How does the Tourist Value the Nature-based Tourism Sites in North-eastern Bangladesh?

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Abstract: The underlying goal of this paper is to estimate the willingness to pay for different nature-based tourism sites in Sreemangal-Kamalganj area of Bangladesh. Primarily, a semi-structured questionnaire survey was carried out during the period 4 to 9 December 2013 and 9 to 14 May 2014 among domestic as well as foreign tourists. This paper emphasizes on tourists' choice and accordingly calculates the value as US$ 24.74, US$ 13.11, US$ 8.25, US$ 5.89, US$ 6.62, US$ 1.03 for Lawachara National Park, Tea States, Madhabpur Lake, Hum Hum Waterfall, BaikkaBeel (Wetlands) and others, respectively. This result would be beneficial to developing countries where the tourism sector has great potentials. Finally, recommendations are made as regards to the sustainable development of the tourism sector so as to minimize ecological damage to the destinations concerned

Key words: Bangladesh, multiple destinations, nature-based tourism, Sreemangal-Kamalganj, willingness to pay

Introduction

Tourism is an important sector that can bring significant contribution to the national economy. Among others, tourism increases gross domestic product (GDP), creates employment opportunities, generates foreign exchange, stimulates local commerce and industry, improves the quality of life of local people, promotes cultural awareness essential to a global community (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2006). In Bangladesh, tourism sector made a significant contribution to GDP and international tourists' arrival to this country helped to earn sufficient foreign currencies in the last decade (Chowdhury, Fahim & Dooty, 2013). As the country is endowed with nature-based tourism destinations, there is still growth potentials in this sector. Sreemangal-Kamalganj, located in north-eastern Bangladesh, is an ideal nature-based tourism destinations. Generally, nature-based tourism encompasses 'adventure tourism' in terms of the type of activities involved; while sharing the characteristics of 'ecotourism' in terms of locality. Ecotourism Australia states that the ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism which primarily focuses on natural areas and fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation, and conservation (Ecotourism Australia website). The International Ecotourism Society (TIESde-

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fines ecotourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the wellbeing of local people, and involves interpretation and education of both staffs and guests (The International Ecotourism Society, n.d.). By promoting nature-based tourism sites in Sreemangal-Kamalganj in a sustainable manner, government can generate more income and employment in the local area and increase GDP of Bangladesh. The purpose of this paper is to estimate the willingness to pay (WTP) for different nature-based tourism sites by tourist in the study area.

Justifications of the Study

Bangladesh has potentials to attract domestic and international tourists. With natural resources such as hills, valleys, forests, beaches, lakes, wetlands and rivers, Bangladesh has many locations that can be developed into tourist attractions. Among many tourists' attractions, a good number of nature-based tourism products are available in Sylhet division. Green carpet of tree plants on small hillocks, natural reserved forests, bio-diversity and protected areas are of great attractions of this area. Migratory birds in the winter season, particularly in the wetlands, scenic view of waterfalls, large lake in the hill area and lifestyle of ethnic communities are also found in Sylhet division. However, due to the paucity of resources, government should not sanction the fund for any sector until the sector provides positive return to the economy either in the short-run or long-run. In this regard, in order to develop an ecotourism zone for a particular locality, we must know how many tourists visit the locality and to what extent they value the experience and the locality itself. If a significant WTP for those places by local as well as foreign tourists is found, this will support the development of the locality into a tourist attraction. Based on tourist's choice, government can also develop different tourism destinations on the basis of 'utility principle', i.e. most preferred location should be developed first. In addition, if the rate and trend of arrivals are sufficiently high to the extent of deteriorating the environment as well as service quality in the local destinations, government and tourism authority should pay more attention to preserve those attractions in a sustainable manner.

