

SAHARA AND THE SUNDARBANS – ECOTOURISM OR MEGATOURISM?

Executive Summary

- Sahara India Pariwar is proposing an 'ecotourism' project in the ecologically fragile mangrove swamps of the Sundarbans in East India.
- EIA does not believe that Sahara's proposals meet with an acceptable definition of ecotourism.
- Based on the available information from Sahara's website, EIA has serious concerns about the environmental and social implications of this project.
- EIA calls upon:
 - The **Government of West Bengal** to reject the proposal as it is currently presented.
 - The **Government of India** to review and amend tourism policy, to ensure that, in the interests of transparency, good governance and corporate accountability, multi-stakeholder forums are established to guarantee that tourism is conducted in a responsible and environmentally sustainable manner.

Introduction

Tourism is now India's largest industry, providing 15% in foreign exchange earnings¹, and wildlife tourism is its fastest growing sector. With the potential to deliver massive economic benefits, global tourism has also been found to contribute to environmental degradation and to the undermining of human rights. Whilst there is a need to harness the positive potential of tourism in India, care must be taken to manage tourism in a manner that does not compromise the integrity of natural resources, including forests and wildlife.

What is Ecotourism?

The application of the term 'ecotourism' has often caused controversy, mainly due to the fact that some providers of conventional tourism use the concept as a marketing tool, without embracing its ethical and environmental basis. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) adopted the following as a definition of ecotourism²:

"Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed areas, in order to enjoy, study and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations"

The above definition demonstrates the ethically led and holistic approach of ecotourism, one in which the well-being of local people, conservation of natural areas and the running of a profitable business are taken as a set of integrated management goals. Ecotourism operations typically tend to be small-scale and sensitive in terms of their impacts on the local environment and culture, involving the participation of local communities as major stakeholders.

When properly managed, such ventures can result in significant benefits to the local community, through increasing

employment opportunities, diversifying the local economy and providing funds for conservation. The ecotourists themselves have a more fulfilling experience by experiencing natural areas in a manner that raises their awareness of sustainable development and engenders respect for local cultures.

A Unique Mangrove Forest

The Sundarbans mangrove forest is one of the world's most outstanding wilderness areas and is part of the planet's largest delta. Formed by the convergence of the rivers Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna, it covers an area of 10,000 square kilometres (km²), just over 40% of which is in India and the rest in Bangladesh.

The Sundarbans National Park (1330 km²), created in 1984, forms the core of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (2585 km²). The high levels of biodiversity and uniqueness were recognised by its designation in 1985 as a World Heritage site and in 1989 as a Biosphere Reserve³.

The forest is home to fifty out of the sixty species of mangroves found in India⁴, hundreds of species of migratory birds, small cats, crocodiles and threatened reptiles. The shallow swamps provide an ideal habitat for juvenile shrimps, crustaceans, molluscs and fish, as well as breeding grounds for endangered species of marine turtles and horseshoe crabs. Furthermore, the forest contains the largest remaining contiguous population of the tiger (*Panthera tigris*), with an estimated population in 2002 of 245 in the Tiger Reserve alone⁵.

In addition to controlling pollution, preventing erosion, protecting coral reefs and buffering against tropical storms, the Sundarbans ecosystem sustains important shrimp fisheries and provides for the livelihoods of thousands of people with firewood, timber, medicines, honey and other natural products.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), of the Government of India, has declared all coastal stretches as protected, and all activities herein subject to regulation, under the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notification⁶. This lists all mangroves as 'ecologically sensitive' areas under CRZ-I, which prohibits new

construction within 500 metres of the High Tide Line.

A Threatened Habitat

The need for protection of the Sundarbans is highlighted by the record of past local mammalian extinctions, including the wild buffalo (*Bubalus huybalis*), the swamp deer (*Cervus duvauceli*) and the hog deer (*Axis porcinus*)⁷. The forest currently faces a number of threats: encroachment from an ever-expanding human population, pollution from the heavy use of water transport, habitat destruction from shrimp aquaculture and a decrease in freshwater inputs (with an associated increase in salinity) due to alterations to river networks. It is, therefore, crucial that tourism does not add to this list and instead becomes a beneficial force.

Sahara's Proposals

Sahara India Pariwar⁸, an Indian business conglomerate, proposes to create a world-class tourism project in the Sundarbans region, worth over US\$155 million and spread over 303.5 hectares of land on a number of islands, including Sagar, L-plot, Kaikhali, Fraserganj, and Jharkhali⁹.

Documents outlining their proposals were submitted to the West Bengal government in 2003¹⁰, but it is not clear if the project has received the necessary environmental clearances from MoEF. EIA has contacted both government officials and Sahara India Pariwar in order to obtain specific details on the plans. However, the only respondent, a member of the West Bengal government, stated that the plan is not available in the public domain. The following information, on which this critique is based, has been obtained from Sahara's own websites^{8,9}.

