

Exploring Marine Tourism Potentials in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Marine and Coastal tourism, one of the largest components of the tourism industry, is emerging as one of the most promising areas of the tourism sector in particular for the developing nations. While Bangladesh is rich in immense marine and coastal tourism resources, most of the potential for marine tourism remains unexplored; in particular, the tourism prospect of the Bay of Bengal is still in its infancy, making it an unutilized economic area. Therefore, this paper aims to focus on exploring the potentials of marine tourism in the context of Bangladesh. This paper is guided by a qualitative research approach in which both the primary and secondary data collection techniques have been utilized, and following thematic analysis and content analysis techniques, the collected data is analyzed. Based on the findings, the paper presents a number of recommendations for the development of marine tourism products and destinations for Bangladesh. This research is one of the first attempts in Bangladesh that have covered up a very timely and unexplored research area, and it is expected to help both macro and micro level administrators affiliated with tourism, educational institutions, and set a benchmark for future marine tourism researchers in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Marine tourism, Potentials, Developing country, Bangladesh.

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1. Introduction:

Though a lot of tourism treasures such as natural, archeological, historical, rural, and cultural, etc. are extended throughout Bangladesh (Alam, 2017; Rahman et al., 2018), the major coastal and marine tourism activities in this country occur in the southern territory around the sea and coastal belt (Bhuiyan et al., 2020). The country owns 118 813 km² kilometers of territory marine area in the Bay of Bengal (Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research & Development; The Daily Star 2015), whereas dividing into three major divisions as the eastern, central, and western part, the coastline of Bangladesh extends in a total of 710 km from the living coral island St. Martin in the south-east to the pristine Sundarbans mangrove forest in the south-west (Quader, 2010). Both the coastal and marine zone hosts several unique tourism resources such as several beaches (Laboni, Inani, Patenga, Bashbaria, Kattoli, Guliakhali, Bashkhali, etc.) including Cox's Bazar (world's longest unbroken sandy beach) and Kuakata (only beach in Bangladesh from where one can enjoy both the sunrise and sunset scene), Himchori, Maheshkhali island (the only hilly island in Bangladesh), Kutubdia island, Sonadia island, some religious sites (Buddhist temple, pagodas, etc.), diversified tribal culture, St. Martin island (only coral island in Bangladesh), Nijhum Dwip (silent island), many forests (both natural and planted mangroves) including Sundarbans (world's largest mangrove forest), and so on in the coastal zone; and the marine zone contains Swatch of No Ground (SoNG), one of the deepest submarine canyons of the world which is a safe breeding place of large numbers of bottlenose, spinner and spotted dolphins and whales, a huge collections of flora and fauna including 442 species of fish, 36 species of shrimps, 336 mollusks and 3 starfish and many more to mention (Bhuiyan et al., 2020; Kalam & Hossen, 2018; Nobi & Majumder, 2019; Quader, 2010; Shamsuddoha & Islam, 2016). Notwithstanding Bangladesh has huge potential for coastal and marine tourism (Bhuiyan et al., 2020; Nobi, 2017; The Business Standard 2020), very little success has been achieved in coastal tourism; and marine tourism has remained largely ignored (Nobi & Majumder, 2019). As a result, the prospect of tourism along the Bay of Bengal is still in its infancy and is an untapped sector for Bangladesh's economy (Mahmud, 2018).

The key objective of the paper is to explore the marine tourism potentials in Bangladesh. In addressing the principal objective, the impact of marine and coastal tourism from the economic, environmental, social, and cultural aspects is covered as well. To secure the research objectives, this qualitative research followed an in-depth interview technique to collect primary data, and a wide range of secondary literature is reviewed, and the theme-based data analysis method is utilized in this paper. This paper adds value to the existing literature in this research context as well as optimizes the potential use of marine and coastal tourism resources. Though a substantial number of studies have been conducted on the blue economy of Bangladesh (Alam, 2017; Bari, 2017; Hasan et al., 2018; Hussain et al., 2017; Hussain et al., 2018; Islam et al., 2018; Jafrin, 2016; Rahman, 2017; Sarker et al., 2018) most of which mainly focus on the potentials, challenges, suggestions, development strategies of the blue economy, relatively a few works and literature (Bhuiyan et al., 2020; Nobi & Majumder, 2019)

on potentials of marine and coastal tourism context of this country have been found as yet. However, Bhuiyan et al. (2020) narrowed down their research focusing on sustainable development through marine tourism only in Cox's Bazar area whereas relying on some secondary literature, Nobi & Majumder (2019) attempted to hypothetically describe the coastal and marine tourism in Bangladesh.

