

Transforming Perception into Reality: Establishing a Sustainable Tourism Framework in Bangladesh

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Abstract: *This study explores tourists' perceptions of sustainable tourism in Bangladesh, focusing on infrastructure, environmental management, community involvement, and sustainability awareness. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with domestic and international tourists who visited popular destinations, like Cox's Bazar, the Sundarbans, and Srimangal, provides valuable insights. Thematic analysis identifies recurring themes and patterns in the data. By coding interview transcripts and categorizing codes into broader themes, the results are interpreted in the context of existing literature. The analysis reveals key themes, including tourists' understanding of sustainability, their perceptions of tourism service quality, and the importance of local community involvement in tourism development. These findings shed light on the complexities of sustainable tourism in Bangladesh. It also offers a comprehensive analysis of their expectations, experiences, and recommendations for enhancement, yielding significant insights into the present condition of tourism in Bangladesh. It encompasses a thorough evaluation of current difficulties and prospective ideas for improving sustainable tourism. The conclusions and suggestions articulated in the study provide a basis for policymakers, tourism operators, and local communities to formulate more efficient sustainable tourism strategies. This study primarily examines tourists' impressions; however, future research could broaden its reach by including viewpoints from additional stakeholders, such as local people, government entities, and private sector operators.*

Introduction

Tourism has become a crucial catalyst for economic expansion worldwide, as both established and developing nations capitalize on their distinctive cultural, historical, and natural assets to draw visitors (Zheng et al., 2024; Salimullah, 2021). Sustainable

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tourism, characterized as a strategy framework that incorporates economic, social, and environmental factors, guarantees the enduring viability of tourism while mitigating adverse effects on local populations (Kyriakaki & Kleinaki, 2022). Although sustainable tourism is widely acknowledged as crucial, the execution of effective techniques continues to pose difficulties, especially in developing nations where immediate economic gains sometimes overshadow sustainability (Osborn et al., 2015). Bangladesh, a developing country with a growing tourism industry driven primarily by the private sector (Salimullah, 2021), boasts an array of natural and cultural attractions. Despite its potential, research has focused on economic benefits rather than tourists' opinions and experiences (Mondal, 2017; Bagchi et al., 2023). Limited studies have explored tourists' perceptions of specific destinations, such as Cox's Bazar (Prodip et al., 2013) and Kuakata (Sarker, Nahar & Asraf, 2023), leaving a gap in understanding tourists' perceptions of sustainable tourism in Bangladesh. This study aims to fill this gap through a literature review and empirical data collection via interviews with domestic and international tourists, using qualitative research methods to understand their perceptions of Bangladesh as a sustainable tourism destination. Ultimately, this study seeks to provide insights on how Bangladesh can enhance its tourism development plans in accordance with sustainability principles.

Review of Literature

Ecologically Responsible Travel

Sustainable tourism entails reconciling economic advantages with social equality and environmental conservation. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) delineates three fundamental pillars of sustainable tourism: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability (UNWTO, n.d.). Realizing these objectives necessitates cooperative endeavors from all parties involved, including local communities, policymakers, and tourists (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Sustainable tourist development in developing nations is frequently obstructed by resource scarcity, insufficient infrastructure, and ineffective governance (Fuest, 2023).

Tourism Sector and Economic Advancement

Tourism significantly impacts the global economy, accounting for 10.4% of global GDP and almost 10% of worldwide employment (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019). In Bangladesh, the tourism sector accounted for 4.7% of GDP in 2013 and is anticipated to expand at an annual rate of 6.4% by 2026 (Kobra et al., 2018). Notwithstanding its economic importance, sustainable tourism development is

relegated to a low priority, as most programs emphasize immediate economic benefits over long-term sustainability (Gössling, 2010).

Measurement of Sustainable Tourism

Measuring sustainable tourism is complex yet crucial for informed decision-making (Bell & Morse, 2008). Traditional evaluation approaches often yield inconsistent results (Huang, 2011), while sustainability indicators offer a reliable and adaptable assessment tool (Schianetz et al., 2007). However, data on environmental and cultural impacts is scarce, whereas economic data is more available (Bošković et al., 2019; Modica et al., 2018). Local community involvement in data collection and reporting can facilitate negotiation with decision-makers (Islam, Lovelock & Coetzee, 2021). Despite challenges, measurement is essential for management, and objective data builds trust (Miller & Torres-Delgado, 2023). Obstacles to measuring sustainability include lack of funding, methodological issues, and technical assistance (Bell & Morse, 2008; UNWTO, 2020). Accurate measurement enables decision-makers to function effectively and make data-driven decisions. By quantifying sustainable tourism, stakeholders can work towards a more sustainable future.

