

Bangladesh moves to develop haor based tourism

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Dhaka : Bangladesh is now moving to develop tourism-both for domestic and international markets-based on numerous haors in the country.

Haors are one of the main tourist attractions for its natural beauty. These enormous wetlands are beauties of nature. In seven North-East districts of Bangladesh namely --Sunamganj, Moulvibazar, Hobiganj, Netrokona, Sylhet, Kishoreganj and Brahmanbaria, these vast water bodies covering an area of 84,000 hectares in 423 haors are located. In total, these haors cover an area of 24,000 square kilometres and offer great tourism potentials.

Recently, Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB) and Bangladesh Inbound Tour Operators Association (BD Inbound) jointly conducted a survey to determine how to attract domestic and international tourists to these vast wetland areas; how to upgrade level of haor tourism and what steps are to be taken to improve living conditions of local people without harming diversity of nature and wildlife.

Initial suggestions

The joint survey has come up with suggestion to take the following measures initially. These are:

1. Establishment of a river channel.
2. Establishment of jetty and pontoon to enter and depart haors.
3. Construction of tourism friendly speed boat, boat and sampans.

4. Floating nature friendly food store. 5. Specific management of garbage disposal. 6. Floating vegetables garden. 7. Establishment of bird and fish sanctuaries keeping the diversity of natural life intact. 8. Establishment of toilets at Tekerhat and other tourist spots. 9. Measures to sport noise pollution. 10. Creation of materials for branding Sunamganj as daughter of haor.

11. Separation of tourist spots. 12. Ensure security for life and property of tourists. 13. Development of tourist facilities. 14. Presentation of life, occupation, culture, handicraft etc of local small indigenous people to tourists. 15. Creation of tourism committee with people of all religion. 16. Improvement of roads from Niladri to Barik Tila and other tourists spots. 17. Development of community based tourism and home stay. 18. Establishment of cultural teams based on Baul and spiritual songs (Hason Raja, Shah Abdul Karim). 19. Measures to involve all stake holders and attract private investment and 20. Creation of inter-ministerial committee with local people and administration for development and promotion of haor tourism.

The observations

Talking to The Bangladesh Monitor Rezaul Ekram Razu, President of Inbound Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh lamented that tranquil beauty of nature is in a sorry state because of sound pollution, the noise created by mechanised boats. Razu said mechanised boats carry boulders and stone-crushing machines without approval which is a long-standing problem facing the greater Sylhet region.

"Even the bridges built in the area are also so unplanned that no tourist boat can pass through the structures properly. There is no eating place, no toilet," he deplored.

Water pollution

Prominent tour operator Taufiq Rahman said, "Tanguar Haor is not yet a product. It is just a resource_ misused and overused. I have found untutored tourists taking bath by using soaps, throwing cigarette butts and litter in water, as if there is nobody to take care of the water body."

In fact, there is no proper tourist boat, no berthing place and no security at Tanguar. It may face the same consequence of St Martin's Island, the country's lone coral island on the southernmost tip of the Bay, if attention is not given to protect the area, he said.

State of host community

Speaking about the locals, the tour operators said wetlands are the lifeline for a vast community of fishers, boatmen and the like. It is upsetting that fish populations are depleting and trees diminishing at the haor for a lack of proper care.

Rahman suggested that the area needs immediate attention. Several small islands are inhabited by local people who need adequate work for their livelihoods. Any development there without disturbing the ecosystem means their engagement and reintegration. They should be trained on how to get engaged with tourism.

"There should be dwelling facility for those selling local food, displaying local culture and trading in handicraft. The potentiality is huge but mismanagement can bring the bright future of the area to a crisis."

Haor tourism timing

About attracting foreign tourists to the area, Rahman said monsoon can lure international tourists. Tourist season is currently from October to March. But haor tourism can be from July to March.

The government has a Haor and Wetland Management Board. They have drawn a master plan for the area, but the implementation of which has not started yet, he stated.

Last but not the least, wetlands can be popular tourist ghettos in the proximity of

the natural environment. Wetlands are home to a variety of sweet-water fish, a habitat for migratory birds and a balance of the environment. So, it is high time to bring wetlands under a management system to develop haor tourism.