The novelty of this qualitative research is its' concentration, for the first time in Bangladesh's perspective, particularly on the potential of Marine and Coastal tourism, and obtaining detailed understandings of the viewpoints of stakeholders involved. In doing so, the opinions secured from the stakeholders are analyzed using a six-stage thematic analysis method. The findings and recommendations presented in this research may have wider applicability for both macro and micro level administrators affiliated with tourism, educational institutions, and set a benchmark for the future marine tourism researchers in Bangladesh.

This research paper is structured in three parts. In the first part, a detailed description of the research methods, data collection, and analysis procedures are covered. The second section of the paper discusses the findings with a thematic analysis that evident the importance and contributions of Marine tourism, and the third section generates some policy recommendations for the successful utilization of the country's untapped marine tourism treasures.

2. Research Method

A qualitative research approach has been adopted in this research as it is extensively accepted (Ritchie et al., 2005) and applied research method in tourism research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Jennings, 2004) which help creating a more comprehensive and nuanced assessment of attitude (Shanahan et al., 1999) and in turn, the qualitative perspective contributes to the sustainable development of tourism (Ruiz et al., 2019). Moreover, in the context of the developing nation, the aptitude for using qualitative methods is well recognized when the active participation of the stakeholders is required in the research (Camfield et al., 2009).

3. Sampling

The data collection strategy comprises both primary and secondary methods. This paper adopted the interview approach because it provides researchers with access to the area where they have not been and lived (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001), and thus the primary data collection was done using semi-structured in-depth interview technique which is found best suited in situations where the secondary knowledge is minimal and to obtain a detailed understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of the interviewees (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Minichiello et al., 1995). The stakeholders having experience and knowledge regarding marine tourism in Bangladesh were considered as the population in this research. Within this research design, the purposive judgment sampling technique is used to sample populations (Churchil et al., 2010) accompanied by the Snowball approach as the application of this technique is

advocated when the researchers do not have access to sampling frames and information concerning the target population (Minichiello et al., 1995; Revilla Hernández et al., 2016).

4. Data collection

Dividing into two different phases, in total 12 interviews (including 3 key informants) have been conducted for this research. As selective key informants, firstly, a meeting was arranged with a Professor from Maritime Tourism and Hospitality Management department, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Maritime University, Bangladesh, and later on two more institutional representatives respectively from Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) and Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB) were consulted between February-March, 2020, and asked their assistance to identify the knowledgeable participants for this research. Then the snowball sampling technique was applied as an identification tool for another 11 research participants. During the second phase, from April-mid June 2020, the rest of the interviews were conducted. The following Table 1 summarizes the categories and number of research participants.

Table 1. Categorizing and profiling research participants

Category	Interview code	Quantity
Academician (Maritime tourism; and Tourism and Hospitality Management department)	interview no. 01, 04, 06	03
Institutional Representative (Officials from BPC, BTB, Maritime affairs unit, and Maritime research organization)	interview no. 02, 03, 05, 10, 12	05
Tour Operator	interview no. 07, 08	02
Post Graduate Student (Maritime tourism department)	interview no. 09, 11	02
Total		12

From Table 1, it is evident that the research participant category covers academicians, institutional representatives, tour operators, and postgraduate students. The interviews were carried out using a funnel style to form a relationship between the interviewer and participants (Kidder et al., 1986; Minichiello et al., 1995). Before starting each

interview session, the research aim was shared with the participants, upon consent the whole session was audio-recorded and noted (key points only), and at the end, the zest was summarized to the interviewee for his/her confirmation. Each interview session lasted on an average of 50 minutes. The researchers stopped interviewing when they observed data saturation. Besides, for the triangulation of primary data, a range of secondary sources such as scientific journal articles, books, workshop papers, newspaper clippings, etc. was reviewed.

5. Data Analysis

The Thematic analysis technique, an extensively applied method in tourism and hospitality research to analyze interview transcripts (Walters, 2016), is adopted in this study. For a deeper, richer, and detailed understanding of the interview materials, six stages thematic analysis process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) are followed. Accordingly, all the interview clips were transcribed first, and then necessary information was translated selectively from each. While translating, the data accuracy was assured by cross-checking the translated files with the audio clips forth times altogether. At this stage, to gain a comprehensive understanding, the transcribed documents were reviewed a few times. Finally, the interview transcripts were manually coded and indexed under the probable theme, which was correspondingly refined and defined for producing the final report.

