



Developing Community-Based Ecotourism in Minalungao National Park

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Abstract

The study dealt with the present socio-economic status, perceptions and opportunities of maximizing the benefits of ecotourism to the local community. Responses from the local community, officials of the local government unit, and visitors using quantitative and qualitative method, particularly the inductive approach through survey, observation and interview was used. Local community involvement in tourism activity is limited to tour guiding, particularly the children, while the rest of the population are into farming, fishing and harvesting forest products. The park was categorized as “Protected Landscape” under Republic Act 7586, now gaining its popularity and one of the fastest growing ecotourism sites in the Philippines is under the supervision of a private company. Visitor satisfaction and potential risk on environmental degradation were observed due to lack of regulation on the observance of carrying capacity. Tourism Action Plan for the destination was prepared but allocation for project for the local community that would contribute to their present socio-economic status was not evident. The geographical unit of the destination, its breath-taking view, the presence of various distinct flora and fauna made it to be labelled as the “Hidden Paradise and Mystical Eco-tourism in Nueva Ecija”. Sustainability in ecotourism, involves the participation of the communities that protect and manage the natural resources, cultural and indigenous knowledge and practices, environmental education and ethics. Community involvement equipped with proper education and conservation awareness, training, and employment opportunities may sustain the destination and enhance visitor satisfaction.

Keywords: Community-based, hidden paradise, Minalungao, protected area, socio-economic benefits

Introduction

One of the pressing matters concerning the tourism industry is how to think of possible plans to destinations that appropriately optimize equitable benefits for the local communities while reducing adverse impacts of tourism. The United Nation’s declaration of “International Year of Ecotourism” in 2002 gave rise to the popularity of ecotourism worldwide and a new term “Community-based Ecotourism (CBET)” with a principle of active community participation (Suansri, 2002). Despite its growing popularity it remains impoverished and still had limited access to resources and benefits from conservation areas. Sustainability of the environment while improving the community’s livelihood are among the aspects that should be considered. Guidelines for Community-based Ecotourism Development (WWF International, 2001) showed the result of the studies conducted to different countries such as Malaysia, Namibia and Brazil, in determining whether ecotourism is an appropriate option prior to preceding stages such as planning with communities and other stakeholders; developing viable community-based ecotourism projects and strengthening the benefits to the community and the environment. This is to assure that community-based ecotourism will be in the “context of conservation, sustainable development and responsible tourism.”

What is Community-Based Tourism?

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is tourism activity, community owned and operated, and managed or coordinated at the community level that contributes to the well-being of



communities through supporting sustainable livelihoods and protecting valued socio-cultural traditions and natural and cultural heritage resources. (ASEAN Community-Based Standard, 2016). Its main concept is to empower the local community by providing viable projects mutually beneficial to host-guest relationship.

Based on the definition, CBT is important in improving the social and economic condition of the community without sacrificing their cultural tradition, natural and cultural heritage. Community involvement in tourism will enhance their pride through being self-sufficient and responsible in contributing to the conservation and preservation of their natural and socio-cultural attractions. Visitors' satisfaction will be enhanced through a meaningful host-guest interaction.

Why this study?

Tourism has been the priority of the government in terms of promotion and investment as identified in the Philippine Development Plan 2011-2016. As reported in the Quarterly Meeting held in Bacolod City by the Philippine Association for Government Budget Administration (PAGBA) in 2017, tourism revenue gradually increased at 20% per annum with 4% annual increase in employment. This will be strengthened by the National Tourism Development Plan 2016-2022 in where "expanding economic opportunities and increase access to economic opportunities" in reducing inequality through acceleration of human capital development and valuing cultural diversity are given importance.

In the Philippines, Ecotourism is defined by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources/Department of Tourism (DENR/DOT) as "part of tourism that conducts activity in a natural environment for the sake of conserving its natural form and cultural aspect while promoting environmental understanding and education." It enhances its potential as tourist destination and yields the socio-economic effect for the concerned community. The term "ecologically sustainable" implies a suitable return to the local community and long-lasting conservation of the resource.

