

Promoting Ecotourism: A Case Study on Sagada, Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations, and the facilities created to cater to their needs. According to UNESCO (n.d), tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries and an important source of foreign exchange and employment for many developing countries. Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundlandt Report, n.d). Tourism can be a contribution to the sustainable development of an area. It contributes to the economic status of the area because of the wide range of services it can provide to individuals such as work in the hotels, travel agencies, and other establishments around the tourist spot. The tourism industry provides job opportunities to the people.

According to UN (n.d), the tourism industry that promotes environment protection is a big contributor to the socio-economic profile of the country or the area. Tourism also has been responsible in maintaining the quality of the environment and to ensure the provision of satisfying experiences for visiting tourists. Ecotourism is the protection of the environment and the preservation of the natural resources. It is also respecting the culture of the place and not exploiting its resources. Ecotourism is a phenomenon wherein it will greatly affect the sustainable development of the area because of the indicators it can bring about such as the economic, social, and environmental aspects (Kiper, 2013).

Despite these positive impacts and potential benefits that ecotourism has to offer, it has its own set of negative impacts especially in socio-cultural aspects and the environment. According to the National Statistics Coordination Board, *“there are one hundred ten (110) indigenous ethno-linguistic groups in the Philippines with an estimated total population of*

around 12 million found in the various parts of the country, comprising 17 percent of the total population” (NSCB, n.d). Ecotourism has a direct effect on these indigenous people as they are easily subjected to discrimination and exploitation. Most of the location of tourist spots is where the minority tribes or the indigenous people live. The whole process of developing an area for ecotourism itself or urbanizing the area causes different disturbances that disrupt the livelihood and lifestyle of these marginalized people. The establishments that will be built will somehow be in competition with the local stores in the area. This also jeopardizes the preservation of the culture heritage of these different tribes as they will inevitably encounter different elements of the developed world, new cultures, technology and ideologies.

“The planet’s natural resources are consumed or contaminated by its human population. Human survival needs drinkable water, breathable air and usable biological diversity. Natural ecosystems are the world’s primary reservoirs for each of these” (Buckley, 2008, p.5). This statement implicates that an increase in population possibly because of an increase in economic growth will lead to a more rapid depletion of natural resources. Hence this makes it a very pertinent view on the impacts of ecotourism. Furthermore, a very important outlook made by Do, et al. (2011) is the technological advancements we have had for decades in transportation. Faster cars, bikes, planes and boats have significantly enabled us to travel long distances and reach desired destinations in a short amount of time. However these technological advancements have also significantly contributed to the pollution of our environment. In the context of ecotourism, pollution is also a highly detrimental factor for sustainability.

Ecotourism induces change in the environment. These changes include several development benefits. The Philippines is known for famous tourist spots, beautiful sceneries, and breath-taking beaches. But an underutilized ecotourism sector, with the right amount of support

and funding will make protected areas highly lucrative, productive and sustainable. Developing ecotourism sites will help sustain and preserve the precious elements of the location. The transformation process of these ecotourism sites will also impact and improve accessibility in these areas attracting both foreign and local tourists.

Promoting ecotourism is also by being responsible tourists by not harming the environment with their certain agendas in the place. The Marine Bio (n.d) stated that *“a good ecotourism operation will strive to support the community and encourage travellers to be culturally sensitive by training and employing local people and by purchasing local supplies and services to further stimulate the economy.”*

The government plays an important role in the tourism industry as the source of funds in enhancing the infrastructures. As well as private institutions who help in enhancing tourism in the country. The tourists who visit the tourist spots in the area also play an important role in the tourism industry because they are the ones who contribute in the protection of the environment or the surroundings of the place they are visiting. It is in their hands on how they are going to maintain and enhance the beauty of the environment of the place they are visiting. The community of the area is also part of promoting ecotourism because they play as the role model of the tourists. These people are the ones who set example in maintaining and preserving the beauty of the place. Businesses surrounding the tourist spot such as souvenir shops, restaurants, lodges, etc. are of help in marketing the place. If the products or goods they sell in the shops or they provide good services to the tourists then they will be the talk of the town, which means that the place will be known for certain products and good quality of service.