6. Findings and discussions:

The findings from the interviews provided insight into a variety of marine and coastal tourism potentials in Bangladesh which are categorized under four sub-themes i) economic, ii) environmental, iii) social, and iv) cultural. The following Table 2 summarizes the potential contributions of marine and coastal tourism identified by the research participants.

Table 2. The key theme, sub-themes, and potential contributions summarizing the research findings

Key Theme	Sub-themes	Potential contributions
Potentials of Marine Tourism	Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Employment generation ▪ Income generation ▪ Generates foreign currency ▪ Contributes to GDP ▪ Attracts investment ▪ Creates entrepreneurial opportunities
	Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improves marine environment ▪ Enhances environmental conservation ▪ Supports marine ecosystem
	Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enhances quality of life ▪ Infrastructural development ▪ Reduces poverty
	Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Promotes local culture ▪ Protects cultural heritage ▪ Encourages cultural exchange

Most of the research participants opined that marine tourism can elevate the economic phase of Bangladesh by generating a vast number of employment scope, earnings, contributing to GDP, attracting foreign investment, and creating entrepreneurial opportunities. One academic category participant (**interview no. 01**) denoted that “We all know that about 71% of the Earth's surface is water-covered, and the oceans hold about 96.5% of all Earth's water. In most of the littoral countries, the tourism industry has flourished with high dominance, though still, the tourism industry of Bangladesh is completely land-based. If Bangladesh can use its marine resources to offer marine tourism to entice a huge number of tourists, a new horizon will open up. This largest segment of tourism has an extensive prospect to contribute to the economy and GDP.” Another institutional representative category participant's comment fell into the same line which is following-

“...through the introduction of marine tourism, a huge number of employment opportunities will be created that can lessen the unemployment rate of the country as

well as improve the socio-economic conditions of the locals simultaneously.” **(Interview no. 03)**

Marine tourism's potential for creating entrepreneurial opportunities and foreign exchange earnings was acknowledged by most of the participants in this research. In particular, the academic **(interview no. 01, 06)**, institutional **(interview no. 02, 05, 12)**, and tour operator category participants **(interview no. 07, 08)** emphasized marine tourism's potentials in creating entrepreneurs and earning foreign currency. In this regard, two comments of the research participants are presented following-

“...another important thing is that when marine tourism will be developed, it will undoubtedly help to create more entrepreneurs in the country. For example, if we consider surfing, scuba diving, snorkeling, parasailing, and such types of water-based activities as individual industries, just imagine how many people will be employed in each sector.” **(Interview no. 06)**

“Whenever a foreign tourist comes to our land, we earn foreign currency. Suppose, if the international cruise ships bring 1000 foreign tourists to our country in every month. They spend a total of 10 days visiting our marine and coastal tourism destinations and spend a total of 1 million USD (assuming a tourist spends 100\$ per day). Then every year we'll be able to earn an additional 12 million USD.”**(Interview no. 02).**

These findings are also reflected in several scholarly writings which are presented in the following Table 3.

Table 3: Economic potentials of Marine tourism (source: compiled by the authors, 2020)

	Economic contribution	Sources
Marine tourism	Generates revenues	The Business Standard (2020).
	Contributes to GDP	Nobi & Majumder (2019), The New Nation (2020).
	Creates employment opportunities	Bob et al. (2018), Cheong (2002), Nobi & Majumder (2019), Shamsuddoha & Islam (2016), Yacob et al. (2007).
	Generates income	Wilson & Tisdell (2003)
	Produces foreign currency	Cheong (2002), Nobi & Majumder (2019)
	Attracts investment	Gier et al., 2017).

According to The Business Standard (2020), if Marine tourism is introduced and popularized, it will be one of the major sources of revenue earned from this industry