Objective of the Study

The principal objective of this study is to estimate the value of different nature-based tourism sites in the area of Srimangal-Kamalganj, as a north eastern part of Bangladesh. The specific objectives of this study are:
- To know the age distribution of tourists in the study area;
- To identify the type of tourist and the rate of arrival in varied seasons;
- To know the tourists' choice for major destinations;
- To know the tourists' average age, households' income, number of sites visited, number of nights stayed, and aggregate WTP for visit; and finally,
- To calculate the WTP for different destinations of the visit.

Literature Review

In the previous literature, various types of methods were applied to assess the value of recreational sites. Observed market data or hypothetical market data can be used to calculate tourist's WTP for the benefits from recreational site.

Using travel cost method (TCM), WTP for Irish Forests ranges from IR£ 2.38 to IR£ 5.95 per adult equivalent per trip (Mayor, Scott & Tol, 2007). Based on the same data set, this study concluded that the TCM method provides more accurate estimate of benefits than contingent valuation method. Espineira and Tuffour (2009) conducted on-site survey among visitors of Gros Morne National Park of Canada to estimate the demand function for the site. Using the multi-purpose weighting approach, they examined the influence of price variable and income variable on travel costs. Since the nature and socioeconomic condition of tourists varies from developed to developing countries, discussion on the estimates should focus particularly on the developing world.

Based on TCM method, Dehlavi and Adil (2011) conducted a sample survey among the tourists of Keenjhar Lake of Pakistan and estimated the recreational use value PKR 3.46 billion (equivalent to USD 42.2 million). Assuming average daily visits of 1,000, this estimate is based on an annualized mean consumer surplus per visit of PKR 9,500 (equivalent to USD 116). Another study conducted in Xiamen, China revealed that an annual recreational benefit is more than USD 53 million. For the individual visitor, consumer surplus per visit was found to be approximately US$ 16.9, which suggests this was the suitable entrance fees for protecting coastal environment and natural resources (Chen, Hong, Liu, Zhang, Hou & Raymond, 2004). However, both of the studies did not estimate WTPs for complementary sites by tourists.

In the context of Bangladesh, relevant study was carried out by Shammin (1999) who estimated the WTP for individual visitor as well as annual WTP for the Dhaka Zoological Garden. By conducting questionnaire survey among visitors, it was found that the people's average WTP was BDT 300.64 per visitor per day (equivalent to USD 6.46) and yearly WTP was BDT 1,288,601,665 (equivalent to USD 27.68 million).

Muzib (2014) conducted a socio-cultural study on Lawachara National Park and found mixed result upon the life of ethnic community. After launching this eco-park, income as well as employment opportunities of ethnic community increased sufficiently. They are now enjoying modern education, more security, modern medical facility, better roads and easy transportation. Their core cultural elements like language, dress pattern, house pattern, and food habit are also changing as the result of the interactions with tourists and other non-locals. They are now more aware about environmental conservation. However, the eco-park affected the available land that the ethnic community could access. The locals' housing rights were also affected. Eco-park officials forced the locals to contribute labour hours to the part. Agriculture was also affected as visitors sometimes ruin betel and lemon gardens. On the other hand, Rahman and Shil (2012) measured the consumers' service satisfaction on young tourists of Lawachara National Park. Conducting sample survey among young tourists, they found that service satisfaction largely depended upon ease of access into the park. Procedural complexity of the managerial authority may hinder the tourist's service satisfaction, while less expense, warm and friendly reception can increase the service satisfaction. No study was conducted by any researcher so far on estimating the WTP for Sreemangal-Kamalganj tourism locations. In this paper, an attempt has been made to estimate the WTPs for major tourism destinations in the study area based on tourists' choice.

Methodology

Study Area

Sreemangal and Kamalganjare two sub-districts of Moulvibazar district, situated in the North-Eastern region of Bangladesh (LGED). These areas are well known tourist destina-

tions in Bangladesh. Broadly, Moulvibazar district is located within 24.48093 degree north and 91.76427 degree south. Sylhet District is in the North, Hobiganj district is in the West and Tripura State of India is in the South and East of Moulvibazar district.

