

The Buhatan River Ecoadventure: A Case Study

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Cyra Mae R. Soreda¹, Aldrin John J. Estonanto²
Sorsogon State College, Sorsogon City, Philippines
cyramaesoreda@gmail.com¹, aldrinestonanto@gmail.com²

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Abstract - *This explanatory study focused on the ecotourism project in Buhatan, Sorsogon, Philippines. It highlighted the potentials of ecotourism as a developmental tool for biodiversity conservation, economic, and social development. It sought to determine the implications of having ecotourism, who or what sector(s) would best benefit from ecotourism and what are the things needed to be done to maximize the potentials of ecotourism. While qualitative design was employed, triangulation was used to reduce the risk of bias and inaccuracies the analysis of data. Findings revealed the common implications of ecotourism in Buhatan such as job opportunities, fostering cooperation, balanced economic and environmental activities, discipline and inter-sector linkages which profits most the boatmen, culinary group members and cooperative. The study concluded that the ecotourism in Buhatan has a potential in promoting economic and social development, and environmental conservation could benefit the community as a whole if private-public sector linkages and active participation of the community members are improved. It was recommended to include the tourists' perception about the ecotourism project in the data gathering procedure since it would provide useful insights on the implications of ecotourism to its target clients*

Keywords: *ecotourism, establishment, sustainability, economic and social development, ecoadventure*

INTRODUCTION

This study focused on the rapidly growing form of tourism known as *ecotourism*, emphasizing on the nature-based experience of the subject has to offer. The case study used the term *ecotourism* to emphasized a developmental tool for biodiversity conservation, to highlight the potential of ecotourism in Buhatan as an economic activity that will contribute to the sustainable economic and social development of the area and to the environmental and preservation while ensuring the participation of local residents and other stakeholders in the process and provide feasible suggestions to improve ecotourism.

Ecotourism is linked with many other sectors of the economy, although to the extent that tourism interests are not understand or focused on. Anyone who may come across this study can understand the perks and challenges that go along with ecotourism in Buhatan Eco- river and the role of each member of the community, whether directly or indirectly involved in their project, in attaining the ecotourism goal: sustainability.

Case studies focusing primarily on Ecotourism, specifically as a developmental tool, were chosen to guide the study and find the relevance to the present

case. The implications of having ecotourism on various sectors were identified from case studies selected. Then, theme by theme, theories and research that applied to the present case were presented to ensure the relevance to the present case study.

The *Come on Safari with Us (The Ultimate Luxury Safari with the Maasi)* was a case study conducted by the Maasi Wilderness Conservation Trust (MCWT) with their ecotourism partner, Camp ya Kanzi [1]. This study emphasized how ecotourism in Maasi contributed to promoting the works of natives of the place like the lodges use in the Camp. The research was done in partnership with the Maasi community of Kuku Group Ranch proving that Camp ya Kanzi can give all the luxury without damaging the environment tourists come to immerse themselves in and most of all, support MCWT mission on preserving the Maasi ecosystem and sustaining economic benefit for the local community.

Another similar study entitled *Case Study: Tourism and Biodiversity (Ecotourism—a Sustainable Development Tool, a Case for Belize)* was prepared by Weizsman Pat in courtesy of Ministry of Tourism and Youth Constitution on January 2001 presented in order to provide an in-depth view on the ecotourism in

Belize as a development tool for biodiversity planning and conservation for Belize.[2] It focused on the nature-based experiences offered in Belize mainland, with its national tourism policy and direction while not replacing the traditional (sun, sea, and sand) tourism but rather complemented it especially in providing job opportunities for local townfolk in hotel, transport, food industry, telecommunication and other areas. The study also touched the vital role of different sectors in promoting sustainability through ecotourism and how sound laws and policies can strengthen the potentials and success of the project. In the end, it provided the existing planning and policy in tourism in Belize and some proposed strategies and solutions for improving biodiversity conservation and planning in the tourism planning sector.

One more study entitled *Ecotourism in Palawan: A Case Study* that was conducted by Nelson Palad Devanadera[3] concluded that ecotourism benchmarking in Northern Palawan can provide a good opportunity to promote sustainable development. However, there should be a balance in the economic activities and environment protection to ensure this, an Environmental Management System should function effectively and inter-sector linkages must be mobilized and for the people to experience the benefits of ecotourism, local manpower should be developed first.