Tourists' Perspectives on Sustainable Tourism

The perspective of tourists is essential in formulating sustainable tourism strategies since favorable perceptions can stimulate demand for environmentally conscious and culturally respectful tourism offerings (Gössling et al., 2012). Studies indicate that tourists' perceptions are shaped by multiple elements, such as destination image, service quality, and environmental circumstances (Beerli & Martín, 2004). Comprehending these impressions is crucial for formulating targeted marketing strategies and improving the overall tourist experience (Chen & Chen, 2010).

Origin of Tourists and Their Perception on Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism concepts often have Western roots (Mazzocchi, 2020) and may not translate effectively to developing countries with unique socioeconomic and cultural contexts (Newell, 2005). Tourists from developing countries must tailor sustainability perceptions and strategies to their contexts (Homer & Kanagasapapathy, 2023). The United Nations acknowledges the gap between developed and developing countries in implementing sustainable development goals (Osborn et al., 2015). Domestic tourism is growing rapidly in developing countries (Ghimire, 2001), and planned development

is essential for sustainability (Mazimhaka, 2007). Understanding cultural differences is crucial, as tourists' priorities vary. For example, Asian tourists focus on price, while Western tourists prioritize sustainability and safety (Poon & Low, 2005). Recognizing these differences is key to developing effective sustainable tourism strategies.

Methodology

Study Parameters

This study examines both domestic and foreign tourists who have visited a minimum of one significant tourist destination in Bangladesh. The research focuses only on the perceptions of these respondents, offering insights into the understanding and experience of sustainable tourism inside the country.

Research Design

A qualitative study methodology was employed to thoroughly investigate tourists' perceptions. Open-ended questions were employed to elicit the nuanced perspectives of participants about the following major aspects:

- i. Their overall comprehension of sustainable tourism and sustainable tourism practices during their visits.
- ii. Aspects of tourism in Bangladesh that correspond with their sustainability ideals.
- iii. Regions deficient in sustainable tourist techniques.

Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 50 tourists, consisting of 30 domestic and 20 overseas visitors. The interviews were carried out in prominent tourist locations, like as Cox's Bazar, the Sundarbans, and Srimangal, during high visitor seasons to guarantee a varied array of responses.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilized to discern recurring themes and patterns within the data. The analysis entailed coding the interview transcripts, classifying the codes into overarching themes, and interpreting the results in the context of previous literature. Prominent topics that surfaced include tourists' cognizance of sustainability, the perceived quality of tourism services, and the involvement of local communities in tourism development.

Discussion

This study reveals a notable disparity in tourists' awareness of sustainable tourism practices in Bangladesh. International tourists typically exhibited a more nuanced comprehension of sustainability principles, but domestic tourists frequently linked sustainable tourism to fundamental notions like cleanliness and the preservation of natural beauty. This discrepancy in awareness levels illustrates the overarching problem of advancing sustainability in a developing nation context, where awareness campaigns and educational programs are still constrained. Previous studies corroborate this observation, suggesting that tourists from Western nations generally possess a heightened awareness of sustainability issues and eco-friendly travel practices, attributable to their increased exposure to environmental movements and sustainability discussions (Poon & Low, 2005). Enhancing awareness among domestic tourists is essential for cultivating a culture of responsible tourism in Bangladesh. Educational campaigns, workshops, and partnerships with local tourism operators are essential for raising awareness and promoting sustainable practices among domestic travelers.

Perceived Quality of Tourism Infrastructure and Services

Tourists' perceptions regarding the quality of infrastructure and services in Bangladesh exhibit ambivalent sentiments. Although numerous respondents valued the nation's natural attractions, they criticized the insufficient infrastructure and absence of necessary amenities, such as dependable transportation, decent sanitation, and hygienic housing. The absence of sustainable infrastructure, including environmentally friendly accommodations and effective waste management systems, was a persistent worry among participants. The results align with previous research emphasizing the infrastructural obstacles encountered by Bangladesh's tourism industry (Sarker & Begum, 2013; Mondal, 2017). Enhancing infrastructure is essential for sustained tourism advancement. Investments in green infrastructure, including solar-powered facilities, rainwater harvesting systems, and trash recycling units, can substantially improve the sustainability of tourism sites in Bangladesh. Moreover, the implementation of intelligent technologies for visitor management and service provision can enhance the overall tourist experience while reducing environmental effects.

