlights in SEP include the following:

- Formation and re-election of Village Conservation Forums (VCFs); and Peoples' Forum (PF).
- Development of eco-tourism support for SEP, including training a cadre of eco-guides from local communities as well as the establishment of eco-cottages near the Eco-Park.
- Supporting the setting up of shops by the resident populace to boost locally prepared products and contribute to alternative income generation.
- Alternative Livelihoods Development training and support for SEP-dependent communities, including sustainable value chain support and MoUs between local communities and national buyers in both fisheries and handicrafts.
- Training and capacity building as well as leveraging additional financial support to sustain effective co-management of SEP conservation into the future.

USAID's Integrated Protected Area Co-management (IPAC) Project has initiated several interventions to reverse the trends that are degrading the biodiversity of SEP. Some of which include:

- To maintain a rich gene pool of flora and fauna for the purpose of conserving biodiversity while supporting infrastructural developments to encourage students, teachers, researchers and visitors alike to visit the Eco-Park.
- Facilitating the level of competency demonstrated by the FD officials, in association with local authorities occupied in forest management.
- Escalating co-management concerns and PA approaches with importance and support given to the concerned ministry and departments to raise competence.
- 1 PF to be formed who will work alongside the 10 VCF already functioning.
- Initiating a plan to establish Nishorgo Conservation Clubs to further raise awareness amongst the people living in the region.
- In a bid to initiate the process of alternate income generating (AIG) activities via eco-tourism, training 10 eco-guides to accompany visitors along the set Park trails.
- To further boost eco-tourism, a session for upcoming entrepreneurs will be conducted to encourage them to build eco-cottages for tourists to the Eco-Park and its environs.