Lastly, the research *Ecotourism in Bohol Province: The Philippines* studied by Rene Lopez Relampangos[4] is founded in the idea that tourism has been one of the world's largest industries accounting for about 6% of the world's gross national product (GNP) as early as 1993. Relampangos put emphasis on the changing roles of business and industry, community and government in order to deliver to the society the goal of tourism—sustainability.

This present case study about the ecotourism happening in Buhatan, Sorsogon took its form, guided by these researches and their theories. With these, the researchers were able to identify the balance economic and environmental protection activities in determining the implications of ecotourism for the present case. The studies provided an overview of the common impacts of ecotourism to different sectors in the community. Simultaneously, it gave the researchers an idea on how the inter-sector linkages and sound laws and policy regarding ecotourism can affect the sustainability provided by ecotourism and be used to propose strategies and activities in maximizing the potential of the project which is the end goal of this

study. With these themes, the researchers were guided to explain the case along with the data was collected.

In order to achieve the purpose of this case study, this was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the implications of Buhatan Eco- River to the community? ; (2) Who or what sector(s) would best benefit from Buhatan Ecotourism- River?; and (3) What are the things needed to be done to maximize the potentials of ecotourism?

METHODS

This section discusses how the data were collected, analyzed and interpreted in order to strengthen the evidences for the insights as well as the claims made for this case.

Participants

The researchers sought to have most of the participants that have direct relation to the ongoing ecotourism project in Buhatan, Sorsogon City as key persons for the interviews and collecting archival records. Some of the participants were common residents of the community of Buhatan to get their perceptions on the project considering that they don't have direct relation to the project. Appointments were made for interviewing the key participants for the study while other participants were selected randomly and interviewed at their convenience. The researchers interviewed seven (7) participants, three of which were key persons for this research considering that they have a direct role to play for the ecotourism project in Buhatan, Sorsogon while the other four participants were common residents of the barangay in order to get perceptions regarding the ecotourism project in the grass-root level.

Data Collection Procedure

Since case study often benefits from multiple sources of data, the researchers used distinct sources such as interviews and archival records (financial reports, log-ins, and other paper files). For the interviews, appointments with the subject participants were made while other participants were interviewed purposively and by convenience. The interviews followed a flexible format using the research questions as the guide. Collecting data about rival explanations or stand were also entertained during the open-ended interviews. The data collected were then recorded. As for archival records, the researchers asked permission to obtain a copy of the records from the resource persons in different concerned agencies.

Beforehand, the researchers sent letter to the barangay council for the permission of the conduct of the study. The approval of the barangay captain signaled the researchers to carry out the data gathering procedure. Data obtained were treated with utmost confidentiality upon the agreement of the resource persons and the researchers.

Data Analysis

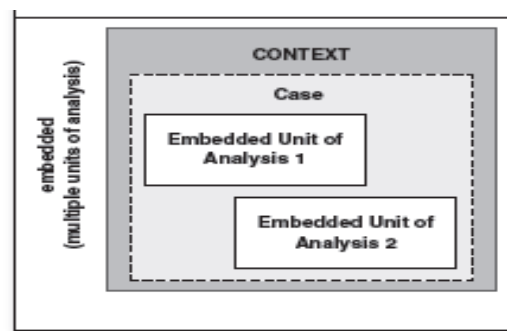
Since this case study utilized an explanatory framework, guided by research questions, it made use of analytic analysis in form of descriptions. The study used emergent framework to group the data and then the relationship were identified. In order to present the analysis, narratives and framework approach were employed. Pattern matching and explanation building techniques were also used to support the data. Summaries and self-memos were also used as tools for the analysis. Triangulation of evidence from multiple sources was also applied to establish converging lines of evidence which make the findings as robust as possible and reduce risks for bias and inaccuracies. These criteria in data analysis strengthen the data and claim for this study.

