

TRANSFORMING PROTECTED AREAS INTO EFFECTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM DESTINATIONS: LESSONS FROM THE GROUND

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ABSTRACT

A common problem faced by park area managers is the perennial funding crunch, which results to ineffective enforcement of conservation laws and measures. Transforming these protected areas into ecotourism sites is an excellent avenue not only for sustainable community development, but more importantly, as an economic development strategy. This paper is an outcome of the Action Research Project of the Center for Development Management (CDM) of the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) on Protected Area Management. Some National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) sites showed success in surmounting this funding obstacle by developing the ecotourism potential of their respective locations. This paper draws lessons from the experiences of some selected protected areas including but not limited to the following: the Rajah Sikatuna Park, the Olango Bird and Wildlife Sanctuary, the Puerto Princesa Underground River (PPUR), the Tubbataha Reefs National Park, the Apo Island Seascape and Landscape, etc. It discusses practical considerations on how to utilize ecotourism in promoting appreciation of and support for nature conservation and local culture, while generating economic opportunities for the community.

Keywords: protected areas, ecotourism, NIPAS, sustainable development

1 BACKGROUND

Protected areas are “*clearly defined geographical spaces, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values*” (Dudley 2008). These areas are considered the cornerstones of conservation strategies spearheaded by local, national, and international actors—both public and private. They are as close to virginal as any area in the modern world could be, so they become refuges and havens for species and ecological processes that would otherwise not survive in habitats that are quickly being taken over by development.

Falling under the umbrella of protected areas are a wide range of ecosystems—grasslands, wetlands, forests, coastal and marine areas, etc. These areas, when protected and allowed to flourish, ensure that ecosystem services—like the provision of clean water, acting as a reservoir for resources, and protecting the soil, among many others—are constantly and sustainably delivered (EEA 2010).

However, most stakeholders agree that protected areas face a lot of challenges. According to the WWF (2013), these problems include: (1) poor representation of habitats, as they are not well accounted for in the current list of protected areas; (2) lack of connectivity, since protected areas are for all intents and purposes walled off from the outside world and can only support so many individuals of the same species, leading to isolation from natural habitats; (3) lack of funds and poor management, since merely declaring a site as a protected area is not enough (i.e. stakeholders need money, training, etc.); and (4) human activities, since our actions can lead to pollution, introduction of invasive species, climate change, and other negative effects.

In the Philippines, the most common problems faced by a destination are concentrated on three major areas: (1) perennial funding crunch; (2) lack of training; and (3) the gap between ecotourism principles and practices (Bagadion & Soriano 2013). A research was conducted on the National Integrated Protected Areas (NIPAS) system to determine the issues and challenges in its external environment as well as the gaps in the implementing units involved. Although protected areas generate income through various ways such as donations, endowments and grants; entrance fees and fines; taxes for the permitted sale of flora and fauna; proceeds from the lease of multiple use areas; and contributions from industries and facilities, these are inadequate to finance the maintenance and operations (Bagadion & Soriano 2013). Three successive DENR reports also underscored the inadequacy of funding in these areas (DENR 2012). Financing is therefore a necessary condition for effective implementation of conservation programs.

Protected areas exist for two reasons: (1) to ensure that the ecosystem within that protected area is preserved and allowed to thrive so that the communities and/or stakeholders involved in the conservation of the site will gain something from their efforts and (2) to guarantee that these sites are used to generate income, livelihoods, and other forms of service to the community. Ecotourism is the best option available to make sure that these are met.

This paper presents successful cases wherein obstacles in protected area management were conquered through the utilization of ecotourism potential in their locations. Likewise, emphasis is also placed on the importance of park personnel acquiring additional skills beyond their traditional biological expertise as well as on building alliances with the private sector and other stakeholders for resource mobilization.

2 SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY

Tourism is one of the most low-impact approaches to maximizing the potential of protected areas, especially when it is effectively managed. Tourism is a global phenomenon. Not only has it been hailed as the largest industry in the world (Goeldner & Ritchie 2011; Ninemeier & Perdue 2007; Walker & Walker 2010; Tarabanov 2007), it also continues to experience "expansion and diversification, becoming one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors" (UNWTO 2011).

Ecotourism is a niche market within the tourism sector, with the potential of being an important sustainable development tool for nature conservation, visitor education, and community building (Wood 2012). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) in 1990 gave one of the earliest

definitions of ecotourism – *"Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people"* (TIES 2013). While it is still centered on providing an enjoyable experience, the primary functions of ecotourism include the protection of the site itself, revenue production, as well as local participation, education, and capacity-building. The entire value chain of ecotourism activity – from planning and development, to implementation, marketing, and operations – should be environmentally, socially, culturally, and economically sustainable (Wood 2012).