Furthermore, ecotourism can increase community participation. According to *Bagadion and Del Fierro-Juan (2013)*, this will ensure the equitable distribution of the benefits. This is

also the key to maintain a sustainable form of ecotourism. Community participation enables constituents to become stakeholders themselves. Constituents will also adapt to the business opportunities that is in line with the ecotourism establishments such as transportation services, retail and consumer industries and hospitality.

Some organizations have provided their ecotourism principles and concepts to be practiced. One example of this organization is the United Nation World Trade Organization (UNWTO). This organization has provided three (3) main concepts on what sustainable tourism should be. 1) Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity. 2) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance. 3) Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

With these three (3) main concepts, ecotourism is not just about promoting and enhancing the environment and the natural resources but to also respect the culture and heritage sites in the place that the tourists are visiting. In a way, ecotourism is also promoting the community development. With the tourists/guests following the necessary rules and regulations to be observed in the place they are visiting, the community wherein the attraction/destination sites can be found will be highly respected – and with that, the preservation of the culture of the people living in the place will still be practiced. As for the long term goal of the concepts and principles of ecotourism, it will help provide more opportunities to the place such as providing jobs to the

people, marketing the area to attract more visitors and investors which may result to having a sustainable ecotourism development.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has funded Ethiopia's Ecotourism Development Program. This program shall protect natural resources and cultural heritage sites and improve the livelihoods and quality of life of local communities. The goals of this program are similar to the concepts and principles of the UNWTO. These goals are expected to be the results to a stronger tourism in Ethiopia. The preservation of the cultural and heritage sites is the most important factor in promoting ecotourism because this will help the area in attracting tourists. The tourists would want something unique and extra-ordinary for their travelling purpose.

ECOTOURISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

As an archipelago composed of 7,107 islands, the Philippines offers countless attractions to see. There are many tourism activities that can be done in the tourist spots in the Philippines such as kayaking, scuba diving, hiking, sight-seeing, surfing, and many more. The Philippines attracted 3,267,542 visitors starting from January 2014 until August 2014 (Official Website of Tourism, 2014). Tourism is a major contributor to the economy of the Philippines contributing to 6.0 percent to the gross domestic product (GDP) as of 2012 based on National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB). The NSCB was able to collect the GDP of the Philippines starting from the year 2000 until 2012. Throughout these years, the statistics of the year 2012 reached a good percentage under the tourism industry. They measured accommodations, food and beverage serving services, transportation services (whether land, air, or water transportation services), travel agencies and other reservation services, entertainment and recreation, shopping, miscellaneous, and other products.

In relation to the country's GDP, the tourism industry also has provided more jobs in the Philippines. As of 2009 statistics of the employees in the travel and tour agencies (NSCB), a total of 67,974 employees were hired and worked under the tourism industry.

The 2009 Survey of Tourism Establishments in the Philippines (STEP) for Transport Operators, Tour and Travel Agencies – Final Results – summarizing the survey of tourism establishments in the Philippines (STEP) for transport operators, tour and travel agencies, every tourists/guests are provided with the services they need such as tour packages, online reservation/booking and all transportation facilities. Overall, the tourists/guests were provided with the necessary accommodations and services which were of delight to them. Eagles, et al. (2002) mentioned that tourists are demanding quality service from the places where they stay in because for them it is their only time to relax and enjoy the ambiance of the place where they are staying in. Also, providing quality service to the tourists/guests will enhance and promote tourism in the area. It will attract more tourists which will be advantageous to the attraction site.

With the positive results of the aforementioned survey, the jobs that were provided, the visitors that come and go in the country, and aligning it with the GDP of the Philippines under the tourism industry, it is safe to say that the tourism industry is one of the biggest indicators of the sustainable development of the country.