The Solution

This study made use of an embedded, single- case study design in targeting a community that was establishing ecotourism as one of its economic development tool through identifying its implications and providing insights on the common problems regarding ecotourism and ways of addressing these problems. The empirical data collected were utilized to gain deeper understanding on the subject while targeting the community residents and officials as participants of the study as they could provide the necessary information. It also focused on the grass-root level of the society to give the locals “voice” in which to present their perceptions on the ecotourism development and to avoid influences from “big people” in the society, hence, this study really centered on who really benefits from the ecotourism project. The study used two variables as a unit of analysis. The first was the implications of ecotourism as cited by the participants and the second was the common problems the participants cited with regards to ecotourism in their community and how these problems can be addressed.

The design on making the final deliverable can be illustrated on the figure below wherein the first unit of analysis will be the implication and the second unit of

analysis is the suggestions that can be made based on the data gathered.



SOURCE: COSMOS Corporation.

Figure 1. Embedded, single case study design

Process for Developing the Solution

The researchers involved community residents and local officials during the interview to provide their perceptions regarding ecotourism and also insights about the organizational structure of ecotourism and its relationship to the community. Empirical data were collected in the attempt to identify patterns that exist in the community as well as to provide a deeper understanding on the subject, ecotourism.

The researchers interviewed different persons from the community of Buhatan, Sorsogon since April 6, 2015 when the Buhatan River Ecotourism Ecoadventure was first launched by the local government of Buhatan as its major tourism project. The participants include persons like the barangay chairman, person-in-charge for tourism, president for the cooperative handling the project, as well as four residents of the barangay who all provided their opinions and knowledge about the ongoing project. The researchers found out during the process of making the study that residents were reluctant at first to share their honest perspective about the ecotourism community project in their barangay that it took some more questions or time for them to confidently share their standpoints. This situation led to the decision of the researcher to employ triangulation as a process of gathering information from different resources to reduce the risks of bias and inaccuracies associated with getting info from only one source.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Participants

The researchers interviewed seven (7) participants, three (3) of which were key persons for

this research considering that they have a direct role to play for the ecotourism project in Buhatan, Sorsogon while the other four (4) participants were common residents of the barangay in order to get perceptions regarding the ecotourism project in the grass-root level. The first part of the interview includes the name, occupation, and age of the participant since this basic information may elicit diversity of opinions among the participant. The other half of the interview was guided by the research questions in determining the implications, problems and solutions associated with ecotourism in Buhatan, Sorsogon based on the perceptions of the participants. The key persons were: Edwin Divina, the chairman of Brgy. Buhatan and one of the persons-in-charge for the Buhatan River Ecoadventure Project; Nenita Alpas, one of the counselors of Brgy. Buhatan, Sorsogon and person-in-charge for Brgy. Tourism and; Myrna Fulo, president of Buhatan River Ecoadventure Cooperative (the organization in-charged for the project). The key persons were interviewed during their scheduled time. Other participants were: Analiza Deliosa, former Samahan ng Kababaihan culinary group member; Lourdes Dato, 62 years old and nipa maker; Katrina Lizano, a midwife; and Efegenio Dato, 68 years old, a retired government employee. The resident-participants were interviewed by chance, during their most convenient time.

Implications of Ecotourism in Barangay Buhatan, Sorsogon City

While there are many advantages and disadvantages that one can name when it comes to ecotourism, participants gave common answers when asked what are the implications of having ecotourism project on their barangay.

Additional Source of Income

All of the participants agreed that having the ecotourism project in their barangay had provided additional source of income to the community residents, particularly for the fisher folks and women who have skills in cooking. The barangay council, in cooperation with the Buhatan River Ecoadventure Cooperative, made two groups for these people—the boatmen (bangkeros) and the culinary group (women who are member of the Samahan ng Kababaihan). The boatmen, as discussed by the key persons include 15 men tasked to row the boat or the floating cottage for the tourists during their river cruise. On the other hand, the culinary group, consisting of 41 women, are

in charged for preparing the food ordered by the tourist that are usually for their lunch or dinner. This was confirmed by the report provided by the president of cooperative handling the ecotourism project for Buhatan River wherein just from July to September 2015, the total income of the boatmen, in general, was Php 42, 350.00 while there had been a total income for the tourism council and OD for Php 6, 600.00 and Php 13, 300.00 respectively. There was also an amount of Php 3, 267.50 given to the barangay. As one of the key persons told the researcher: “*Dati, yang mga bangkeros, umaasa lang sila sa huli nilang isda na madalas wala kapag masama ang panahon o maulan. Ngayon, basta may tourist na darating, may sigurado silang income ‘pagbumiyahe sila* (In the past, those boatmen only rely on the catch (fish) that are rare when the weather is bad or it’s raining. Now, as long as there are tourists visiting the place, they have a sure income if they’re the one assigned to the cruise).”