Environmental and Cultural Preservation

One of the fundamental tenets of sustainable tourism is the preservation of environmental and cultural resources. The majority of the travelers voiced apprehension regarding environmental degradation, especially in renowned tourist destinations such as Cox's Bazar and the Sundarbans. Concerns such as littering, unchecked development, and over-tourism were often cited. The literature reflects these concerns, emphasizing the necessity for more stringent regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to safeguard sensitive ecosystems (Islam, Lovelock & Coetzee, 2021). Culturally, tourists conveyed a profound appreciation for the nation's rich heritage, encompassing its historic sites, traditional festivals, and local crafts. Nevertheless, they observed that insufficient measures have been implemented to safeguard and enhance these cultural assets. Creating cultural tourism initiatives that engage local communities can improve cultural preservation and yield economic advantages.

Community engagement is essential for sustainable tourism, as it guarantees that local populations gain from tourism activities. Numerous tourists highlighted the significance of involving local communities in tourism development, observing that community-based tourism initiatives can enrich the authenticity of the tourist experience while fostering economic inclusiveness. The study revealed that community engagement in Bangladesh is constrained, as the majority of tourism activities are dominated by private enterprises and governmental bodies. Enhancing community participation necessitates a multifaceted strategy, encompassing capacity-building initiatives, financial assistance for community-driven tourism projects, and collaborations between local communities and tourism operators. These activities not only improve the sustainability of tourism but also aid in poverty reduction and social empowerment.

Challenges in Sustainable Tourism

Despite the increasing interest in sustainable tourism, numerous obstacles impede its efficient execution in Bangladesh. This encompasses insufficient regulatory frameworks, feeble enforcement of current legislation, constrained resources, and a deficiency in stakeholder collaboration. Tourists often identified inadequate hygiene, substandard infrastructure, and the lack of environmentally viable solutions as significant obstacles to sustainable tourism. The tourism sector's significant dependence on private operators has led to unregulated expansion and environmental

deterioration in specific regions. Tackling these issues necessitates a collaborative approach among government entities, private sector stakeholders, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. Policy reforms designed to foster sustainable tourism, along with financial incentives for environmentally conscious tourism operators, can facilitate positive transformation.

Potential Strategies for Advancing Sustainable Tourism in Bangladesh

To advance sustainable tourism in Bangladesh, various strategies may be implemented:

- i. **Advancing Ecotourism and Nature-Based Tourism:** Ecotourism projects aimed at conserving natural ecosystems and fostering responsible tourism can safeguard biodiversity while providing economic advantages to local communities. Examples encompass wildlife excursions, nature pathways, and eco-lodges in areas like the Sundarbans and the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
- ii. **Advancing Green Infrastructure:** Investing in eco-friendly hotels, renewable energy sources, and sustainable transit options can improve the environmental sustainability of tourism destinations.
- iii. **Enhancing Regulatory Frameworks:** Implementing and enforcing more stringent rules concerning waste management, construction, and tourist conduct might alleviate tourism's adverse environmental effects.
- iv. **Improving Marketing and Promotion:** Focused marketing initiatives that emphasize Bangladesh's sustainable tourism options can draw eco-conscious guests. Partnering with global tourist boards and sustainability organizations helps enhance Bangladesh's reputation as a sustainable tourism destination.
- v. **Promoting Public-Private Partnerships:** Public-private partnerships can enhance the establishment of sustainable tourism infrastructure and services. Such collaborations can stimulate innovation in tourism offerings, thereby improving the overall tourist experience. By executing these strategies, Bangladesh can establish itself as a premier sustainable tourism destination in South Asia, appealing to both domestic and international visitors while safeguarding its natural and cultural heritage.

Findings

The findings of this study elucidate significant insights regarding tourists' perceptions of sustainable tourism in Bangladesh. Despite increasing tourist interest in sustainability, significant problems including infrastructure, environmental

management, and community engagement persist, obstructing the achievement of sustainable tourism in the country. The results from semi-structured interviews with domestic and international tourists offer significant insights into their expectations, experiences, and suggestions for enhancement.

Tourists' Perceptions of Sustainability Awareness

A substantial proportion of respondents, especially international tourists, exhibited a moderate to high degree of awareness concerning sustainable tourism. They linked sustainability to ethical travel behaviors, the conservation of natural resources, and the reduction of tourism's adverse effects on local populations. Domestic tourists, conversely, frequently equated sustainable tourism with fundamental cleanliness and infrastructure enhancements, highlighting a necessity for more extensive awareness campaigns. Notably, several respondents indicated that although they were acquainted with the concept of sustainability, they witnessed minimal concrete initiatives toward sustainable tourism during their visit to Bangladesh. The disparity between awareness and actual execution highlights the necessity for focused policies and prominent sustainability activities at significant tourist attractions.

