

A Correspondent

Bagerhat: The Sundarbans, one of the country's most popular tourism spots, witnessed a dramatic drop in visitors during the peak tourism season this winter due to the ongoing countrywide blockade enforced by the opposition alliance.

"Peak tourism season continues in the Sundarbans. But the local and foreign tourists could not visit the tourist spot due to the ongoing political blockade. Tourists do not want to visit the Sundarbans putting their lives at risk on highways during the blockade," Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) of Sundarbans East Amir Hossain Chowdhury told.

He said tourist arrivals in the forest has rapidly declined in the current tourism season, which is contributing to a decline in tourism revenues from the Sundarbans area.

Private tour operating companies have been facing a setback in their business during the ongoing tourism season.

Director of the Guide Tours Limited Hasan Mahbub Bablu told that they have had practically no business since the start of ongoing blockade on January 6.

"Our four launches remain idle. Some 15 tours have already been cancelled and if the blockade continues, more tours will be cancelled," he added.

According to the data of the Forest Department, a total of 48,921 tourists visited the Sundarbans in last six months (July to December 2014). Among the total tourists, some 46,940 were domestic tourists while 1,981 people were foreign tourists.

During the period, the Forest Department of the Sundarbans collected about Tk 45.5 lakh from tourists. But a very small amount of that revenue came in the last two months due to the countrywide political instability, and the Sundarbans is lacking tourists since January 6, 2015 due to the existing blockade enforced by BNP-led 20-party alliance.

According to the Forest Department, foreign tourists have to pay Tk 300 to visit the protected areas of the Sundarbans while domestic tourists pay Tk 150. Entry fee of Karamjol Tourists Spot is Tk 20 for domestic tourists and Tk 300 for foreign tourists. Except the protected areas, the foreign tourists must pay Tk 1,000 to visit other parts of the Sundarbans, while the fee is Tk 70 for domestic tourists.

The Sundarbans is a unique ecosystem with the largest single block of tidal halophytic mangrove forest in the world. The Sundarbans covers around 6017 square kilometers in Bangladesh, and is a Unesco World Heritage Site. It is also covered by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.

The Sundarbans is also one of the largest natural habitats of Bengal tigers, a critically endangered species.

The most popular tourist spots of the Sundarbans are Karamjal, Harbaria, Supati, Katka, Kochikhali, Nilkamol, Dublarchar, Shekherhat Temple, Mandarbari sea beach and Kalirchar. Pugmark Tours and Travels proprietor Nazrul Islam said his company has already incurred a loss of Tk 40 lakh as seven tours of foreign and domestic travellers have been cancelled due to the ongoing blockade.