Major Nature-based Tourism Sites

Major characteristics of the study area are the largest number of tea gardens, large wetlands mixed and evergreen reserve forest. There is a unique combination of hill, plain land forest and haors. Along with that, the lifestyle of expatriates, culture of tea-laborers, heritage of ethnic communities like Manipuri, Khasia, Tipra has made the district a unique one. Major tourism sites are Lawachara National Park, Tea States, Madhabpur Lake, Hum Hum Water Fall, BaikkaBeel (wetlands) etc. Lawachara National Park in Kamalganj was established in 1996 with a total forest land of 1250 ha (BFD, 2006). The abundant flora and fauna makes this national park a great place of bio-diversity. The Park is a potential source of eco-tourism, on account of its dense high forests, historical and cultural values, scenic beauty and ethnic diversity. Tea estates are available in both Kamalganj and Sreemangal area. Tea estates offer scenic view, culture and lifestyle of tea laborers. In particular, at the Finlay's Tea Estate, drinking of the seven layer colors tea invented by two brothers is much anticipated by tourists. Madhabpur Lake is one of the popular tourist spot which is situated in the study area. With small hills, this natural lake gives absolute pleasure to local as well as foreign tourists. The hidden beauty of Hum Hum waterfall in Kamalganj was first discovered in 2009 – the location is still pristine and not easily accessible. Baikkabeel is about 100 hectares of wetland in the eastern part of Hail Haor which was declared as a permanent sanctuary by the Bangladesh government on 1 July, 2003 (Kabir, Hasan & Rowshan, 2009). This sanctuary project is running by collaborative management which is called 'co-management' approach. As an excellent safe habitat for fishes, birds and wildlife, this wetland attracts local and foreign tourists as well.

Valuation Method

From our study area, it was realized that majority of the tourists usually comes to the Sreemangal-Kamalganj area to visit multiple places. To overcome a narrow estimation, the authors tried to focus on all possible tourists' attractions within the study area. Since tourists do not state their WTP accurately, the cost of recreation was considered as a proxy variable of WTP. In this study, the cost of recreation by tourists mainly includes accommodation, food, transport, entry fee and value of travel time etc. Cost of traveling from the point of origin (home) to tourism sites was not factored in, because this cost differs substantially from tourist to tourist. Moreover, visitor does not give equal weight to the change in travel cost to that of visit fee. In the study area, overnight stay by tourists is very common. Thus, the authors factored in the accommodation cost into the WTP. The value of travel time was estimated by opportunity cost of travelling, i.e. it was asked to each tourist whether he/she would work in absence of visit. For local tourists, actual wage was treated as the cost of traveling if he/she would otherwise be engaged with work. In case of foreign tourist, income was initially recorded in respective country's currency and then converted into local currency. Again, most of the female tourists under this study were housewives, therefore, the opportunity cost of visit is assumed to BDT 5,000 per month. Finally, by summing direct and indirect costs of visit, the mean WTP of the tourists could be estimated.

Population, Sample and Survey

In the study area, about 12 eco-cottages/dormitories serve tourists all year round. Only four cottages, namely Nishorgo Eco-cottage, Lemon Garden Resort, Jungle Cottage, and Amazon Forest Resort were chosen for the study. Thus, purposive sampling was adopted. Among the four eco-cottages, the numbers of respondents approached were proportionate to the capacity of eco-cottages. Tourists usually visit in two alternative seasons at those places, peak and off-peak season. Peak season is defined as the period from October to March, while the rest of the year is defined as off-peak season. To get sufficient and meaningful response from tourists, the study was carried out in December 04-09, 2013 and May 09-14, 2014. In other words, data collection coincided with the peak season.

Respondents

Of 50 respondents, a number of 18 respondents were selected randomly from Nishorgo Eco-cottage, 18 from Lemon Garden Resort, 4 from Jungle Cottage and 10 from Amazon Forest Resort that is shown in Table 1.