ACCOMMODATION:

- A mixture of accommodation types, comprising 5-star floating hotels, high-speed boathouses, land-based huts, luxury cottages and tents for 1000 pilgrims at Sagar, an eco-village at Fraserganj. (It is unclear what is meant by an 'eco-village'.)

TRANSPORT/COMMUNICATION:

- Landing jetties, hovercraft, helipads for emergency evacuations, a ``30-seater multi-utility high-speed powercraft for floating clinic, fire fighting and ultra modern security system''⁸ and broadband Internet facilities.

ENERGY:

- Solar power plants on some islands. (It is unclear whether this will be sufficient for the project and what other sources of energy may be required.)

RECREATIONAL FACILITIES:

- Beach development to create ``exclusive, beautiful virgin beach''⁸; development of 36,000 km² of waterways; water-based activities including catamaran services for tourist excursions, aqua sports, e.g. scuba-diving; wildlife watching facilities including an elevated walkway through the forest, watch towers, a tiger/crocodile breeding centre; other land-based facilities including a casino, spa, health, shopping and meditation centres, restaurant complexes and a mini golf course.

EDUCATIONAL/CULTURAL FACILITIES:

- Interpretation centres, an ecology centre, a community hall for traditional art and drama, pottery and a craft museum.

OTHER PROPOSALS:

- Fish/vegetables/shrimp culture. (It is unclear whether or not Sahara intends to set up fish processing in the Sundarbans.)

Why Sahara's Proposal is Not Ecotourism

According to the information on the proposals currently available, EIA is concerned that this project does not satisfy an acceptable definition of ecotourism. In fact, rather than being ecologically and socially sustainable, the project could have potentially damaging implications for the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, the surrounding mangrove forest and the indigenous communities.

Sahara's corruption of the concept of 'ecotourism' seriously undermines the

legitimate use of the term by organisations genuinely seeking an ecologically sustainable alternative to mass tourism.

Sahara's proposals do not meet with the definition of ecotourism as it is applied to conservation, environmental sustainability, local communities and education / cultural respect.

CONSERVATION

- *Ecotourism*: contributes to conservation through: the direct improvement of local habitat e.g. rehabilitation work; donating to environmental or conservation organisations; ensuring that merchandise for sale does not come from rare or threatened species.
- *Sahara*: There is no indication of support for direct conservation of the mangrove forest or for conservation organisations, e.g. Project Tiger. Outside of strictly controlled scientific programmes designed to maintain genetic diversity, there is no conservation benefit to be gained from captive breeding of tigers: 1) there is no need to augment India's substantial captive bred population; 2) they cannot be reintroduced into the wild and 3) there is widespread concern that many captive breeding facilities, some of which have recently been raided in Thailand, are contributing to the illegal trade in tiger parts.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

- *Ecotourism*: employs practices which do not degrade the environment in terms of an appropriate location, construction materials, site disturbance, visual impacts, lighting, water conservation, treatment of effluent, noise, air quality, waste minimisation, energy efficiency and minimal disturbance to wildlife.
- *Sahara*: The development of waterways could threaten the fragile ecology of the mangrove swamps and facilitate poachers' entry into the forest. Increased waterway traffic could increase pollution, whilst floatels could involve higher noise levels and the unnatural use of floodlights, which could disturb wildlife, possibly altering natural breeding behaviour. Increased tourist

flow may increase conflict with tigers and encroach on their habitat. Beach development is likely to include the removal of vegetation, reducing the buffering effect against the sea.

- EIA is aware of opposition to this project on environmental and conservation grounds from Sanctuary Asia⁴.

LOCAL COMMUNITY

- *Ecotourism*: provides ongoing contributions to the local community through purchase of local products/services, employment of local guides, etc.
- *Sahara*: The proposal is for a large-scale project with huge investment in expensive construction work rather than for socially useful development or conservation. The focus on high technology employs relatively fewer workers. There is no indication that local guides and other workers will be employed or that the project will diversify the local economy.
- EIA is aware that there has been opposition to the project from the National Fishworkers Forum¹².

EDUCATION / CULTURAL RESPECT

- *Ecotourism*: embraces the cultural aspects of the area, consulting with local people to allow presentation of authentic cultural values, providing guides with knowledge of local heritage/people, advising ecotourists on appropriate behaviour, etc.
- *Sahara*: The type of construction proposed is not in keeping with the local way of life. There is no indication that the local communities are being properly consulted by Sahara. Far from engendering respect for local people, there are reports that fishworkers are being relocated from the island of Jambudwip to make way for foreign tourists, with a bureaucrat of the West Bengal government reportedly stating that it was 'to get rid of these eyesores'¹³.

Recommendations

- EIA does not believe that Sahara's proposals meet with an acceptable definition of ecotourism, and therefore calls upon the Government of West Bengal to reject the proposal as it is currently presented.
- EIA also calls upon the Government of India to review and amend tourism policy, to ensure that, in the interests of transparency, good governance and corporate accountability, multi-stakeholder forums are established to guarantee that tourism is conducted in a responsible and environmentally sustainable manner.

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