Sustainable ecotourism relies on local knowledge, provides significant local income, and encourage communities to place a high value on protected areas, resulting in net conservation benefits (Denman 2001). Ecotourism can be integrated with other sectors of the rural economy, thus, creating mutually supportive linkages and reducing financial leakage away from the area. In principle, multiple sector activity within the community should be encouraged.

Because ecotourism started not as a discipline but as an idea, stakeholders, particularly the government, operationalized it without a clear idea of what the principles of ecotourism are. The International Ecotourism Society managed to track the results of stakeholder meetings which led to the formulation of the ecotourism components and principles (Wood 2012). However, most research reveals that there is a gap between the theories of ecotourism and local practices which caused problems in the areas. There were limited stakeholder involvement and participation, some activities were also likely to bring negative socio-cultural effects, economic, and environmental effects to the community. Among the challenges faced by destinations were related to leadership and control structures, degradation of the environment, and lack of/inadequate infrastructure, financial support, and research (Juan 2012).

To make sure that all the stakeholders, especially the local community, receive benefits from the tourism venture, the importance of a tourism management strategy must be emphasized. However, quite often, the managers, organizations, and other stakeholders in protected areas are inexperienced in managing tourism ventures in a professional and sustainable manner. This setback is a growing problem, especially in developing countries (Strasdas 2002). This was corroborated in the discussion during the Fourth ASEAN Heritage Parks Conference in 2013, wherein participants concurred that although ecotourism is a vital tool for national development, it is not properly implemented due to problems associated with knowledge transfer (ACB 2013). Therefore, there is a need for significant support measures such as capacity-building, training, and resource mobilization.

3 ECOTOURISM AS AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Ecotourism is a dynamic economic engine that can spur healthy economic growth in most underdeveloped areas (EplerWood Report 2004). By increasing market share and improving microbusiness conditions in a destination, ecotourism can be an effective tool for poverty alleviation. As a labor-intensive industry, ecotourism provides jobs to the local communities through craft production, guiding services, vehicle rentals, and recreation services. Employment opportunities are also available within the transportation, accommodation, and food service sectors. Local residents may also put up their own small tourism enterprises with very minimal capital requirements such as food stands, travel services, souvenir shops, ecolodges, etc. These

types of businesses do not only benefit the local communities, but also play a crucial role in the success of their ecotourism destination.

One best way to measure ecotourism's positive effect on the economy is through the multiplier effect. The revenue received will be spent and respent, causing direct and indirect financial benefits to the community. Collective economic benefits also include improvement in human capital; source of income through tourist receipts and taxes; development of infrastructure and improvement of vital facilities like electricity, water, communication, health services, etc. Ultimately, the local residents will benefit from all these developments.

4 LESSONS FROM THE GROUND

This paper draws lessons from the experiences of some selected protected and conservation areas including, but not limited to: the Puerto Princesa Underground River (PPUR), Tubbataha Reefs National Park, Gilutongan Marine Sanctuary (GMS), Rajah Sikatuna Park, the Olango Bird and Wildlife Sanctuary, the Apo Island Seascape and Landscape, and the Mapawa Nature Park of the Emmanuel Pelaez Ranch, Inc. The literature presents the conceptual theories as the foundation for developing an effective ecotourism strategy. In addition, the studies cited earlier serve to corroborate and support this paper. Ecotourism has proven itself to be a vital engine for nature conservation, and in certain cases, it has improved the quality of life of the local people. In order to ensure an effective ecotourism strategy, different stakeholders must be involved. The private sector must agree to the guidelines and regulations, the government must be competent in ecotourism management, and the local community must actively engage in ecotourism planning and development. Transforming protected areas into effective ecotourism destinations may be a difficult task, but the ecotourism cases presented here clearly show that it can be done.

4.1 Nature Product as a Starting Point

One must start with a nature product or a scenic sight: something that people would be attracted to, something that people would find aesthetically pleasing. A nature product can be an awe-inspiring sight that highlights the wonders of nature and at the same time, it can also be a potential setting for nature activities such as mountain climbing, bird watching, and scuba diving.

The Gilutongan Marine Sanctuary (GMS) in Cordova, Cebu is well-known for its extensive collection of corals and reef fishes. These natural wonders have drawn the attention, not only of casual tourists but also of scuba divers and yacht owners. Meanwhile, Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary is a stopover for more than 30 species of migratory birds, in addition to its 103 species of reef building corals. The Sanctuary has become well-known for offering a one-of-a-kind birdwatching experience. Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, also known as PPUR, is perhaps one of the best examples of a nature product that attracted both local and international attention. With its limestone karst landscape, mineral rock formations, stalactites, and unique species, it was hailed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO and as one of the finalists in the online competition, "New Seven Wonders of Nature." The river's beautiful scenery and extensive ecosystem is an excellent example of a nature product that was successfully promoted through ecotourism. While the biodiversity of the species inhabiting the area is by itself an

attraction, the geological features heighten the area's appeal and increase its value as a nature product.