Under a pre-designed semi structured schedule, both closed-ended and open-ended questions were asked to discover the respondents' cost of recreation. We considered only those tourists in the study area who have finished their visit, so that we can collect maximum actual payment for visiting the sites.

Rating Scale

Tourists' choice of destinations depends on various socio-cultural-economic factors such as income, cost of travels, accommodation, size of travel party, currency exchange rate, level of education, type of occupation, ethnic identity, religion and point of origin (Guillet, Lee, Law & Leung, 2011; Sathiedrakumar & Watson, 1997; Hamal, 1998; Vietze, 2008). In this paper, we have categorized six major tourists destinations, such as Lawachara National Park, Tea States, Madhabpur Lake, Hum Hum Water Fall, Baikka Beel, and eco-cottage itself etc. for choice. Unlike traditional TCM, we used a rating scale to measure the tourist's choice toward those environmental attributes. The rating scale under this study ranges from zero to four. The value 'zero' stands for 'neutral', means 'no choice' to that particular attribute. In this case, it can be assumed that the tourist is not willing to pay for the attribute. The value 'one' stands for 'poor choice' to the particular attribute, which means the tourist is willing to pay few money for the attribute. The value 'two' stands for 'moderate choice' which means that the tourist agrees to pay a higher amount of money for the attribute. At the extreme case, the value 'four' stands for 'very high choice' to the particular attribute, which means that the tourist is verily excited for the attribute.

Table 1. Sampling technique

Study Area	Name of Eco-cottage	Number of Respondents, n ; $i=1,2,3,4$
Sreemangal-Kamalgonj (n = 50)	Nishorgo Eco-cottage	$n_1 = 18$
	Lemon Garden Resort	$n_2 = 18$
	Jungle Cottage	$n_3 = 04$
	Amazon Forest Resort	$n_4 = 10$

Note: n= Sample size

to see the site and willing to pay highest possible price for that attribute. These values finally treated as weight to measure WTP for individual attribute.

Tools and Analysis

To measure the weighted frequency for a particular rating, the following formula was used:

$$f_j = \sum \left(f_{j,r} \times R \right); \qquad j=1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, \text{ and } r = 0, 1, 2, 3, 4.$$

where f_j stands for the weighted frequency for j^{th} destination $f_{j,r}$ stands for frequency of jth destination at a particular rating and R is the particular rating.

Excluding travel cost from point of origin (i.e. residence) to destination, we consider total cost of visiting different spots in the study area as a summation of direct and indirect cost of visit.

WTP = DC + IC

where, WTP stands for the WTP, DC stands for direct cost and IC stands for indirect cost of visit. Direct costs include costs for food, accommodation, transport and entry fees etc. while indirect cost means the opportunity cost of visit. Among other vehicles, mode of transports for visiting the places includes public bus, mini bus, jeep, CNG-driven taxi, Motorcycle or bicycle etc. We considered group visit in our analysis as different individual has different choice to the attributes.

$$\text{Mean WTP} = \frac{\sum C_i}{n}; i=1,\ldots,n. \ n=50.$$

where, C_i stands for total cost of ith tourist and n stands for the number of tourists under the study.

$$\text{WTP}_j = \frac{\sum f_j}{\sum \sum f_j} \times \text{mean WTP}; \qquad j= 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.$$

where, WTP_j stands for WTP for j^{th} destination and f_j weighted frequency of a tourist for j^{th} destination

Finally, mean aggregate WTP was measured with lower bound and upper bound.

Test of Validity

To test the validity of the estimation, personal interview with tourism entrepreneurs and tourist guides were conducted, in order to gather more information about tourism sites, tourists' choice and local people's behaviour and other aspects of tourist's behaviour.

Results and Discussion

Distribution of Age

In the study area, tourists (local or foreign) usually come from different socio-cultural background. Table 2 shows the age distribution of local and foreign tourists.