At this time, the key persons admitted that although it is a source of income, it is still limited to 15 boatmen since there are only 10 kayaks (donated by the City government Mayor Sally Lee), four floating cottages namely: Regina 1 & 2 (donated by ABS-CBN foundation), Lagrimas (donated by a navy officer), and Archangel (donated by a priest) who both wished to be unknown donors, and a reserved floating cottage that the cooperative rents if ever there is a need. As one of the key persons said, more fisher folks will be able to get additional income if only there are more boats and floating cottages to be used. This also limits their capacity on accommodating large number of guests at a time. Role of the tourist guides were also given to cooperative members and other officials who know the place and the project’s features in order save money and also due to lack of resource persons. This resonates Ghimire[5] statement that local communities not only lack financial resources to begin tourism schemes but also have difficulties in meeting high level managerial capacity building to manage these projects. Another key person added:

“*Niyan, ang kababaihan, imbes magtsirismisan, may pagkakaabalahan na sinda na makadanun pa sa kanira magka-income* (Today, women here in our place, instead of spending their time gossiping, can have something to do where they can get an income).”

One of the resident-participants, however, shared that although the ecotourism project offers additional source of income for culinary group members, this

opportunity may be limited since that way it works, culinary members were assigned of a specific dish in the menu offered to the tourists and when a tourist orders a specific dish from the menu at the start of the cruise, one culinary group member assigned to that dish will be contacted to prepare the food, using her own money first. She will just get her fund plus its increase after the tourist had paid for the food. So if you don't have the money to prepare the food, then you won't be able to have the additional income. This issue had been cleared by one of the key persons in one of the interviews when she shared that it was really the situation before since the project is just starting and there is no extra fund for food preparation. But now, since there had already been a profit, the cooperative can give the budget for the food to the culinary member assigned to prepare it then later, when the tourist pay for the food, the budget will be remitted back to the cooperative as a standing fund while the income will be given to the one who prepared the food.

While all of the participants were aware of the additional source of income that comes with this ecotourism project, most of the community residents shared their sentiments that while it is not a bad thing to have this ecotourism since it really provides additional source of income, the people who can experience this opportunity are only those boatmen and women who are members of the culinary group, not really all of the residents of the barangay.

One of the key persons seems aware of this sentiment, said:

"Kaya ako, ini-encourage ko ang mga ka-barangay ko na kung mayun sinda maski nano na produkto na gusto ipabakal, ikadi lang dini saamun kay kung may gusto magkuha or mag-order, ipapaaram mi man sa kanira kay sayang бага san income (That's why I encourage my neighbors to share to us whatever product they may want to sell so that whenever someone buy or wants to order the product, we will notify them because we they can gain income out of it)."

This strengthens the statement of Devanedara[3] who postulated that local manpower must be develop to capture the benefits of tourism. What seems to be the issue of not experiencing this benefit of ecotourism is not the absence of the opportunity itself but the ways to embrace the opportunities for additional source of income are not visible to common residents.

Promoting Environmental Awareness and Protection

All of the participants agreed that with establishing ecotourism, the environmental awareness on their place had increased especially when it comes to maintaining the cleanliness of the river and assuring that everyone is cooperating when it comes to waste management by not dumping in the river. The ecotourism project for the Buhatan River didn't have an easy start as the river needs rehabilitation since it had been dumped with different kinds of wastes. However, the community of Buhatan made it sure that the natural beauty of the river was not to be destroyed. One of the key persons said:

"Walang ginalaw sa natural beauty ng river; tinanggal lang ang mga basura galing sa Sorsogon Bay at dito sa Buhatan (The natural beauty of the river wasn't touched, we just took away the wastes coming from Sorsogon Bay and here in Buhatan)."

