

UGONG ROCK – ECOTOURISM THAT BEGINS IN A PADDY FIELD

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INTRODUCTION

Puerto Princesa City in Palawan is endowed with rich natural resources and high cultural diversity. This is the main reason its tourism products and services are geared towards ecological tourism. Relative to its geographical location, the City has six tourist destination circuits (Puerto Princesa City Tourism Office 2011). Ugong Rock is in the northwest circuit along with the Puerto Princesa Underground River or PPUR (one of the world's 7 new wonders of nature) and seven others.

Ugong Rock, which means a "humming rock" as guests gently tap on stalactites inside its caves, is a unique karst outcrop in a rice field of a farming village in Tagabinet, Puerto Princesa City. According to Philippine Travel Forum (2013), Ugong Rock is second best ecotourism site to visit in Puerto Princesa City. It is about one and a half hour drive towards the western seaboard of the City.

Ugong Rock was identified as one of the alternative destinations of PPUR under the community-based sustainable tourism (CBST) program of the City Government of Puerto Princesa. Organized in 2006 as an association, it is now managed by Tagabinet Ugong Rock Service Cooperative. This cooperative was organized with the assistance of ABS-CBN Foundation, Inc., a private partner.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, field observation and key informant interview methods were used. Field data gathering was done in early March 2013. In addition, secondary data from the Puerto Princesa City Tourism Office were gathered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exploring Inside

According to the site ecotour guide, Ugong Rock is a 50-meter high limestone formation, which is believed to have developed some 20 million years ago undersea and buoyed up by tectonic plate movement. It has features of a cave (Figure 1) and was once a dwelling place of Palawan's *Tagbanua* tribe. Before entering the cave and climbing up the limestone formation, a ritual or prayer is recited by the group's head or site ecotour guide. Once inside, permission to take pictures has to be uttered from time to time in respect of local tradition. As one ascend numerous plants and herbs are found, which according to the tour guide served as food ingredients and herbal medicine of the tribesmen.



FIGURE 1. Smooth surfaces inside the cave at Ugong Rock, Tagabinet, Puerto Princesa City

Karstic View

At the top is a panoramic view deck (Figure 2), where one could enjoy sightseeing and taking pictures of the vast PPUR National Park karst forest and its surrounding rice paddies. There are two ways of going down from here, following the trail as one climbs up through caves or the zip line adventure. The two popular zips are sitting position and superman descend (Figure 3).



FIGURE 2. PPUR National Park Karst forest (background) and rice paddies (below) at Ugong Rock



FIGURE 3. Preparing for a superman descend at Ugong Rock view deck

Number of Guests and Project Beneficiaries

The number of guests in the last four years is presented in Figure 4. Business started to pick up in the later part of 2011 bringing the average daily guests to 200. Entrance fee varies from PhP 200 (US\$ 4.65) – Spelunking only; PhP 450 (US\$ 10.46) – Spelunking + Zip line (Sitting); and PhP 550 (US\$ 12.79) - Spelunking + Zip line (Superman).

According to key informants, about 40 members are receiving a monthly income between PhP 7,000 to 15,000 (US\$ 162.79 to 348.84). From this income, they were able to send their children to higher education.

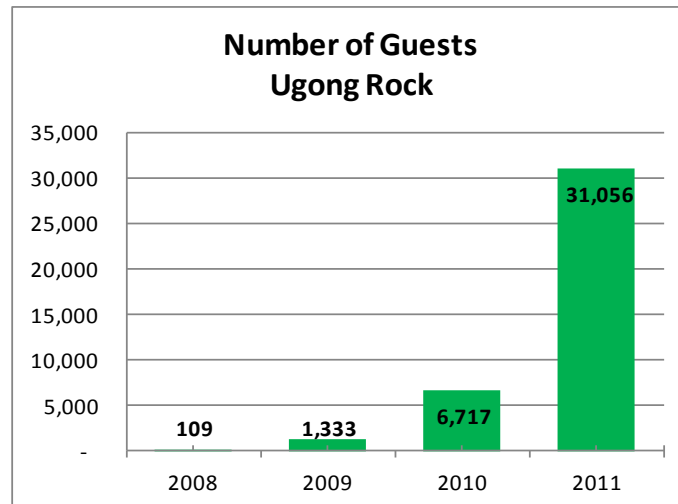


FIGURE 4. Number of Guests at Ugong Rock

CONCLUSION

In the past seven years, Ugong Rock management has met with a lot of challenges, some are common to community-based organizations and some are extraordinary. Management has to comply with government regulatory reporting system. Proper record-keeping is a must as the cooperative's business volume is getting bigger. Overcoming the challenges of the past seven years with the help of its partners, Tagabinet Ugong Rock Service Cooperative looks to the future with optimism.

REFERENCES

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