and will contribute to the blue economy of Bangladesh. In this vein, The New Nation (2020) reported that by introducing Marine tourism, Bangladesh can earn 1 billion USD per year to a staggering 10% GDP growth in one decade with Bangladesh's expanded maritime boundary. Besides, Shamsuddoha & Islam (2016) said that the country has enormous potentials for developing coastal and marine tourism while creating huge employment scope for the locals. Similarly, Nobi & Majumder (2019) also stated that marine tourism has the potentials to create employment opportunities and contribute to the GDP of Bangladesh. The potentials of Marine tourism in economic development were highlighted by White & Rosales (2003). Yacob et al. (2007) also showed how eco-tourism in Marine Park contributes to the economy by generating employment opportunities. Similarly, both Bob et al. (2018) and Cheong (2002) affirmed that marine tourism creates a lot of new jobs for the locals. Focusing on the economic benefits of wildlife-based marine tourism, Wilson & Tisdell (2003) argued that this segment of tourism can generate alternative income. Jamshidi (2015) reported that only in Europe, the Marine tourism industry employed over 3.2 million people and generated US\$200 billion approximately. Additionally, both Cheong (2002) and Nobi & Majumder (2019) emphasized marine tourism's potentials in foreign currency earning. Marine tourism can also attract foreign investment in the sub-sector associated with it such as transportation, accommodation, etc. (Gier et al., 2017). It was also reported that, in 2018, the worldwide Marine tourism industry was valued at 58900 million USD, and predicted that by the end of 2024, this industry will reach 81800 million USD, where the Asia-pacific regions, in particular, Southeast Asian countries will dominate more market share of global Marine tourism market in the following years (Marine Tourism Market Report 2020).

Beside these economic potentials, marine tourism also contributes to the environment by enhancing environmental conservation, improving the marine environment, and supporting the marine ecosystem as mentioned by the research participants. For example, a participant (**interview no. 08**) from the tour operator category stated that “most of the tourists are generally attracted by the beauty, cleanliness, and calmness of any tourism destination. To satisfy the tourists, the destination's beautification and cleanliness are maintained and ensured. In this sense, we can say that if marine tourism is introduced, it may improve the marine environment”. In this vein, Orams (1999) claimed that the enhancement of the marine environment is strongly assisted by marine tourism. It can help to preserve marine environmental resources as the community manages and preserves the resources for the tourists so that they can visit and enjoy which ultimately brings benefits to the community (Gier et al., 2017). Added to this, White & Rosales (2003) highlighted the potential contribution of marine tourism in coastal conservation as well. It is also asserted by Nobi & Majumder (2019) that marine tourism protects the marine environment. Similarly, Bozec et al. (2016) and Hicks et al. (2013), cited in Bhuiyan et al., 2020, recognized marine tourism's support to ecosystem services.

However, the topic of ‘sustainability’ was echoed in most of the comments of the research participants. For example, one participant (**interview no. 10**) from the

institutional representative category opined that “sustainable marine tourism conserves marine environment”. In the line of this comment, a post-graduate student also argued that

“Marine tourism can ensure environmental benefits only if it is developed and managed sustainably.” (**Interview no. 11**)

Diedrich (2007) stated that sustainable marine tourism strengthens conservation through its associated benefits. Endorsing sustainable development, Bhuiyan et al. (2020) also confirmed that marine tourism can ensure environmental benefits. The following Table 4 links the findings and scholarly articles regarding marine tourism's contribution to the environment.

Table 4: Environmental potentials of Marine tourism (source: compiled by the authors, 2020).

	Environmental contribution	Sources
Marine tourism	Improves marine environment	Nobi & Majumder (2019), Orams (1999).
	Enhances environmental conservation	Diedrich (2007), Gier et al., (2017), Nobi & Majumder (2019), White & Rosales (2003).
	Supports marine ecosystem	Bhuiyan et al. (2020), Bozec et al. (2016), Hicks et al. (2013).

In terms of social contribution, marine tourism's potentials to enhance the quality of life, infrastructural development, and poverty reduction have been underscored by almost all the participant categories in this research. An academic category participant (**interview no. 06**) said that “...marine tourism can create new jobs for the locals. By involving those jobs, they can earn, increase their income, and improve their quality of life”. This view is also endorsed by two institutional category participants (**interview no. 03, 10**) and one participant (**interview no. 08**) from the tour operator category. In this regard, two more comments from the research participants are presented following.

“If marine tourism is established, then there will be a lot of infrastructural development, as well as many facilities and services will be created in the islands or coastal areas associated with marine tourism. This development otherwise might not have been developed. Undoubtedly the locals will be greatly benefited from this development.” (**Interview no. 10**)

“If people participate in economic activities and earn money, the rate of poverty will decrease automatically.” (**Interview no. 06**)

Aligning these findings, Bhuiyan et al. (2020) revealed that sustainable development of marine tourism can improve quality of life, develop infrastructure, as well as enhance public facilities, and thus ensure social well-being. They also added that investment in marine tourism ensures infrastructure and public facilities development in the destination area. Nobi & Majumder (2019) stated that marine tourism contributes to reducing poverty. Additionally, based on the findings of Diedrich (2007), it can be said that marine tourism development can enhance the quality of life. Table 5 shows the links between the findings and scholarly articles regarding marine tourism's social contribution.