There had been ordinances issued by the barangay council to put a stop on illegal activities surrounding the Buhatan River and dumping of wastes in the river. This action is actually supported by Pat [2] suggested strategies in having a successful ecotourism by having sound laws and policy regarding environment preservation. Two of the residents said that as part of obeying the policies and ordinances issued by the barangay council on the effort of maintaining the cleanliness of the river, some residents have to give up their other source of income like the pig pens near the river or they have to have a septic tank so that the wastes won't go to the river. This is actually an evidence of the sound implementation of policies and laws regarding the environment protection and conservation which is a very important factor for the sustainability of ecotourism.

In addition to these efforts, the key persons also shared that there had been different activities like planting of 20,000 Mangroves along the Buhatan River and Bantay-Suba (river guard) program to ensure the preservation and conservation of the river. The community itself is giving conscious effort on protecting their ecotourism for sustainability by protecting the environment.

Improving Community Linkages and Inter-Sector Linkages

Establishing ecotourism in Buhatan with its pioneer project on Buhatan River Ecoadventure does not only offer additional income to local residents but also improve the linkages of within the community

and its linkages across the different sectors and institutions.

All of the residents had been made aware that there were a cooperative organized to act as the steering committee for the ecotourism project namely: Buhatan River Ecoadventure Cooperative and other groups such as the group for the boatmen (bangkeros) and culinary group for the women (Samahan ng Kababaihan), and also a Buhatan Tourism council was organized. The good thing is the cooperative is open to all who would want to join the group and is prioritizing residents of barangay who want to join. It was also through linkages that the cooperative was able to gain donors for the floating cottages and kayaks. As reported by the key persons and one of the resident-participants who had a connection with the Bantay-suba program, it was the City Environment Organization (CENRO) that is in charge for deputizing river guards and giving them salaries.

The community of Buhatan believes that with that through helping each other and sourcing out, the project will have a better outcome. This is also put into focus by Murphy [6] as cited by Timothy [7] and Tuson [8] that tourism relies on the goodwill and cooperation of the people. Although there were struggles making the people cooperate right away, the participants agreed that the first year of the project had been a success because people are cooperating and ready to help just like what it share by three of the participants that in making the restaurant for the project, the people and members of the cooperative really lend a hand to each other in order to minimize the costs considering that budget were limited.

As stated by four of the participants, they have seen many people coming to help in their community and many of the members of their community putting efforts on participating in the project. This was also shared by Relampagos [9] on his case study that sustainability offered by ecotourism may be achieved through the efforts of business, tourism industry, community, and government. In fact, the Buhatan barangay council wants to make partnership with the education sector of the community for training tourist guides in the near future.

Fostering Discipline

All of the resident-participants admitted that although they may not get an additional income from the ecotourism project, they are positive to it since it promotes discipline. This was affirmed by one of the key persons' own words:

“Di mo man mahahali na minsan may pasaway talaga na matapok man gihapon basura sa river maski aram na bawal pero ang publicity san project tapos makita niya na sya nalang an di nagsusunod, masunod man yun. Mararaw-ay man siya sa sadirinya kaya mapundo siya (It’s really hard to make everyone obey the ordinance at one. There will be someone who will still dump in the river though they know that it is prohibited but the publicity gained by the project and he will realize that he is the only one not obeying the ordinance, he will follow. He will be ashamed of himself so he will now follow).”

The ecotourism project in Buhatan as a community-based project really needs the cooperation and discipline each member can offer to attain its development goals.

Promoting Ecologically Low-Impact Experience

Like the Maasi community that is promoting ecologically low-impact experience to the visitors, Buhatan River Ecoadventure also offers a variety of activities like kayaking, floating cottage experience, fireflies and birds watching, and fishing that are all safe and ecology-friendly. It stresses the idea presented by Devenadera [3] that economic activities and environment protection must be balanced in order to sustain ecotourism. This only implies that one can have a rich experience close to nature without harming the environment. In fact, as the key persons shared, most of their visitors are tourists who already experience the adventure but would want to do it again with other people. Just from the opening of this ecotourism project, April, to July 2015, they already had 1, 436 recorded tourist visits.