Several ecotourism sites were identified such as Olango Bird Watching in Cebu, Cambuhat River Cruising and Pamilacan Island Dolphin Watching in Bohol. Aside from the identified ecotourism sites, DENR also listed several protected areas in the Philippines based on its landscape, seascape, game refuge and bird sanctuary, resources reserves, managed resource reserves, national parks and natural parks.

Minalungao National Park, located in the foothills of Sierra Madre mountain range in Barangay Pias, the municipality of Gen. Tinio, Nueva Ecija, was established as a protected area by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources by virtue of Republic Act 5100 issued on June 17, 1967. In compliance with Republic Act 7586, otherwise known as NIPAS Act of 1992, Protected Area Suitability Assessment was conducted where it was recommended under the category "Protected Landscape". The recommendation is based on its geological formations suited for recreational activities that will provide public enjoyment through recreation and tourism within the normal lifestyles and economic activity of the area. Aside from its breathtaking view, it is also rich in distinct flora and fauna not to mention its historical significance. However, at present, the park is under the supervision of GALCO, a privately owned corporation therefore limiting the economic benefits of the locals in the destination.

Objectives

In developing the community-based ecotourism in the destination, the research seeks to investigate the present socio-economic status of the locals, their perception on the proposed development and how these benefits may be maximized.



The aims of this research is therefore:

1. To document how tourism activities at present affect the socio-economic condition of the local community as observed by the locals themselves, the local government officials and the visitors
2. To examine the challenges and opportunities of the community-based tourism development in enhancing the socio-economic status of the locals.
3. To recommend strategies for developing community-based tourism in the area.

Literature Review

Sustainable Tourism

The environment is one of the most vital parts of the economy. It gives natural resources that can deplete or accumulate its sources and could help gain a large sum of capital. "Ecosystems as natural Assets" gather and review different approaches on how to value ecosystem services, focusing on the problem of benefits that vary spatially across landscapes and illustrated with the example of coastal ecosystem. The model starts with the basic natural asset with the assumption that any natural environment that is conserved must compete with other assets in the portfolio of wealth owners in the economy. This shows the importance of optimal allocating or landscape and the costs of maintaining this service to vary with the spatial distance across the natural landscape and finally for examining the effects of the risk of ecological collapse (Barbier, 2009).

Sustainable development is often based on the three on the three pillars of sustainability model using social, economic and environmental indicators, by measuring each pillar could help improve the sustainability of the whole system. In the case of South West Victoria, sustainability was found to be largely determined by the conditions of the environment (Wallis, et.al., 2011). Further, an empirical evaluation of 'sustainable development preferences', "aims to have a better understanding preference for different combinations of assets that comprise (part of) the asset portfolio of a nation meaning choosing an asset and finding its weak and strong preference using different compensation option (Lázaro-Touza, & Atkinson, 2013).

The "Theory of Sustainability" (Ekardt, 2016) describes sustainability as a form of economy and society that is lasting and can be lived on a global scale. The society-changing potential of the claim: 'More justice between generations, more global justice - at the same time' faces the peril of getting oversight. This theory represents the levels of definition, causes (external hindrances and motivation), necessity (normative questions on why sustainability be attractive), balancing (sustainability is required from a legal or moral point of view if it's against competing interest) and enforcements (effectively attain the chosen goals; include making strategies to overcome obstacles) helps in understanding the concept of sustainability. Over the years, the concept of sustainability has evolved in the three pillars of sustainability (social, economic and environmental). "Environmental Sustainability" is focused on its geophysical aspects meaning, maintaining or improving the Earth's life support system. These, however, resulted to problems involving the economic sustainability in which due to financial crisis, there are countries who view sustainability focusing on economic pillar and cast over the sustainability of development based on economic progress (Hak, Moldan & Dahl 2012).

The study "Externality or sustainability economics?" discussed the concepts between environmental externality and sustainability. Other aspects that needs further studies include the distinction between weak and strong sustainability, spatial sustainability and sustainable trade, distinctive sustainability policy and the ideas of early sustainability economists (Van de Bergh, 2010). The study probed that sustainability does not imply zero externalities. However, whenever the environmental policy internalizes environmental externalities, then sustainability will be ensured (Bithas, 2011).