Infrastructure and Service Quality

Tourists conveyed varied perspectives concerning the infrastructure and service quality in Bangladesh. Although they valued the country's natural beauty and cultural richness, many expressed dissatisfactions with the insufficient infrastructure, including poorly maintained roads, limited eco-friendly accommodations, and a deficiency of basic amenities such as clean toilets and proper waste disposal facilities. The absence of sustainable infrastructure, such as solar-powered hotels, eco-lodges, and sustainable transportation options, was a persistent concern among respondents. Numerous international tourists unfavorably contrasted Bangladesh with other South Asian nations, such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, where eco-friendly tourism alternatives are more accessible. The respondents observed significant disparities in the quality of services offered by tour operators and local guides, with some demonstrating a commendable dedication to sustainability and customer satisfaction, while others exhibited a lack of professionalism and adequate training. This disparity in service quality underscores the necessity for standardized training programs and certification schemes for tourism service providers.

Environmental Concerns and Cultural Preservation:

Tourists frequently expressed environmental concerns, particularly regarding waste management and pollution in prominent tourist destinations such as Cox's Bazar and the Sundarbans. Participants indicated the presence of considerable litter, particularly plastic garbage, on coastal areas and hiking trails. Numerous individuals conveyed dissatisfaction with the absence of structured waste management systems and recycling facilities. Conversely, tourists commended the nation's abundant cultural history, characterized by its varied traditions, festivals, and historical landmarks. Nevertheless, they observed that cultural preservation initiatives were frequently eclipsed by fast urbanization and unregulated tourism practices. Numerous respondents indicated that increased investment in cultural tourism initiatives, including heritage tours and local craft markets, could bolster the sustainability of tourism by delivering economic advantages to local communities while safeguarding cultural identity.

Community Engagement and Socioeconomic Consequences

A consistent theme in the findings was the restricted participation of local communities in tourism activities. Numerous tourists observed that although local communities were visible at prominent tourist sites, their involvement in tourism operations was limited, with the majority of services administered by private operators and governmental entities. Several participants underscored the significance of community-based tourism (CBT) as a strategy for fostering sustainable tourism. They indicated that CBT efforts could improve tourists' experiences by facilitating genuine cultural exchanges and delivering direct economic advantages to local communities. Nonetheless, the insufficient assistance and training for local populations was recognized as a significant obstacle to the execution of such programs. Tourists also emphasized the socioeconomic ramifications of tourism, acknowledging both beneficial and detrimental effects. Although tourism offers employment and cash for local enterprises, unrestrained expansion may result in problems such as overcrowding, inflation, and social upheaval. Respondents emphasized the necessity for a balanced strategy that fosters economic advantages while protecting the welfare of local communities.

Recommendations

Despite the aforementioned challenges, numerous tourists indicated a readiness to revisit Bangladesh, highlighting its distinctive natural and cultural offerings.

Nonetheless, they observed that substantial enhancements are required to improve the overall tourism experience.

Tourists often highlighted the necessity for improved road maintenance, sustainable lodging options, and hygienic public facilities, especially in isolated and rural tourist locales. Numerous respondents indicated that inadequately maintained roads not only complicate travel but also dissuade prospective tourists from exploring the less accessible yet picturesque areas of Bangladesh. The lack of sustainable accommodations, including solar-powered hotels, eco-lodges, and campsites, was identified as a significant deficiency in the tourism industry. Tourists observed that although prominent towns like Dhaka and Chittagong provide luxury hotels, environmentally aware travelers pursuing sustainable lodging frequently encounter difficulties in locating appropriate accommodations in rural regions and natural reserves, such as the Sundarbans or Srimangal.

Public amenities, such as sanitary restrooms, potable water facilities, and allocated picnic places, were noted to be inadequate or inadequately maintained. The absence of these fundamental amenities adversely affects the overall tourist experience. Participants recommended that municipal authorities, in conjunction with private firms, prioritize the enhancement of infrastructure in prominent tourist areas to satisfy the expectations of both domestic and foreign travelers.

Improving Environmental Management

Environmental management has been a significant concern to many respondents. A multitude of travelers articulated their discontent with the ubiquity of litter, particularly plastic refuse, in renowned tourist destinations such as Cox's Bazar, St. Martin's Island, and the Sundarbans. The absence of adequate waste disposal and recycling systems has resulted in observable contamination, compromising the natural aesthetics of these regions and endangering local fauna.

Participants advocated for more stringent garbage management laws and the implementation of systematic waste collection and recycling initiatives at tourist locations. A number of travelers proposed promoting sustainable tourism activities, including the prohibition of single-use plastics in protected areas and the encouragement of enterprises to use environmentally friendly practices, such as composting and water conservation.