Table 5: Marine tourism's contribution to society (source: compiled by the authors, 2020).

	Social contribution	Sources
Marine tourism	Enhances quality of life	Bhuiyan et al. (2020), Diedrich (2007).
	Infrastructural development	Bhuiyan et al. (2020).
	Reduces poverty	Nobi & Majumder (2019).

The participants in this research also identified some cultural contributions of marine tourism. Most of the participants from the 'academic' as well as 'institutional representative' category claimed that marine tourism can protect, promote, and exchange local culture. For instance, one participant (**Interview no. 12**) from the institutional representative category added that "besides, tourists' continuous appreciation of local cultural elements such as art, music, dance, wearing, craft, cuisine style, etc. may create a strong desire among the locals to renew and protect their culture". With this notion, one academic participant also extended that-

"...we know that tourism brings people into contact with each other. Tourism can promote understanding between tourists and cultures, as well as encourage cultural exchange between guests and hosts. So it can be said that as a segment of the tourism industry, marine tourism also can promote and exchange culture. Moreover, marine tourism can also boost the preservation of culture and traditions, which often contributes to the protection of local heritage, cultural arts, and crafts..." (**Interview no. 04**)

Similarly, Diedrich (2007) argued that marine tourism supports protecting cultural heritage. On a similar note, Gier et al. (2017) stated that marine tourism encourages cultural exchange. Besides, marine tourism activities can also increase demand for local cultural goods and handicrafts (Truong et al., 2014, and Voyer et al. 2018, cited in Bhuiyan et al., 2020) which can create awareness among the locals to protect their

culture. Table 6 shows the link between the findings and scholarly articles regarding marine tourism's contribution to local culture.

Table 6: Cultural contribution of Marine tourism (source: compiled by the authors, 2020).

	Social contribution	Sources
Marine tourism	Protects cultural heritage	Diedrich (2007)
	Promotes local culture	Bhuiyan et al. (2020), Papageorgiou, (2016), Truong et al. (2014), Voyer et al. (2018).
	Encourages cultural exchange	Gier et al. (2017), Nobi & Majumder (2019).

7. Conclusion and suggestions for marine tourism development:

This research aims to explore the marine tourism potentials in Bangladesh. From the findings, the opinions secured from the key stakeholders of marine tourism, it is evident that Bangladesh has enormous potentials in marine tourism. Despite having plenty of resources for marine tourism development, the country dawdles in utilizing this highly promising opportunity. The country has failed to receive the value from this unique sector because of a number of issues including no tourism development master plan (Muneem et al., 2020; Siddiqi, 2019), lack of coordination among ministries and bodies linked with tourism (Failler et al., 2018; Muneem et al., 2020), unsatisfactory performance of Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB) (Muneem et al., 2019), traditional land and airport permitted visa policy (Failler et al., 2018), poor infrastructural services, mass and uncontrolled tourism practices (Shamsuddoha & Islam, 2016), and lack of governmental initiatives regarding marine tourism development.

This research suggests that to utilize the marine tourism potentials, firstly, a proper plan is needed and successful coordination among the ministries, administrative bodies at the central, regional, and local levels, and stakeholders affiliated with marine tourism must be ensured. Updating visa policy with the inclusion of marine port, the introduction of on arrival visa system, tourist-friendly immigration and customs services, port facilities, and assurance of tourists' safety and security is also very crucial for marine tourism development. Additionally, effective marketing and promotional effort, making connections with the international cruise ships, travel agencies, and tour operators, developing joint itineraries, and route maps are also essential in this regard. The Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism needs to play the key role to ensure active involvement and coordination among the other ministries, administrative bodies, and stakeholders associated with tourism, besides, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and BTB

should play the promotional role whereas Bangladesh Tourism Corporation should take all the necessary actions to ensure touristic facilities and services. Most importantly, marine tourism needs to be developed in a sustainable way so that it does not negatively affect the environment, biodiversity, and ecosystem.

This research is one of the first few attempts to explore marine tourism potentials in Bangladesh, and from this viewpoint, this study could be a benchmark for future researchers in this context. By identifying the detailed role of the associated stakeholders, future researchers can concentrate and contribute more to this promising field.

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