Table 2. The age distribution of tourists in the Kamalganj-Srimangal area

Age (years)	Number of Tourists
15-24	12 (24%)
25-44	35 (70%)
45-64	3 (6%)
65+	0 (0%)

Note: Figures in parenthesis shows the percentage   *Source: Authors' calculation*

Table 3. Tourist matrix in the study area

Type of Tourist	Peak	Off-peak	Total
Local Tourist	25 (50%)	7 (14%)	32 (64%)
Foreign Tourist	5 (10%)	13 (26%)	18 (36%)
Total	30 (60%)	20 (40%)	50 (100%)

Note: Figures in parenthesis shows the percentage   *Source*: Field Survey

In Sreemangol-Kamalganj tourism zone, almost 70% of the tourists were young and there was no tourist above the 65 years old. From Table 2, it is clear that the destinations studied appeal to young tourists the most.

Type and Arrival Rate of Tourists

Frequency of tourist arrival varies from season to season. From the sample survey, we found that 60% of total tourists visited during the peak season and the remaining 40% visited during off-peak season.

Again, both local and foreign tourists came to the study area for recreation or research purpose. Out of 50 tourists, 36%were foreigners and 64% were localsas shown in Table 3.

Choice for Major Tourists Attractions

In the following table, choices for Lawachara National Park, Tea States, Madhabpur Lake, Hum Hum Water Fall, Baikka Beel and Eco-cottage are discussed.

Among tourism sites, majority of tourists visited the Lawachara national parks as most of the eco-cottages were adjacent to this park. Table 4 shows that the highest number of tourists voted for 'very high' rating for Lawachara national park. Since the Hum Hum waterfall was far away from the cottages as well as considered too adventurous to many tourists, very few tourists revealed their interest to visit the site. Second highest number of visitors was found for Tea State since Sreemangal was famous in Bangladesh for its vast tea garden.

Aggregate WTP of Tourist

Among the tourists, the mean household income was BDT 80200 which was far higher than the authors' expectation. High mean and variance in household income was found due to the substantial income gap between local and foreign tourists.

Table 4. Tourists' choice for major tourism destinations

Rating Scale	Lawachara National Park	Tea States	MadhabPur Lake	Hum Hum Water Fall	Baikka Beel (Wetlands)	Eco-cottage
	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency	Frequency
0	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
1	1 (1)	0 (0)	2 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
2	5 (10)	2 (4)	6 (12)	0 (0)	1 (2)	0 (0)
3	15 (45)	7 (21)	10 (30)	0 (0)	5 (15)	1 (3)
4	28 (112)	16 (64)	3 (12)	10 (40)	7 (28)	1 (4)
Total	49 (168)	25 (89)	21 (56)	10 (40)	13 (45)	2 (7)

Note: Figure in the parenthesis shows the weighted frequency.   *Source*: Field Survey

Table 5. Summary statistics of tourist based on observed market behaviour

Variables	Mean	Max.	Min.	S. D.
Age	30.82 years	52 years	18 years	7.94
Household income (monthly)	BDT 80200	BDT 200000	BDT 25000	57786.29
Number of Sites visited	2.4	4	2	0.70
Average Length of Visit	2.1 nights	4 nights	1 night	0.81
Aggregate WTP	BDT 4630.9	BDT 8720	BDT 2300	1430.84

Source: Field Survey
Note: Max.=Maximum, Min.=Minimum, S.D.=Standard Deviation.
Currency conversion US$ 1 = BDT 77.6, *Source*: BB (2014).

Table 6. Value of nature-based tourism sites based on respondents' choice

Tourism Site	Weighted Frequency, Σf_j	WTP (in BDT)
Lawachara National Park	168 (41.48%)	1920.524
Tea States	89 (21.97%)	1017.211
MadhabPur Lake	56 (13.83%)	640.329
Hum Hum Water Fall	40 (9.88%)	457.444
BaikkaBeel (wetlands)	45 (11.11%)	514.393
Eco-cottage	7 (1.73%)	80.099
Aggregate	405 (100%)	4630.000

Note: Figure in the parenthesis shows the percentage. Currency conversion US$ 1 = BDT 77.6, Source: BB (2014).
Field Survey

Tourists, on an average, stayed in the study area more than 2 nights and visited more than two sites. Table 5 shows that the mean WTP is BDT 4630 equivalent to US $ 59.66 approximately, where maximum WTP was BDT 8720 and minimum WTP was BDT 2300. On the other hand, the WTP for overnight stay was BDT 2205 in the Sreemangal-Kamalganj area.