In order to further promote and enhance the ecotourism in the Philippines, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) implemented an administrative order that states the principles of ecotourism and the guidelines of planning, developing, and managing the ecotourism. This administrative order was effective last August 2013. The objectives of this order are as follows: 1.) to institutionalize ecotourism planning and management process in protected area management 2.) to promote advocacy on the concept and

principles of ecotourism 3.) To introduce ecotourism businesses in protected areas both as a conservation strategy and an economic development option through viable business partnerships with the local government units or the private sector 4.) to promote inclusive equity of socio-economic benefits to the local community and indigenous cultural communities and encourage community participation 5.) to ensure the participation of both women and men in the ecotourism planning and management and that gender-related issues are addressed in the ecotourism management plan.

The goal of the DENR was to achieve stronger ecotourism in the Philippines by following the objectives they have set for the attraction sites here in the Philippines. As mentioned earlier, tourism provides many opportunities. It can provide jobs which will add to the manpower in providing services to the tourists. This is similar to what Eagles, et. al (2002) mentioned – that tourists will keep coming back if the service quality is great and it satisfies their stay in the area.

The objectives of the order that was made by the DENR was aligned to a bigger goal with the concepts and principles of ecotourism. The concepts and principles of ecotourism based on the order by the DENR are as follows: 1.) Conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. 2.) Ownership by the local communities providing them business opportunities to sustain their well-being. 3.) Gender responsiveness and adherence to inclusive growth that considers women, children, indigenous peoples and informal sector activities. 4.) Promotion of learning experience and conservation awareness. 5.) Responsible action on the part of tourists and the tourism industry. 6.) Deliver to appropriate number of participants and businesses that observe and follow ecotourism and conservation concepts, ensuring appropriate development and visitor control.

With the established or implemented order of the DENR regarding the concepts and principles of ecotourism, it will not only promote and enhance the ecotourism but it will also address the sustainable development in tourism. According to Eriksson (2013), promoting ecotourism will result to the sustainability of tourism itself because *“it serves to provide tourism products and services while accommodating for the economic, social and environmental aspects of society.”* Thus, catering to the needs and wants of the tourists in the country shall contribute in each aspect aforementioned which will lead to sustainable development.

To further support the implementation of the order by the DENR, they will be providing funding to the local government units of the different regions and to the non-government organizations that are helping in enhancing the attraction sites. The DENR will be responsible for the allocation of funds. The money will be coming from funding agencies and the institutions that will be tapped by the LGUs. Additional funds will be coming from the overseas development assistance. With the funds that will be provided, this will be of greater help to the tourist spots because the local government unit in the area will be able to enhance the tourist spot and build other infrastructures and more businesses in the vicinity. The enhancement of the tourist spot and the construction of other infrastructures and businesses will attract more visitors and investors in the area – infrastructures such as “historic, cultural, religious and heritage sites and prime tourist destinations”. The government will also be funding the places that are capable of becoming tourist spots if enhanced (Tourism Act of 2009). In connection to the funding of the infrastructures, training procedures will be provided to the workers as part of the human resources development (Order 19, 2013). The Tourism Act of 2009 is to provide training modules, to educate the workers, and to conduct seminars in order to enhance their skills and be prepared in guiding the tourists. All the government and non-government institutions that are

involved or will be involved in the tourism industry will be informed about all changes and necessary pre-cautions in preserving the natural resources of the Philippines. The DENR will also be aligning all the activities in the places with the concepts and principles of ecotourism aforementioned. There will be a monitoring and evaluation phase to see if all involved are complying with all the necessary things that were implemented.

These concepts and principles given by the DENR, UNWTO, and USAID are just three of the many ecotourism concepts and principles. There are many organizations that have contributed to the concepts and principles of ecotourism. Each one of these organizations all have the bigger goal they want to achieve which is to preserve the environment, protect the wildlife, preserve the culture and heritage sites which lead up to promoting ecotourism in every place in the world because this will help the country achieve a sustainable development.

