

Ecotourism and Value Adding: Source of Livelihood among the Villagers in Basey Samar, Eastern Visayas, Philippines

Anita Garrido Cular

University of the Philippines Visayas Tacloban College, Tacloban City, Leyte Province, Philippines

Abstract: This study aims to highlight how ecotourism is contributing additional income to low income and marginal farmers in 2 villages of Basey, Western Samar. This is a case study among the members of the Sohoton Service Association (SSA) All members were interviewed using an interview schedule in order to elicit information from them. A focused group discussion was also conducted to validate their information. SSA was organized to help in preserving the cave and in order to augment their income. There were 24 members of SSA whose majority members are women. Findings show that >50 % of the members of SSA were earning an average of PhP500.00 per month from ecotourism while 6 or 31.6% were earning a maximum of PhP1000.00. Three respondents claimed that they were earning an average monthly income of PhP2, 000.00. In terms of income contribution, majority of the respondents claimed that their work in Sohoton contributes 25-50% to their income. Only one claimed that ecotourism activity contributes the highest share of 76% of the income. However, it is estimated that approximately, 15% of their family monthly income is derived from ecotourism activities. While, ecotourism is indeed augmenting the income of the farmers in the two villages of Basey, Samar, the members of the SSA should try to create value added in their routine activities at the cave. Value adding in this case, offering additional service/features to tourists while in Sohoton Cave will increase livelihood activities of the SSA members. This will lead to higher income for their respective families, thus increasing their chance of poverty alleviation and improved living conditions. This is the truest sense of ecotourism activities: livelihood and preservation of Sohoton Cave, the natural resource.

Key words: Ecotourism, livelihood, value added, livelihood, natural resource

INTRODUCTION

Tourism now a days is one of the numerous activities that governments (national or local) pursue in order to augment their gross domestic products. As pointed out by (CI):

“Tourism is now the world’s largest industry, capturing 10% of the global economy. It forms as the principal source of foreign exchange. It is also a means to generate alternative incomes in rural areas. It also acts as a driver for general economic development, supporting a variety of local and national businesses such as restaurants, hotels, transportation and guiding within areas of high biodiversity” (1).

Ecotourism is a sustainable form of tourism within natural and cultural heritage areas. It also means protection and management of natural resources, culture, indigenous knowledge and practices; it also provides economic benefits for the enrichment of host communities. Furthermore, it means that there is a community-based participation and environmental education and ethics are involved.

The thrust of ecotourism is not only to conserve these natural tourist spots but also to generate various economic activities that will improve the lives of the people in the community. These include investment and development of small enterprise, environmental education, conservation awareness and empowerment of the local communities.

With ecotourism activities, it is expected that local communities living conditions will have improved due to the livelihood created that contribute to the income of their families.

The above views are similar with the idea of Community Based Ecotourism (CBE), a tourism based on the “integration of regional development axes, community management, the experience and knowledge exchange between tourists and communities, cultural and environmental enhancement and broad access to the benefits of tourism” (Fontoura 1).

Eastern Visayas as spelled out in the Regional Development Plan (2011-2016), recognizes the role of tourism/ecotourism in its goal of increasing incomes of communities and eventually reducing poverty.

Ecotourism as embraced by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and Department of Tourism (DOT) in Eastern Visayas is not a new phenomenon. Several countries have also undertaken this program. For instance, the study of Stem *et al.* (2003) found that in Costa Rica, there were mixed findings regarding ecotourism's effectiveness as a conservation and community development tool. They also found little evidence that people are investing tourism-generating income in environmentally threatening practices.

Barna and Cristina (2009) highlighted in her research that true ecotourism represents only "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of the local people (99).

In another study by Scheyvens (2008), she noted that the success of ecotourism is manifested when local communities have some control over them and if they equitably share the benefits emerging from ecotourism activities.

A study by Springle *et al.* (2001) cited a lot of advantages and disadvantages brought about by ecotourism. Two among these benefits are the provision to local people of alternative income sources which do not threaten the flora and fauna (e.g., charcoal production, overgrazing) and the significant benefit is the employment generated such as guides, guards, workers and craft production.

The downside of ecotourism were likewise cited. Among these were the money generated by ecotourism is not used for the maintenance of the site and local people lack the required skills; jobs may not be distributed equitably or tourist can effect "commodification" of culture when one group of people (tourist) pay money to see another group of people.

Another study by Oracion and Enrique (2001) claimed that ecotourism as a strategy to promote sustainable resource management and tourism will only have positive effect if individuals involved in the business of tourism such as brokers, locals and tourists behave to a tolerable level that will cause the least damage to the local ecosystem.

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

Given the above mentioned studies on ecotourism, varied claims were pushed. This study is an assessment of a community-based ecotourism activity in Sohoton Cave. It examined the twin goals of ecotourism if indeed both were simultaneously achieved which are translated in improved economic well-being of the host communities and environmental conservation.