WTP for Different Tourism Sites

Based on respondents' choice as regards different tourism sites, Table 6 shows that the highest WTP was BDT 1920 for Lawachara National Park and the lowest WTP was only BDT 80 for relaxing into the cottage because of its closer location to nature.

Other WTP were BDT 1017, BDT 640, BDT 457, BDT 514, BDT 80 for Tea Estates, Madhabpur Lake, Hum Hum Water Fall, Baikka Beel, and eco-cottage, respectively.

Conclusion

In this study, the mean WTP was found to be BDT 4630 (approximately US $ 59.66) for the whole trip, which was sufficiently high. If the government declares this study area as a special tourism zone and accordingly Bangladesh Tourism Board takes necessary steps to promote tourism, more foreign tourists would visit to this zone and spend more money for their recreation. Based on weightage approach, the individual WTPs again were found to be BDT 1920 (equivalent to US $ 24.74), BDT 1017 (equivalent to US $ 13.11), BDT 640 (equivalent to US $ 8.25), BDT 457 (equivalent to US $ 5.89), BDT 514 (equivalent to US $ 6.62), and BDT 80 (equivalent to US $ 1.03) per person per trip for Lawachara National Park, Tea Estates, Madhabpur Lake, Hum Hum Water Fall, Baikka Beel (wetlands) and eco-cottage, respectively. Since the north-eastern part of Bangladesh is famous for tourism, and local as well as foreign tourist are willing to pay for these sites, government should develop these destinations according to tourists' preference.

Other findings and suggestions of this study are as follows:

(a) Most of the tourists prefer the scenic view of the study area than hospitality offerings;
(b) Tourists living in the eco-cottages think that the tourism sites should be environment friendly. Most of them also advocate for environmental protection. Moreover, hotels/cottages located in the study area hardly protect the nature. This is why government as well as non-government organizations should pay more attention towards ensuring that the hotel/cottage entrepreneurs adopt environment-friendly measures in keeping the nature unaffected;
(c) Foreign tourists were largely dependent on the websites to access tourism information. Some cottage owners have yet to design websites whereas some cottage owners have developed good websites that help potential tourists to contact the cottages regarding reservations and other queries. Every cottage owner should develop website with sufficient information on destinations and necessary expenses;
(d) Foreign tourists usually visit those sites by riding bicycle and intended to get information on tourism destinations through booklets. Eco-cottages under study area should provide sufficient logistics such as bicycles, skilled tourist guides, eco-tourism guidebooks etc.;
(e) Though Hum Hum waterfall offers scenic views to visitors; most of the visitors cannot reach the destination due to remoteness. Tourism authority should develop this destination so that adventurous tourists may enjoy the scenic view easily;
(f) Some tourists (particularly local tourists) posed threats to the biodiversity of the destinations. This was observed in Lawachara National Park and BaikkaBeel (wetland). The authorities concerned should increase conservation efforts to preserve the natural habitats and biodiversity of the destinations. This can be partly achieved through promoting awareness among the tourists or through prosecution of offenders.

Policy Implications

Based on the values estimated for different ecological attributes, the policymakers may protect and develop these sites in order to boost the tourism sector of Bangladesh.. Similar criteria may be adopted in other countries, where the tourists' choices to those attributes are the same as this study. Secondly, this estimation to different attributes will reinforce the necessity of environmental protection. Finally, this study will be beneficial to all stakeholders of the developing country including academicians, policymakers, tourism entrepreneurs, ecologists and tourists etc.

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