CASE STUDY: SAGADA, PHILIPPINES

Sagada is the perfect getaway for thrill-seekers, nature-lovers, and soul searchers alike. It is small town atop Mountain Province in Northern Luzon, 275 km from Manila. With a vast array of natural wonders, from caves to rice terraces to waterfalls, this town is an adventure haven. Many foreigners and Filipinos alike visit this place for a breath of fresh air.

As part of Sagada's marketing strategies, they made their official website (The Sagada Genuine Guides Association Inc.) wherein the tourists can look up all the things they need to know before going to Sagada. Their official website also shows the places of where to visit, eat, relax, stay for a day or two, the rates of the transportation and lodging, etc. If the local government unit of Sagada wants to attract visitors and investors in the place, they would want their guests to feel secured while they are staying in the premises of Sagada. The official website

also provided what routes to take in order to get to Sagada safely. As part of promoting the place, the visitors/tourists need to feel safe and secured while they are having their vacation. With these guidelines that the Sagada has provided, they will surely attract visitors and investors to visit the place. It is a common and modernistic practice to promote ecotourism via website which will connect the rest of the world to this distant destination.

One of the researchers, Miguel Hernando, visited to Sagada over the summer. In which the following statements were based on the first-hand experience of the researcher in Sagada. *“After going back and forth from the places we visited, we found our place of residence for our stay, ‘Hidden Hill Inn’. We were greeted by the very friendly innkeeper, ‘John’ whose hospitality far exceeded that of our expectations and exemplified the trait that the Filipino is famous for.”*

In a report by Anita Pleumaron on a study by Juline R. Dulnuan, it was mentioned that tourism came to Sagada effortlessly as more and more people knew about the place. The community capitalized on this opportunity and started opening up inns for the visitors. Pleumaron (n.d) enumerates the other forms of livelihood that blossomed from the boom in tourism such as souvenir vending, dining establishments, transport, and tour guiding. The study showed that the locals perceived the effects of tourism as mainly beneficial and brought them prosperity in totality. In spite of this success, development was concentrated on those with the capacity to put up businesses while a large majority of the farming population remained farmers and may even have been damaged by the tourism industry in the forms of environmental destruction, land use, and the privatization of water. Still, the fact that tourism is being facilitated by the community gives better opportunity for inclusive development.

Another challenge that Sagada faced as to accordance of the report is the lack of ordinances and guidelines about issues such as zoning, sale of land, and environmental practices.

This does not seem to be much of a problem for now as Hernando (2014) stated that Sagada was still a “serene and peaceful town” in his visit in last summer.

Tourism has also seemed to have a negative effect on both natural and cultural resources. Sagada’s untouched beauty doesn’t remain as “untouched” as it once was. Vandalism and litter can be seen in some of tourist attractions. The conservative culture of the locals also causes culture shock when visitors are for example, rowdy and noisy, or overly intimate. Nevertheless, the culture and practices of the townspeople are still very much alive and have survived alongside the adoption of more modern activities.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATION IN SUSTAINING ECOTOURISM

From the researcher’s experience in Sagada, several points can be raised. First is the lax implementation of laws and policies. Although Sagada is a very peaceful town and the need for stricter law implementations seems unnecessary, some concerns such as the cleanliness of the environment must be addressed. At this point, land, air, or water pollution in Sagada is far from out of control, but the town should definitely not wait for the mentioned situation to happen. Another development that could be made in Sagada is the improvement of the roads leading up to the town. As mentioned by the researcher, the roads were very risky to travel. Construction is occurring on these roads but operations should probably be sped up to encourage more tourism in Sagada as well as providing its residents with easier access to other areas. Other developments may be suggested for Sagada, but it is our opinion that any drastic urbanization or technological or commercial advances would ruin the ambience that tourists come looking for in this simple, charming little town.

