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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 in 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 Subterranean River, the Tubbataha 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

BACKGROUND

Protected areas are defined as "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, pp. 8-9). These areas are considered the cornerstones of conservation strategies spearheaded by local, national, 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 represented well 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 a protected area is not enough—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) closing 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 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, their revenues are inadequate to finance their 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) that the ecosystem within that protected area is protected and allowed to flourish so that the communities and/or stakeholders involved in the protection of that site will gain something from their efforts, (2) that these areas are used to generate income, jobs, and other forms of service to the community. There is nothing more efficient way of ensuring these than through ecotourism.

This paper presents successful cases in surmounting obstacles in protected area management by utilizing the ecotourism potential in their locations. Likewise, the importance on how park personnel can acquire additional skills beyond their traditional biological expertise and learning how to build alliances with the private sector and other stakeholders for resource mobilization is also emphasized.

SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM AS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY

Tourism is one of the most low-impact approaches to maximizing the potential of protected areas, especially when effectively managed. It is a global phenomenon. Not only has tourism been hailed as the largest industry in the world (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2011; Ninemeier & Perdue, 2007; Walker & Walker, 2010; Tarabanov, 2007), it 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 the one of its earliest definition: "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 the planning and development, to the implementation, to the 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, 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, especially 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 their destinations. There were limited stakeholder involvement and participation, some activities were 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, infrastructure, financial support, and research (Juan, 2012).

To make sure that all the stakeholders, especially the local community, receive benefits that are suitable 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 not sufficiently qualified or are not experienced to manage a tourism venture in a professional and sustainable manner – 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 ecotourism, being a vital tool national development, 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.

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, like 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 vital facilities like electricity, water, communication, health services, etc. Ultimately, the local residents will benefit from all these developments.

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 Subterranean River, Tubbataha National Park, Gilutongan Marine Sanctuary, 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 be actively engaged 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.

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 appreciate aesthetically. A nature product can be an awe-

inspiring sight that showcases the wonders of nature, at the same time it can also be a potential setting for nature activities such as mountain climbing, scuba diving, and bird watching.

The Gilutongan Marine Sanctuary at 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 scuba divers and yacht owners as well. Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary, on the other hand, 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 bird-watching experience. Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, also known as the Underground River, is perhaps one of the best examples of a nature product that attracted attention not only locally, but internationally. 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 of the online competition, "New Seven Wonders of Nature." The Underground 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 serve to heighten the area's appeal and increase its value as a nature product.

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 would not gather steam unless you supplement it 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.

Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park 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, the River 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 the underground river in droves, eager to experience the natural wonders being advertised online. As a result, the underground river 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 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 is home to several diving schools, while the Tubbataha Reefs is reputed to be one of the best diving destinations in the world. However, the other protected areas in the country are not faring as well as the underground river. This does not mean that they are inferior in terms of species biodiversity and geological features, however. What they lack is a viable marketing strategy that can boost their ecotourism. For example, the Rajah Sikatuna Protected Landscape has a high biodiversity which includes several endangered species, a karst-type forest, and five watersheds. It has a high potential for ecotourism, but sadly, this potential is not maximized because it has a nonexistent marketing strategy RSPL is located along a tourist route that boasts scenic attractions such as the chocolate hills and old historic churches, yet tourist inflow is nil in the RSPL itself.

Other protected areas also do not fare well in tourism returns due to absent or insufficient marketing strategy. The Emmanuel Pelaez Ranch, Inc., located at Cagayan de Oro City, has a nature park that offers recreational activities such as camping, horseback riding, river treks, and even environmental education talks. Despite this rich list of activities that tourists can enjoy onsite, it still suffers from low tourism numbers. A good marketing strategy would be able allow protected areas such as Rajah Sikatuna and EPRI get the recognition they deserve, as well as achieve much-needed ecotourism revenue targets.

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, 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.

The Puerto Princesa Underground River used to be accessible only via a 3-hour long trip. In order to make the site more accessible to tourists, Palawan's Mayor had a road built, thus greatly reducing the travel time. A wharf was constructed for boats that bring tourist to dock. Also, a system of boats to ferry passengers inside the cave was established, along with cavern lights to aid the view inside.

Aside from infrastructure, the nature product should have a solid management support system and logistics and policies, or soft inputs. This includes the availability of trained tourist guides, personnel to handle the influx of tourists, enforcement of site policies, tourism pricing, and security. For example, in the Gilutongan Marine Sanctuary, 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.

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 Gilutongan, a 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.

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; ensure the security of the area and the tourists. The community would perceive a threat to the tourists or to the natural resource of the area as a threat to their livelihoods and their welfare, and will act accordingly to protect these.

There are many ways by which an ecotourism program can benefit a community. In the Underground River, community members were hired as rangers to patrol and protect the area while the communities benefited further via social development projects. 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.

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, the Mayor of Palawan established a one family, one boat policy 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 are owned by one local village politician. Spreading the economic benefits evenly would result in less conflict and establish stability and lay the foundations of long term peace and order, a sine qua non for tourism development.

Enhanced Environmental Protection in Anticipation of Second-Generation Problems

Last but certainly not the least, protection of natural resources at any area should always remain top priority. With the passage of time, tourists may swell in numbers and infrastructure will inevitably expand to accommodate the increased demand. There is a danger, however, that natural resources may be compromised or forgotten, especially if the stakeholders of the ecotourism project are distracted or blinded with huge revenues. Overloading of trash could easily destroy the ecosystem and lead to a drain in natural resources. In the case of Pujada Bay or Boracay, deteriorating biophysical conditions, elevated nutrient levels, and sedimentation threatened 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 resources protection can be seen in the setup of the Gilutongan Marine Sanctuary. 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. 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.

Leadership

The presence of a catalyst and an organizer is necessary to make an ecotourism program fly. In the Underground River, Mayor Hagedorn was the moving force that made the Underground River into what it is today. He mobilized local funds and resources to provide the hard and soft inputs needed to fuel the program; he put into place the different building blocks that constituted the foundation of the ecotourism program; he was instrumental in the move to make the underground river known internationally. 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, the proper incentives must be found to motivate park area managers to develop ecotourism strategies, Currently, the PaSus are overworked, overburdened, and 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.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The lessons derived from the analysis of the protected area cases suggest that there are 7 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 institutionalise the change process to be introduced.

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