

MANGROVE PADDLE-BOAT ECOTOURISM: CONSERVING CENTURY-OLD GROWTH FOREST AT CABAYUGAN, PUERTO PRINCESA CITY

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INTRODUCTION

Community-based ecotourism (CBET) has emerged as a popular tool for biodiversity conservation. The Mangrove Paddle Boat Tour (MPBT), a CBET located in the village of Sabang, Cabayugan, Puerto Princesa City, is a strategy to protect and conserve the century-old mangrove forest along the Cabayugan River, which is part of the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park (PPSRNP) reservation.

The mangrove paddle-boat ecological tour covers a distance of about 1.2 kilometers from river mouth upstream. A view of public records from the Puerto Princesa Tourism Office, key informant interviews and field observations were utilized as data gathering methods. Fieldwork was conducted in March 2013.

CENTURY-OLD MANGROVES

The attractions include century-old grown mangrove forest, a variety of fauna and other aquatic animals that inhabit the area. According to a local guide, this area hosts the most number of mangrove species in the Philippines, including *Rhizophora apiculata*, *R. mucronata* and *Bruguiera gymnorhiza* among others. The condition of mangroves found in this part of PPSRNP is pristine, a typical forest in Palawan before many migrants from various parts of the Philippines came over to enjoy the bounties of the province (Regoniel 2012). The paddle-boat ecotour is a 45-minute to an hour ride along century-old mangroves in Cabayugan River (Figure 1). Local guides educate tourists about mangrove conservation, wildlife, and the area's significance to their livelihood. They also serenade visitors with locally-composed eco-songs and one about mangroves popularized by tour guide "Lady Mangrove." A mangrove-planting activity by the visitors caps the tour.



FIGURE 1. Paddle-boat tour along century –old mangroves



FIGURE 2. MBTGAI officers and a group of ecotourists pose at the Mangrove Paddle -Boat Tour signage

DIRECT ECONOMIC BENEFITS TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

MPBT is managed by a 28-member Mangrove Paddle-Boat Tour Guide Association, Inc. (MPBTGAI) since 2001 (Andrade, 2008) with the support of Conservation International (CI), the local government of Puerto Princesa, the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) and the United Nations Foundation (Figure 2). Ecotour fee is PhP 200 (US\$ 5). The gains are divided as follows: 80% for the boatmen and tour guides of the day, while the 20% goes to a trust fund where half is allocated for the maintenance of boats and operational emergencies and the other half goes to the local barangay unit (Ortega, *interview*). For 2011 and 2012 respectively, the total amounts of PhP 334,389 (US\$ 8,360) and PhP 356,720 (US\$ 8,918) from the Trust Fund were shared equally by the MPBTGAI and the barangay council (Santander, *interview*).

ADDRESSING MBTGAI'S OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

Thirty individual tourists per day are required to breakeven the tour operations. Without an ample market to appreciate MPBT as an ecotourism-product, the MPBTGAI's effort to conserve the mangrove forest is challenged. With few visitors to the site, the funding to support the conservation initiatives diminishes. To address this concern, the MPBTGAI members planned to increase the tour operations by improving infrastructure and enhancing its member's frontline skills in order to provide better service to ecotourists. Along with the capability-building initiatives, a more effective information dissemination and environmentally-responsible marketing for promoting the MPBT has been considered. The most recent project of the association is a mangrove nursery which could be a source of revenue for MPBTGAI in the future (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3. A glimpse of the association's mangrove nursery project

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