Sustainable tourism's primary goal is to develop and manage tourism activities that will conserve the protected sites, preserve the natural attractions that will make the place desirable to visit and live in. It aims to help the local community such as giving job opportunities and business opportunities to help in their daily lives. The idea of sustainability has several dimensions and principles and the most important dimensions are: First, the Environmental Sustainability, where it needs to sustain the beauty and importance of the environment avoiding the negative impacts of tourism activities. Second, the Social Sustainability that refers to the local people accommodating and interacting the tourists without harming anything such as their culture and tradition. And lastly, the Economic Sustainability that refers to the level of economic gain and other considerations that will determine the economic sustainability of the community (Nicolaidis, 2015; Khairat and Maher, 2010).

Community-Based Tourism Development

Developing countries have seen the value of tourism as an important contributor in its economy. However, in an effort to help improve the economic condition of the community and alleviate poverty, not all forms of tourism development maximized the economic benefits that can be derived from it. In most cases, tourism enterprises are managed and owned by private businessmen and investors. Thus, when businessmen employ the locals in the destination, the locals are dependent on the plans of the owners and they are treated as mere employees. This Top to Bottom (Centralized Approach) in Conventional Enterprises was illustrated by Calanog, et.al (2012) showing the businessmen/investors in control of the operation having a huge share of the business and income while the employees are benefiting only from the salaries that they receive. In contrast with that approach, CBT uses a decentralized approach where planning, decision-making and business operation is directly handled by the local community thus, directly benefiting from tourism.

ASEAN Community-Based Standard (2016) identified principles in the standard performance criteria that covers the following:

- (1) Involve and empower community to ensure ownership and transparent management;
- (2) Establish partnerships with relevant stakeholders;
- (3) Gain recognized standing with relevant authorities;
- (4) Improve social well-being and maintenance of human dignity;
- (5) Include a fair and clear profit-sharing mechanism;
- (6) Enhance linkages to local and regional economies;
- (7) Respect native culture and tradition;
- (8) Contribute to natural resource conservation;
- (9) Improve the standard of visitor experiences by strengthening substantive host and guest interaction;
- (10) Work towards monetary independence.

CBT also provides benefits such as employment and financial gain for marginalized individuals within the sector; Agriculture, forestry, and marine products and by-products are showcased and marketed, therefore transporting native heritage and products back into the tourism map; Money is not leaked out of the community. Instead, native products are made for local consumption; Surpluses and financial gain revenues will be allocated to social development projects in the community; Surpluses and income revenues can also be utilized as capital for new community enterprises (or as an alternative for more or other community enterprises); Decentralized approach in decision-making permits native individuals to become economic decision-makers and actively engaged citizens (Calanog, 2012).



Philippine Framework for CBT Development

Through the years, the Philippine Tourism Development Plans became the government's priority considering the industry's contribution to the economy. Republic Act 9593 also known as the Tourism Act of 2009 recognizes the need to balance tourism development between urban and rural areas in order to spread the benefits of tourism and contribute to poverty alleviation, better access to infrastructure and to a reduction in regional imbalances. The general policy objectives specifies the need to enhance capability-building of local government units (LGUs), in partnership with the private sector in the management of local tourism projects and initiatives, thereby ensuring accessible and affordable destinations throughout the country, especially in areas which have shown strong comparative advantage.

The 2007 Sustainable Tourism Management Plan for Central Philippines states that "government policy on community involvement encourages participatory processes that strive to attain equity for all concerned." It states further that "the application of this policy is manifested in the acceptability of tourism development to the host communities and validated by the degree of communities' participation in its component activities." This policy also gives emphasis on "bringing the benefits of tourism development to womenfolk and putting in place measures that will not make them unfairly pay the price of such development."

In the National Tourism Development Plan for 2011-2016, promotion of "a more pro-poor pattern of tourism through increased local community participation in the development of tourism" in their area especially at public sector tourism sites in their vicinity was considered.

The latest National Tourism Development Plan 2016-2022 aimed at creating a foundation for inclusive growth, a high-trust society, and a globally-competitive knowledge economy. This is through enhancing the social fabric, reducing inequality and increasing potential growth. Strategies involved trade and fiscal policy, macroeconomic stability and competition policy. "Malasakit" or social fabric can be achieved through clean, efficient and citizen-centered governance. Emphasis on promotion on awareness and importance of cultural diversity was also specified.

