**The Sundarbans**

The Sundarbans is the world’s largest contiguous mangrove forest. It covers about 600,000 hectares (ha) in Bangladesh alone and serves as habitat for around 334 species offlora and 375 species of fauna, including the endangered Bengal tiger (*Pantera tigris tigris*).

1973: The Sundarbans Tiger Reserve was created (2584 sq km- approximately 25% of the Sundarbans).

1978 this area was designated ‘Sundarban Forest Reserve (SFR)’

1996: the forest reserve area was expanded to include the whole of the Sundarbans

1997 the area was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO

1998; The Sundarban Biodiversity Conservation Project was initiated.

**Bangladesh**

The total area of Bangladesh section of Sundarbans is 595,000 hectares (ha) of which 139,699ha are protected as follows:

Sundarbans West Wildlife Sanctuary with 71,502ha;

Sundarbans East Wildlife Sanctuary with 31,226ha; and

Sundarbans South Wildlife Sanctuary with 36,970ha.

**India**

Sundarbans National Park (133,010ha), a World Heritage Site, lies to the west in India.

In recent times, population pressure, economic development, and unsustainable management practices have resulted in the rapid depletion and degradation of the SRF’s resources and biodiversity, threatening its very survival as well as the livelihood of many rural people.

**Sundarban Forest Reserve (SFR)**

The SRF attracts around 100,000 tourists per year, generating about $50,000 per year in revenue from entrance fees.3

Around 2.5 million people live in small villages within 20 kilometers of the northern and eastern borders of the SRF within the impact zone. These people are dependent on the forest and waterways for such necessities as firewood, timber for boats, poles for house-posts and rafters, golpatta leaf for roofing, grass for matting, reeds for fencing and fish for their own consumption.

The Sundarbans area also provides a livelihood at certain seasons of the year for an estimated 300,000 people, working variously as wood-cutters, fishermen, and gatherers of honey, golpatta leaves (Nipa fruticans) and grass. Fishermen come in their boats from as far away as Chittagong and establish temporary encampments at various sites along the coast, where they remain until the approach of the monsoon season in April before returning to their homes. The season for collecting honey and wax is limited to two and a half months commencing annually on 1 April.

The core area is free from all human disturbances like collection of wood, honey, fishing and other forest produces. However, in buffer area fishing, honey collection and wood cutting are permitted in limited form.

Protection of the park from poaching and theft of forest products is done by armed forest staff who patrol in motorboats and launches.

Seminars, workshops, awareness camps. are organised frequently in the vicinity of park to educate the people on eco-conservation, eco-development and such other issues.

Mangrove and other plants are planted in the fringe area to meet the local need of fuel wood for about 1000 villages and to conserve the buffer area.

Controlling man-eating tigers is another major activity. The number of casualties has been reduced from 40 to 10 per year. The reduction in number of casualties is a result of strict control of the movement of the people inside the tiger reserve.. Straying of tigers into nearby villages is tackled through measures like nylon net fencing, and the use of human dummies to frighten them off. The villagers are also given training in how to deal with tigers which stray into the villages.

The [Mangrove Interpretation Centre](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mangrove_Interpretation_Centre&action=edit&redlink=1) is established at [Sajnekhali](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sajnekhali&action=edit&redlink=1) to make the local people and tourists aware about importance of conservation of nature in general and specially the mangrove eco-systems.

**Constraints**

Though there is tough protection in the park there are a few loopholes. The geographical topography with hostile terrain criss-crossed by several rivers and their tributaries, long international border with [Bangladesh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh), fishing trawlers and launches helps in poaching, cutting of wood and also affecting the mangrove forests.

Lack of staff, infrastructure and lack of funds also added up the factors.

There is also still conflict between local people and the tigers who move into the buffer zone.

**Sundarbans Biodiversity Conservation Project (SBPC) 1999-2006**

The **Sundarbans Biodiversity Conservation Project** was implemented by the Government of Bangladesh in 1999, and was intended to run until 2006.

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION (Asian Development Bank Publication)**

The Sundarbans Biodiversity Conservation Project was designed with the goals of conserving the environment and biodiversity of the SRF and alieviating poverty in the area.

The objective of the Project was to develop a system for sustainable management and conservation of the SRF and the surrounding impact and marine zones. 5 The Project consisted of six components:

* effective organization of the SRF;
* biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management;
* socioeconomic development of the impact zone;
* ecotourism and environmental awareness;
* technical advice, monitoring, and research studies;
* an effluent treatment facility for the Khulna Newsprint Mills (KNM). 6

The ADB was the major funder of the project, providing US $ 37 million out of the total project cost of US $ 82.2 million. SBCP’s consultancy budget was managed entirely by the ADB, who allocated 61% of the total expenditure to consultancy, most of which went to foreign consultants.

**Project Failure**

The project was intended to take place between 1999 and 2006, but the implementing agency and co-funder, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), suspended the project in September 2003, citing problems with project design, the implementation of some activities, and financial management.

The ADB then formally and unilaterally cancelled their commitment in early 2005, blaming Bangladesh’s Forest Department (FD) for failing to take steps to revise the project.

**Specific issues arising include**

1. **Corruption**

* Local people had to apply for permits to carry on their activities in the production area, but this meant extra expense as they were forced to bribe Forest Department officials in order to obtain these permits. (see videos)
* Local people also had to pay Forest Department officials to provide them with armed protection from bandits when they travelled through the production area by boat.
* Forestry Department officials were involved in illegal logging operations in the area.

1. **Lack of participation**

* To enable participation by local people in the project, part of the plan was to create a Stakeholder Advisory Council (SAC).

The SAC was expected to be a forum for expression of views and concerns for numerous stakeholders of the SRF. Representatives of user groups (e.g., woodcutters; fisherfolk; shrimp fry, fuelwood, and honey collectors; and tour operators) were to be nominated to the SAC by nongovernment organizations (NGOs) engaged under the Project. However, due to the delay in mobilizing NGOs under the Project, The Ministry of the Environment and Forests handpicked nominees to represent user groups in the SAC. The SAC met once in 2004 but it lacked credibility since the members were not considered to be true representatives of the user groups. Hence the SAC did not serve an effective role in the Project.

1. **Promotion of non-environmentally friendly practices.**

* The project also caused widespread protest among the local NGOs and affected communities, who criticised the so-called ‘environmental conservation’ project for failing to take into account the real forces causing damage to the ecosystem. Industrial shrimp farming, which has converted thousands of hectares of agricultural village land to commercially-controlled ponds, has created severe ecological problems and displaced whole communities from their lands. (See earlier work on shrimp farming)
* Instead of addressing this and other issues of biodiversity loss, the SBCP actually encouraged aquaculture practice through micro-credit schemes. The SBCP watch group, formed of local community members, was particularly vocal in challenging the injustices of this project and the exploitation of their natural resources.

Useful Extension Reading: Pages 7-10 : http://unnayan.org/reports/Deserting.the.Sundarbans.pdf

In recent times, population pressure, economic development, and unsustainable management practices have resulted in the rapid depletion and degradation of the SRF’s resources and biodiversity, threatening its very survival as well as the livelihood of many rural people.

**Compare this management strategy to:-**

**Kinabatangan Corridor of life (Sabah, Malaysia)**

WWF (NGO) initiated, high level of local participation(eg MESCOT/KOPEL)

**Badas (Brunei)**

National Forest Reserve, managed by Government Forest Dept. No local communities involved.