4.2 Make the World Know Your Beautiful Product (Marketing Strategy)

No matter how rich in biodiversity or unique in geological features a nature product is, it will not gather steam unless it is supplemented with a marketing strategy. In today's fast-paced, technology-driven world, a viable marketing strategy is needed to attract peoples' attention. This can come in the form of a media campaign with advertisements plugged into print, television, and social media websites.

PPUR is a very good example of a nature product that was marketed successfully, thanks to the efforts of the local government. Before it was heaped with international recognition, PPUR used to be just like any other local protected area - resplendent with natural wonders, but unknown to the general public. The local government launched an online campaign that showcased the biodiversity and geological features of the underground river. Soon enough, tourists were flocking to PPUR in droves, eager to experience the natural wonders being advertised online. As a result, PPUR became the country's most successful ecotourism spot.

Several protected areas thrive on ecotourism because they were able to market themselves as premier destinations that offer activities such as snorkelling, diving, mooring, and anchoring. Pujada Bay in Mati, Davao Oriental draws more than 3,000 tourists monthly because of its lush beaches and white sand. The marketing strategy of the area is cemented by new commercial establishments that provide even more amenities and opportunities for visiting tourists. Apo Island Protected Landscape and Seascape in Dauin, Negros Oriental is home to several diving schools, while the Tubbataha Reefs National Park is reputed to be one of the best diving destinations in the world. Despite having unique selling points, the other protected areas in the country do not fare as well as PPUR in ecotourism. However, this does not mean that they are inferior in terms of species biodiversity and geological features. What these destinations lack is a viable marketing strategy that can boost ecotourism. For example, the Rajah Sikatuna Protected Landscape (RSPL) in Bohol has a high biodiversity which includes several endangered species, a karst-type forest, and five watersheds; it is also located along a tourist route that boasts scenic attractions such as the Chocolate Hills and old historic churches, yet tourist inflow is nil. Although RSPL has a high potential for ecotourism because of its rich biodiversity, scenery, and location, it is not maximized due to the lack of a marketing strategy.

Another example is the Emmanuel Pelaez Ranch, Inc. (EPRI), a nature park in Cagayan de Oro City that offers recreational activities such as camping, horseback riding, river treks, and even environmental education talks. Despite having plenty of activities that tourists can enjoy on-site, it still suffers from low tourism numbers. A good marketing strategy can give protected areas such as RSPL and EPRI get the recognition they deserve, as well as achieve much-needed ecotourism revenue targets.

4.3 Inputs toward Site Accessibility and Tourism

A nature product with significant aesthetic value and marketing strategy will not be enough to ensure ecotourism success, however. Inputs are pivotal to the success of any ecotourism endeavor. Inputs can be classified as hard or soft: the hard ones consist of infrastructures, while

the soft ones consist of management policies, systems and structures, and logistics to support the operation of the ecotourism destinations. With regards to area inputs, infrastructure is a very important factor. Putting up infrastructure such as roads, pathways, wharfs, and guest houses would make the site accessible and tourist-friendly.

Years ago, travel to PPUR from the city center used to be a 3-hour-long bumpy ride through rough road. In order to make the site more accessible to tourists, the local government unit pushed for cementing the road going to Sabang, the jump-off point to PPUR, thus greatly reducing the travel time. A wharf was constructed for the boats that bring tourists to and from PPUR and a system of boats that ferry passengers inside the cave was also established, along with cavern lights to aid the view inside.

Aside from infrastructure, the nature product should also have a solid management support system and logistics and policies, or soft inputs. This includes the availability of trained tourist guides, competent personnel to handle the influx of tourists, enforcement of site policies, tourism pricing, and security. For example, in GMS, the buffer zone is guarded and maintained by a Filipino-Korean Corporation that provides employment to community residents by assigning them as collectors of tourism receipts, restaurant staff, and maintenance personnel.

4.4 Mobilize Private Sector Participation

Another important factor for effective ecotourism destination is private sector participation. The private sectors can be tapped for resource mobilization and management expertise. In GMS, a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) was negotiated between the local government and the Filipino-Korean Corporation. Under the PPP's terms, the local government was put in charge of enforcing policies and protecting the area while the Corporation managed fee collection and marketing. In Tubbataha, the private sector developed a lucrative business of bringing divers to exotic destinations through live-aboard boats. Ultimately, it is the private sector in search of good returns that will drive the ecotourism development, but in the context of protected areas, this must be in partnership with the government.