Furthermore, certain responders suggested the creation of eco-parks and nature reserves with explicitly delineated tourist regulations designed to mitigate environmental effect. These may encompass marked walking paths, informational displays regarding local flora and fauna, and volunteer-organized clean-up initiatives to involve tourists in environmental conservation activities.

Encouraging Community Engagement

Respondents consistently emphasized the significance of community engagement in tourism development. Tourists noted that in some instances, tourism activities were exclusively administered by private operators, with minimal or no involvement from local communities. Numerous respondents emphasized the advantages of community-based tourism (CBT) programs, which offer travelers genuine cultural experiences while ensuring that local residents directly reap the financial benefits of tourism income.

Participants recommended that local populations receive training and support to oversee tourism initiatives, including homestays, guided cultural excursions, and artisan markets. Policymakers can provide sustainable income sources for local residents and safeguard the region's cultural heritage by endorsing community-led tourist initiatives. Moreover, promoting local ownership and engagement in tourism endeavors can cultivate a feeling of pride and accountability within communities, resulting in enhanced upkeep of tourist attractions.

Tourists emphasized the necessity for capacity-building initiatives designed to enhance the competencies of local inhabitants, encompassing language instruction for guides, hospitality management for small business proprietors, and eco-tourism education for community leaders. These programs can elevate the quality of tourism services while fostering cultural interchange and mutual understanding between visitors and residents.

Enhancing Awareness

Both domestic and international tourists emphasized the necessity of enhancing awareness regarding sustainable tourism via educational initiatives. International travelers exhibited more familiarity with sustainability principles, although numerous domestic tourists conveyed a desire to enhance their understanding of responsible travel practices and their potential contributions to sustainability initiatives.

Participants suggested that awareness campaigns should engage several stakeholders, including tourists, local communities, and tourism providers. These campaigns may be executed via multiple channels, including internet media, on-site signs, and printed pamphlets at prominent tourist locations. Moreover, promotional materials may encompass pragmatic advice on responsible conduct, including appropriate garbage disposal, adherence to local customs, and patronage of local enterprises.

Tourists proposed that educational institutions, including schools and universities, might significantly contribute to sustainable tourism by incorporating environmental education and responsible tourism into their curricula. Prolonged awareness initiatives can foster a new cohort of conscientious travelers who emphasize sustainability in their travel decisions.

By tackling these critical issues and executing the proposed enhancements, Bangladesh may establish itself as a premier sustainable tourist destination in South Asia. Investment in infrastructure, improvement of environmental management, encouragement of community engagement, and elevation of awareness will attract eco-conscious travelers and ensure that tourism positively impacts the nation's economy while safeguarding its natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

Conclusion

This study offers an in-depth examination of travelers' perspectives regarding sustainable tourism in Bangladesh, emphasizing the nation's potential as a sustainable tourism destination and the significant problems it encounters. Despite Bangladesh's abundant natural resources and cultural legacy, the findings indicate considerable deficiencies in infrastructure, environmental management, and community engagement that impede the establishment of a genuinely sustainable tourist business.

Tourists exhibited differing degrees of awareness concerning sustainable tourism, with overseas tourists displaying a more thorough comprehension than domestic tourists. Both parties articulated worries over insufficient infrastructure, especially in distant regions, and underscored the necessity for sustainable lodgings and hygienic public facilities. Environmental concerns, such as waste management and pollution in prominent tourist locales, were often identified as critical areas for immediate intervention. Furthermore, although tourists valued the cultural diversity of

Bangladesh, they observed that initiatives to conserve and promote cultural heritage are inadequate.

The research highlighted the restricted participation of local communities in tourism activities. Participants highlighted that promoting community-based tourism (CBT) could improve sustainability by directly helping local communities and providing tourists with more genuine cultural experiences. Ultimately, both domestic and international travelers emphasized the necessity of enhancing awareness regarding sustainable tourism via focused educational efforts and promotional measures.

By implementing focused policy interventions, developing infrastructure, and fostering stakeholder collaboration, Bangladesh can establish itself as a premier sustainable tourist destination in South Asia. By investing in green infrastructure, augmenting environmental conservation initiatives, fostering local community engagement, and increasing knowledge of responsible tourist practices, Bangladesh may attract eco-conscious travelers and assure long-term sustainability in its tourism sector. Subsequent study ought to concentrate on obtaining perspectives from additional essential stakeholders, including local communities and tourism operators, to formulate more comprehensive strategies for sustainable tourism growth in Bangladesh.

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