Given all the policy framework for National Tourism Development in the Philippines, community-based tourism (CBT) term was not used and the role of the local communities were not clearly specified. Instead, tourism development was reflected by the term "concerned communities".

Research Methodology

Mixed method was used in finding the results of this study. A total of 200 respondents composed of visitors, local government officials, private workers and representatives from the community were considered in gathering the data. Non-probability, quota and purposive sampling was used in selecting the respondents using a survey-questionnaire, interviews and observations.

Results

Improvement in the living condition of the local community

There is an improvement in the local community's standard of living since the opening of Minalungao National Park to tourism activities. From their traditional job of farming, other sources of income such as guiding, selling foods and other items to visitors such as arts and crafts, working as a boatman and tricycle driving, are the activities where the local communities get engaged. Boats and "balsa" were handled by the locals but owned by the private company. Boatmen are earning commission per use of boat. Visitors can also request



for food to be prepared by the locals when needed. Those sources of livelihood enables them to support their basic needs including the education of their children. However, these job opportunities are providing limited income for the community. Most of the guides assigned to assist visitors are children that require more training in handling visitors. Some of the guides are focused only on leading what way to go without giving important information to the visitors. In terms of selling local products, souvenir items are similar to the usual items sold in other destinations. To earn more, more visitors are accepted, boats/”balsa” are crowded in one area that would affect visitor satisfaction and environmental degradation. There were instances that visitors cannot enjoy swimming because of limited swimming areas. Signages for responsible tourist behavior are not also strictly implemented. Some visitors leave items like plastic bottles in restricted areas and only become cautious when reminded by an elderly guide.

Table 1. Respondents’ Type of Employment

Type of Employment	Frequency	Percentage
Govt. Worker	20	10.00%
Private Workers	39	19.50%
Acting as Guide	70	35.00%
Vendor/Seller	43	21.50%
Boatman	17	8.50%
Tricycle Drivers	8	4.00%
Others	3	1.50%

Just like other industries, tourism has an enormous impact to the economy of a country. Tourism gives job opportunities to the locals, especially to the people who are living in the rural area. It can increase not just the income of the family and area, but also the income of the country. It also enhances social interaction with tourists by learning different languages and culture (Cruz, 2013) Since a lot of tourists are coming to the destination, investors tend to grab the opportunity to venture into this business. When the capital used for development comes from the private investor, the community’s chances of gaining benefit from it is when they got employed.

Unfortunately, some businessmen may employ others who are not from the community just like the case of Minalungao National Park. Locals may be enticed to sell souvenirs and other local products to take advantage of the increasing visitor arrivals. While it is encouraged to produce local products using local supply and ingredients, there is a risk that because of high demands more competitors will come. If this happens, when not managed properly, natural resources tend to stress out and supply may be depleted.

Table 2. Respondents’ Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment	Frequency	Percentage
None	1	0.50%
Elementary	73	36.50%
High School	84	42.00%
College	29	14.50%
Technical/ Vocational	13	6.50%



Limited economic benefits of the local government and the local community from destinations managed by private enterprise

Tourism development is important not only in generating employment but in improving the local government's condition as well. In the case of Minalungao National Park, economic benefits are limited that adversely affect its chance to be self-reliant. The destination is presently under the management of a private company with some private employees who are non-residents of the area. Entrance fees are paid upon entry but no official receipt is issued to the guests. Visitors were only asked to sign in the logbook upon entry but during peak season, visitors can enter without signing the logbook.

Local government officials who was interviewed regarding whether they receive a share of income from the private company stated that they receive 50% from the entrance fees collected from the visitors. Considering this practice, it will be difficult for the local government to properly account the income derived from the visitors of the destination. Moreover, due to the increasing popularity of the destination, a lot of investors are interested to take part in developing other activities in the destination for tourist consumption.

