

# Marine Tourism in Cox's Bazar: Impact of COVID-19 and Measures to Recuperate

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The ocean, with its marine environment, has become one of the new frontiers of the world's tourism industry. Bangladesh, a maritime nation is gifted with enormous potential for the expansion of marine tourism. Cox's Bazar, with an unbroken 120 km. long sea beach is considered as the longest sea beach in the world. This district is the home of several attractive tourist spots (like Laboni point, Himchori, Inani beach, Sonadia Island, T9knaf sea beach, Saint Martin's Island, Cheradwip, etc.) and around 70% domestic/international tourists prefer to visit Cox's Bay. It has tremendous potential for becoming an international tourist hotspot for marine tourism. It has been published in different print media that the annual turnover from tourism in Cox's Bazar is about BDT 100 billion. Despite the contribution in the economy, the marine tourism experiences a bunch of challenges in Cox's Bazar that create hindrances to further development. On the other hand, since the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 pandemic has been

generating tough challenges towards the development of marine tourism in Bangladesh. Considering the above scenario, this article would highlight the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector of Cox's Bazar and recommend some possible measures to expand marine tourism amid and post-COVID situation. To develop the article, information has been gathered from secondary sources and also from discussions with a few relevant stakeholders.

## **Marine Tourism in Cox's Bazar: Impact of COVID-19**

The foremost economic activity in Cox's Bazar is based on tourism. A number of hotels, guest houses, motels, restaurants, shops have been built in the city and coastal areas. Besides, many small traders and tourism service providers are involved in marine tourism services to lead their livelihood. It has been published in a news report that according to different tour operators, local hotels, motels and transport



services, the number of domestic tourists in Cox's Bazar rose to 15 million in 2019 from 10 million a year earlier. But due to lockdown since March 2020 for COVID-19 outbreak and announcement of the district as a red zone on 6 June 2020, daily transactions of BDT 250 to 300 million are no longer taking place. However, Cox's Bazar sea beach has been reopened for the visitors again from 17 August 2020 on a limited scale. As per the information of Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh; because of COVID-19, all sectors of tourism, except aviation, have suffered losses amounting to BDT 57-59 billion between January and mid-July 2020. On the other hand, the impact of COVID-19 in Cox's Bazar is immense, which has affected the activities and livelihood of tour operators, hoteliers, food and beverage owners, employees; beach bike/horse/speed boat providers; beach photographers, small traders in the tourist's spots, transportation workers, more over a large number of people who are dependent on the tourism sector in Cox's Bazar. About 0.3 million people directly associated with this industry are facing financial loss.

According to few small traders, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, pickles, showpieces and ornaments made with oysters worth BDT 20,000 to 25,000 were sold daily on the beach. However,

the traders have been generating no remarkable income during the pandemic, even still after reopening of the beach. About 600 beach photographers have lost their occupations and earning from the kitkats-beach umbrella service, is decreased too due to the absence of tourists in the sea beach.

It is worth to note that around 470 hotels and motels, more than 2,000 eateries, Burmese markets and 5,000 tourism-dependent businesses in Cox's Bazar were shut down entirely from 3rd week of March to 3rd week of August 2020, due to the pandemic. It was also learned that about 40,000 employees of hotels, motels, restaurants and more than 150 tour operators were out of work since lockdown. Traders, during COVID-19 pandemic, are struggling to pay bank loans, salaries of employees and shop rents. Hence, the marine tourism in Cox's Bazar faced losses around BDT 10 billion due to the general holidays with the shutdown for four and a half months. As per the opinion of Cox's Bazar Chamber of Commerce and Industries, the district has lost more than BDT 100 billion in commercial activities till June 2020. So, from the mentioned scenario, we can realise how much the marine tourism in Cox's Bazar has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Government Initiatives**

Bangladesh government has undertaken several initiatives to flourish the marine tourism and already offered stimulus package. It offered BDT 30 billion working capital for the COVID-19 affected industries and service sectors. Besides, budget allocation worth BDT 36.88 billion for Civil Aviation and Tourism Ministry in the fiscal year 2020-21 may support the marine tourism stakeholders in Cox's Bazar. Again, Bangladesh also has started the practice of national SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) for the tourism sector.

## **Ways Forward**

We still do not know when this COVID-19 pandemic would come to an end, or people would be able to move without fear. The world is waiting for an effective COVID-19 vaccine. Though the Bangladesh Government has undertaken robust initiatives, hence, the country needs to prepare a technical analysis to tap opportunities for the development of marine tourism further. Therefore, a few measures to expand the marine tourism in Cox's Bazar and other surrounding areas amid and post-COVID-19 pandemic, are recommended hereafter.

## **Recommended Immediate Initiatives**

- a) Nation-wide training schemes for stakeholders on hygienic and responsible tourism.
- b) Facilitation of hygiene-based, IT-based, guided tourism service for small group of tourists.
- c) Adequate and proper distribution of Government declared stimulus package and budget.
- d) Continuous policy dialogues to ensure necessary coordination among the stakeholders focusing Plan of Actions.
- e) 'Restoration of Travelers' confidence ensuring hygiene issues in the tourist spots, transportation corridors and place of accommodations and movements.

## **Recommended Future Initiatives in Post-COVID Situation**

- a) Branding the country as a hub of marine tourism and development of a comprehensive maritime tourism strategy.
- b) Public and private joint investment in research and development as well as capability enhancement to build skilled human resources.
- c) Declaration of some areas exclusively for foreign visitors ensuring adequate tourism service and safety measures.
- d) Introduction/ expansion of exciting beach sports and recreational activities, such as boating, snorkeling, sport-fishing, underwater exploration, parasailing, etc.
- e) Facilitation of MICE tourism (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions), cultural events/competitions, beach carnivals, seafood festivals, sports tournaments, day/evening camping, kite flying festivals, musical shows/concerts, awareness campaigns, the celebration of national days; Bengali New Year etc.
- f) Facilitation of budget and family-friendly standard accommodations, infrastructures & facilities in tourist spots and development in transportation system.
- g) Facilitation of eco-tourism in islands and selected tourists spots.
- h) Establishment of marine parks, large aquarium, marine museum, floating restaurants, restaurants and theme parks along the marine drive.
- j) Facilitation of marine tourism diplomacy and adoption of one-stop tourism service for international tourists.
- k) Sea route from Chattogram to Saint Martin's Island via Cox's Bazar and another route from Cox's Bazar to the Kuakata, Sundarbans (vice versa) can be envisaged. Besides, the introduction of cruise shipping towards 'Swatch of No Ground' maintaining Government rules

and regulations can be envisaged as well.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The marine tourism in Bangladesh has evolved despite many global and domestic crises. But, now it needs time with congenial policy guidelines to bounce again in the post-COVID-19 situation. Currently, Bangladesh needs to focus on flourishing marine tourism to create more employment opportunities. The relevant ministries, public and private agencies, research and academic institutions need to develop further action plans to work in coordination. Bangladesh may learn

from the initiatives of other countries and proceed further to avail cooperation. The business analysts all over the globe are assuming that in the post-COVID-19 situation, the house arrest people will be more attracted to domestic or international tourism. Therefore, would the stakeholders of the marine tourism sector in Cox's Bazar and Bangladesh as a whole be ready soon enough to entertain the expected volume of tourists with adequate health & security measures, policy supports, transportation and other facilities.

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