Sagada's use of ecotourism to promote development seems to have been successful and steadily growing through the years. However, there are some limitations to it as Sagada is still developing certain indicators of sustainable ecotourism. It has given sustainability to both the townspeople, and the natural resources it contains. In the researcher's experience, the local government fees were paid to the respective offices during the first day, while on the next day, the same tour guide dealt with us directly. This seems to provide a good balance between government revenue and income opportunity for the locals. The businesses of the locals all seem to be interconnected, where tour guides would recommend their favorite eating places, souvenir shops, and inns. The community operates in a network that seems to be very effectively and efficiently sustain the small population that reside in the town and from the research conducted. With the information on-hand, Sagada will continue to provide sustenance for its people, conservation in the environment, and income generating tourism for generations to come.

In the case of Sagada, most of its ecotourism sites are situated in the mountain ranges. Overtime, with the help of the beautiful destinations located in the area, different establishments were made available to accommodate visitors resulting into an increase in economic activity within the area. Souvenir establishments, hotels and restaurants produced jobs that helped in the economic boost of the people in Sagada.

According to the Business and Development Research conducted by authors Bagadion and Del Fierro-Juan (2013) of the Asian Institute of Management, there are several improvements that can still be made to improve and transform protected areas to an effective and sustainable ecotourism destination. This shall be applied in Sagada's case. The research stated that identifying an available distinct *nature product* should be made a priority. Something that showcases the wonders of nature that is majestic and remarkably astonishing that also poses a

potential for nature-activities like hiking, scuba-diving, etc. Sagada was already successful in this project. The research also emphasized the importance of marketing. The use of advertisements, media campaigns, and social media are highly recommended to attract people and other potential investments. Additionally the research also stressed the importance of accessibility. Tourism and accessibility goes hand in hand. The Philippines has a lot of tourist destinations varying from beaches, caves, mountains, etc. Unfortunately, reaching some of these destinations will prove to be difficult because of undeveloped roads, absence of ports and even political instability. Addressing these issues will drastically improve accessibility in beautiful tourist destinations the Philippines has to offer. Sagada is located at the northern region of the Philippines hence airports and ship ports will prove beneficial in increasing accessibility.

With proper planning and acknowledgment of natural environments and its needs for preservation, community-based ecotourism development in communities located in the Philippines is achievable. According to Sproule (n.d), “community-based ecotourism refers to ecotourism enterprises that are owned and managed by the community. It’s implied that a community is taking care of its natural resources in order to gain income through operating a tourism enterprise and using that income to better the lives of its members. Hence, CBE involves conservation, business enterprise, and community development.” The participation of people in ecotourism development is what will set the timeline of the goals. The decisions made by community representatives are one of the things that ecotourism is supported by because their decisions will decide the fate of the environment. The benefits of ecotourism development would be the opportunities offered to the people in the community (like jobs for income) and preservation of the environment. For development to occur there has to be funds for the projects. Funding usually come from partners. The partners that are usually present are government

partners, members of the private sector, and NGO's. But the one who would play the most important role as a partner would be the government partners. If you get support from the government, legalization of the project and what is needed to be done for a successful ecotourism development project (Sproule, n.d). By doing such, tourism in the Philippines will continue to grow from all the possible discoveries and preservations of environment.

In terms of management and resource mobilization, the private sector can be tapped to be able to produce good returns that will benefit all stakeholders. However the research has suggested that it should still be within the bounds and partnership with the government to avoid a situation wherein only the elites will reap the benefits. Sagada must utilize this and increase its network within the private sector that will help manage the ecotourism site and sustain it. A healthy relationship between government, stakeholders and the private sector will help sustain the environment, economy the society. Finally, the researchers believe that a strong management is also the key for a sustainable ecotourism sector. Responsible use of the location and protection should remain a priority amongst the stakeholders to limit damages that it might cause to the environment and ecosystems to fully ensure sustainability.

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