Table 3. Respondents' Average Monthly Income

Average Monthly Income	Frequency	Percentage
Below Php3,000	115	57.50%
Php3,001-Php5,000	36	18.00%
Php5,001-Php7,000	29	14.50%
Php7,001-Php10,000	10	5.00%
Php10,001-Php15,000	2	1.00%
Php15,001-Php20,000	6	3.00%
Php20,000 and above	2	1.00%

Shift in the traditional livelihood and attitude of the host-community

Along with the enormous economic benefit that helps some locals sustain their daily living is the shift of the traditional livelihood from farming to becoming tourism workers in the form of jobs as earlier specified. Some of the members of the host community are interested in investing in simple businesses related to tourism if financial and technical support will be provided by the local government. They believe that having the opportunity to invest and start their own business will benefit them more.

However, to most of them, development is seen as construction of infrastructure rather than focusing on the natural attraction of the area as its true assets. While others feel insecure in dealing with foreign tourists due to language barrier, the presence of tourists in the area provided them also a better understanding about foreign culture. It opens opportunities for them to create new friends. On the other hand, their exposure to foreign visitors influences them to embrace foreign culture and diversity.

Table 4. Respondents Attitudes, Values and Opinions on Socio-Economic Effect of Tourism in Minalungao National Park

Variables	Weighted Mean		t-test	T-Value	Critical Standard		VI
	Gov't N=20	Local N=180			P-Value	P-Value	
Standard of Living	2.44	2.69	-1.201	1.960	0.231	0.05	NS
Employment Opportunities	3.15	3.25	-0.546	1.960	0.586	0.05	NS
Investment Opportunities	2.78	3.14	-1.773	1.960	0.078	0.05	NS
Tourism Development	3.03	3.07	0.198	1.960	0.843	0.05	NS
Better Understanding and Appreciation	2.90	2.93	0.129	1.960	0.897	0.05	NS
Problems Encountered	2.69	2.75	0.242	1.960	0.809	0.05	NS

Challenges and opportunities for developing CBT in Minalungao National Park was examined following the standard criteria as set out by ASEAN

Community-ownership and transparent management

The study showed that the community have seen the economic contribution of tourism in their life through the employment opportunities it created for them. There is an intention to invest in tourism when supported by the local government. However, private-ownership or management may affect transparency when not properly monitored. Access to funds, non-partisan tourism support structures and participation of community-based organizations can help in determining the most appropriate and the extent of employment that can be created through CBT.

Establish partnership with relevant stakeholders

The acceptability of the community to engage in tourism but the lack to strictly implement responsible tourist behavior in the destination, can be addressed when partnership with relevant stakeholders are taken seriously (Nicolaidis, 2015) When two different things combine, they could not only create possibilities but also have some negative side effects on the society. Thus, initiatives to strengthen community-participation can be done in partnership with the local government, tour operators marketing the destination and private co-ownership.

Contribution to social well-being

The local community's ability to adjust to foreign culture and opportunities to create new friends motivated most of the respondents to continue their studies, while those who cannot adjust due to difficulty in communication resulted in them having a feeling of insecurity. Both findings may have a positive and negative impact on the social well-being of the local community. The challenge is how to maintain the human dignity despite the exposure to tourism activities and the capacity to distribute equitably the improvement it may give all members of the community.



Quality tour and guiding services

The majority of the respondents engage in tour guiding services but it can be noted that most of them are progenies. While visiting the destination will provide a satisfying experience in terms of the natural attraction it offers, there are other significant information that visitors should know about the destination, for example, its rich history and the presence of distinct flora and fauna. This information should form part of the services provided by the local guides. However, as reported by visitors, it is evident that the present guides are lacking in this aspect.

Conclusion

Considering the goals of the National Tourism Development Plan 2016-2022 aimed at reducing inequality, and enhancing social fabric, as well as increasing potential growth and the qualities of Minalungao National Park as a Protected Area, this study hopes to serve as an input particularly to the local government of Gen. Tinio, Nueva Ecija to consider Community-Based Ecotourism Development in the Area. This is in order to maximize the socio-economic benefits that it can contribute but in protecting the environmental and cultural resources as well. Examining the potential of the community and viability of livelihood projects this can be carefully done through interaction with all partners and relevant stakeholders. ASEAN standards for CBT can be used as a basis prior to any planned development in order to have a stronger foundation. The role of the local government in providing assistance and support to CBT development are important attributes for a successful implementation of the project.

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