4.5 Community Participation

Engaging the local communities is an essential part of ecotourism to ensure that they have an equitable share in its benefits. Community-based ecotourism should be based on the general principles of social equity, cultural integrity, and poverty alleviation policies. Ecotourism is an excellent tool to encourage community participation for their direct economic benefits. More importantly, engagement of the community is essential to guarantee sustainability of the project. Mechanisms that ensure a degree of local control and equitable community-wide benefit distribution must be made available. Enabling a community to benefit from an ecotourism program gives people a stake in said program. They are wont to participate in the protection efforts such as Bantay Dagat or Bantay Gubat initiatives, thus ensuring the security of the area and the tourists. The community would perceive that a threat to the tourists or to the natural resource of the area is a threat to their livelihoods and their welfare. Therefore, they will act accordingly to protect these.

There are many ways by which an ecotourism program can benefit a community. In PPUR, community members were hired as rangers to patrol and protect the area while the communities benefited further through social development projects. Meanwhile, in the Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary, the park management allowed members of the community to pursue livelihood opportunities in the transport service sector. The residents drove passenger boats, motorbikes, multicabs, and tricycles, speeding up the transportation of tourists to and from the area. A local cooperative was also set up to run a community-based ecotourism project wherein the residents served as local tour guides and food vendors. In the Apo Island Protected Landscape and Seascape, a thriving hotel and diving business developed and provided employment to community members. Some community members set up their own businesses to cater to the tourist market while enterprising ones turned their houses into homestays to accommodate tourists interested in local immersion.

4.6 Avoiding Elite Capture

With the proliferation of economic opportunities spawned by an ecotourism program, mechanisms must be established to avoid elite capture and democratize economic opportunities to spread the tourism benefits evenly. One must avoid a situation wherein only the outsiders or the local elite benefit from the business windfalls generated by the ecotourism development of the area. For example, in PPUR, a one family-one boat policy was established to avoid monopolization of the transport business by a few rich families in the area. This is in sharp contrast to one protected area where most of the businesses in the area were owned by one local village politician. Spreading the economic benefits evenly would result in less conflict, establish stability, and lay the foundations of long term peace and order, a *sine qua non* for tourism development.

4.7 Enhanced Environmental Protection in Anticipation of Second-Generation Problems

Last but certainly not the least, protection of natural resources in any area should always remain a top priority. With the passage of time, tourists may swell in numbers and infrastructure will inevitably expand to accommodate the increased demand. However, there is a danger that natural resources may be compromised or forgotten, especially if the stakeholders of the ecotourism project are distracted or blinded by huge revenues. Overloading of trash could easily destroy the ecosystem and lead to a drain on natural resources. In the cases of Pujada Bay and Boracay Island, deteriorating biophysical conditions, elevated nutrient levels, and sedimentation threaten to break the biodiversity of the area. Strengthened environmental protocols must be established to prevent the deterioration of the environment.

An example of effective natural resource protection can be seen in the setup of GMS. In order to conserve and protect GMS' natural resources, the Municipality of Cordova enforced a delineation of the 14.89-hectare area via two zones: the core zone and the buffer zone. The buffer zone is where tourism activities such as scuba diving take place while the core zone is understood as a "no-take, no-entry" zone, and is marked prominently by buoys. Tourists who enter the buffer zone are charged with an Environmental User's Fee (EUF), with the price depending on their activities.

4.8 Leadership

The presence of a catalyst and an organizer is necessary to make an ecotourism program fly. In Puerto Princesa City, former Mayor Edward Hagedorn was the moving force that made PPUR into what it is today. He mobilized local funds and resources to provide the hard and soft inputs needed to fuel the program. Aside from this, he also put into place the different building blocks that constituted the foundation of the ecotourism program. He was instrumental in making PPUR world renowned.

Likewise, the park area superintendents in the protected areas have the potential to be essential catalysts and organizers, but to be effective, they must first develop their skills beyond their present biological competence in addition to learning management and networking skills. Similarly, proper incentives must be given to motivate park area managers to develop ecotourism strategies. Currently, the park area superintendents are overworked and overburdened, thus, they tend to view an ecotourism function as an added burden and responsibility. Without an effective catalyst and organizer on the ground, protected areas will never fly.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The lessons derived from the analysis of the protected area cases suggest that there are seven building blocks for turning protected areas into effective and sustainable ecotourism destinations: 1) Nature product, 2) Marketing strategy, 3) Inputs, 4) Private sector participation, 5) Community benefits and participation, 6) Enhanced environmental protection in the area, and 7) Leadership.

With the knowledge gained above, the next step is to formulate a working model and develop guidelines to transform these building blocks into effective programs and projects. A workshop for policy makers and a training program for area managers and supervisors should follow suit to jumpstart and institutionalize the change process to be introduced.

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