Who profits then?

When participants were asked about who or what sector(s) do they think profits or benefits the most from the Buhatan River Ecoadventure project, all of the participants agreed that at this time, the boatmen and culinary group members as well as the cooperative benefit the most from the project. This may be attributed to the idea that only those who have direct relations to the project can benefit from it as the project only provides menial jobs for the community members and considering that it is still on the process of establishing the industry on the community. This resonates the concept revealed by Tuson [10] that ecotourism projects usually can only be seen to benefit only a segment of the community, this being the committee members. However, one of the key

persons also added that since they are using a community-based approach on this project, it is actually designed to benefit even the grass-root level. The benefit of the ecotourism, like other industries, takes time to be seen in all level. Given the time, these benefits may extend on its context.

Suggestions for Maximizing the Potentials of Ecotourism

Ecotourism in Buhatan, Sorsogon still has a lot of time ahead to improve since it is just beginning to establish the industry on its place. This case study does not aim to provide solutions for the problems associated with the project but rather the researcher seek to offer two suggestions in order to maximize the potentials of the project based on the insights gained on this study and in the literatures that guided this study.

Strengthen private-public sector linkages

The ecotourism project actually has good linkages among the community members and local government. However, it needs to improve or strengthen the private-public linkages to encourage investments especially for improvements of the facilities and dissemination or promotion of the ecotourism project through various channels that still remain as challenges to the steering committee of the project. As Devanadera[3] emphasized, private-public sector relationship is an advantage in ensuring the sustainability of ecotourism.

Give the local active roles in the project

While it is observable that community members are aware of the ongoing project on ecotourism in their barangay, most of the resident-participants stated that they were just called to be informed of the ordinances that will be implemented in connection with the ecotourism project and those who are obliged to give up their source of income like the “skylab” (a method of catching fish by placing nets across an area on the river used by the local residents in Buhatan) and pig pen owners were promised compensations or alternative source of income, which the residents agreed, they don’t really have an active role to play for the implementation of the project. This was also reported by France [11] which discusses manipulative and passive participation as being characteristics when there is pretense of participation and secondly when local members were only informed of what is decided. To address this concern, Irandu [12]

suggested giving the people active participation to the project by providing them fund and capacity building for locals so that they can run and manage their own ecotourism project. This can be also done by informing the people on what are the direct benefits they can get from the project.

CONCLUSION

In view of the data gathered and analyzed for this case, the researchers concluded that the ecotourism as a development tool for Buhatan, Sorsogon has a potential promoting sustainable development as it provides opportunities for additional source of income, fostering balanced economic activities and environmental protection, as well as discipline among people and inter-sector linkages among the community members and other sectors. These factors as discussed by Devanadera[13] will lead to the success of ecotourism. With this ecotourism, fish folks or boatmen (bangkeros), culinary group members and the steering committee are said to benefit the most but it is hoped that as time goes by and as the establishment of this industry is improved, the benefits will be felt by everyone, including the grass-root level. However, for successful implementation, private-public sector relationship as well as the active participation of the local community members should be promoted as stressed by Fennel [14] that ecotourism is generally assumed to involve high degree of commitment and involvement among local communities thus it is important to have them play active roles in the projects.

This case study focused only on the initial effects of the ecotourism project in Buhatan, Sorsogon specifically on the Buhatan River Ecoadventure and does not deal with other form of ecotourism in the place if ever there should be other forms existing on the community nor on its effects outside the community of Buhatan, Sorsogon. It does not also include perceptions of the tourists regarding the ecotourism project as this study was conducted during the off-peak season of the project and was given a limited time. The researchers also only used purposive and incidental sampling to reduce the task in sampling collection and the time it could take.

The researchers would want to suggest to future researchers who would want to build on this case to include the tourists’ perceptions about the ecotourism project in the data gathering since it will provide useful insights on the implications of ecotourism to its target clients. Further study may also include local

elites as a focus group for discussion as to how these influence ecotourism project in the context of community development. It will also be beneficial for future researchers to use more participants on this case to gain more insights and rival explanations if such explanation really exists among the participants. This would be more effective if done using more systematic sampling schemes.

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