The investigator made use of an interview schedule for all the SSA members and an FGD was also conducted

among them in order to validate their responses in the interview. Tourists were also made to respond but this was facilitated in a separate interview schedule in order to solicit information related to their experience in Sohoton cave. Data collection from the tourists covered the period from November 2009 to February 2010. Purposive sampling was used in identifying the tourists.

THE SOHOTON CAVE

The sohoton natural bridge and natural park is the pride and heritage of basey, samar and one among the most visited attractions in eastern visayas. This is one among the four protected areas within samar island natural park (sinp, 2010) created by virtue of pd # 442 issued by the former president gloria m. Aroyo on august 13, 2003. There were four broad themes pursued by sinp: biodiversity management, community outreach, community-based tourism and stakeholder participation and management.

The Sohoton natural bridge and natural park was created to protect unique rock formations, caves and rainforest along the Sohoton River in the Samar Province. It has an area of 840 ha and located near the town of basey within the boundaries of brgy. Inuntan and brgy.mabini.

The Sohoton Cave draws both local and foreign tourists to visit the site due to its natural beauty. Visiting the place begins at the town proper of Basey, Samar. It starts from the pier and a tourist undertakes a 2 h boat ride along the river which locals describe as golden because of its yellowish color. The river bank is flanked by palms and villages of bamboo houses on stilts. Upstream the river narrows and limestone overhangs appear and extend upwards until the boat is travelling through a small gorge into the park itself.

Before getting to the entrance of the cave, tourists have to walk on the cantilever bridge that is attached to big rock formations and is hanging above the golden river. The immediate surroundings of the cave are lush vegetation of tall trees and shrubs and it is quite.

Sohoton Cave "is a cathedral-like dome with a parabolic arch-type entrance of about 50 m high. Its entrance is a flat door about 20 m in width and 50 m in length. On its ceiling hangs spike-shaped crystalline stalactites, rustic and cavernous walls with stalagmites on its floor. At the far end of the cave is an opening with a balcony overlooking the natural swimming pool below" (Samar.lgu-ph.com).

Sohoton Cave is a dripstone cave. It offers visitors a perfect view of the various sizes and shapes of stalagmites and stalactites formations. Inside the cave,



Fig. 1: Sight of fantastic caves of Sohoton



Fig. 2: The beautiful area of Sohoton



Fig. 3: The beautiful bridge of Sohoton

one could see numerous formations that resemble the” Banaue Rice Terraces, the Great Wall of China, a Harem Pavilion, an Amphitheatre with natural built-in acoustical system, and Seductive Courtesan’s Boudoir, refreshingly cooled by mother nature. Some formations resemble human appendages, women’s breast or men’s phallus”

(showcaves.com). Tourists describe Sohoton Cave as amazing, nice, beautiful, fantastic, perfect creation, enthralling, marvelous, fantastic, spectacular and alive to name a few. Once the tourists are at the site, the SSA member on duty takes care of them. The following are some of the images of Sohoton cave (Fig. 1-5).



Fig. 4: The charming sight of drip store cave



Fig. 5: The beautiful area of bridge and drip store cave

THE PEOPLE ORGANIZATION: SOHOTON SERVICES ASSOCIATION (SSA)

SSA was established in 2003 but its full operation started in 2008. Majority of the 9 members were already working in Sohoton, since its founding.

Demographic profile: Majority of the association members are females (74%) and the average age is 50 years old ranging from the youngest of 24 to the oldest of 68 years old. The youngest is single while the majority of the members are either married (68%) or a widow/er (16%) and the rest are separated and in live-in status.

With regard to their educational background, 12 (63.2%) had elementary level of education, 5 (26.3%) had high school education and the remaining 2 (10.5%) had some college level of education.

All of them are Roman Catholics and their main livelihood is farming. Two of the members are into mat weaving, one is a government employee and the other one is an elected government official.

The monthly income of these members ranges from PhP300-3,000 or an average of PhP1, 521.00 per month.

The average household size of the respondents is 5.4 with 84 household members or an average of 4.4 household members per respondent. Among these household members, 35 were only working to augment their family income or an average of 1.84 working household members per respondent. These working household members have an average monthly income of PhP2, 877.14. The average monthly income of the SSA members amounts to PhP4, 398.14 (Table 1).

The fact that Sohoton is a protected area the SSA is tasked in taking care of it. The members take turns at manning the site everyday, thus if there are people with bad intentions, they will hesitate since there are people around guarding the area. Two members are on duty everyday they start at around 8 am to until 3 pm or until such time that visitors will depart from the area. The number of members on duty depends also on the number of visitors. Their duties include the maintenance of the surroundings such

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the SSA members

Characteristics	N = 19	Distribution
Gender		
Males	5	26
Females	14	74
Age		
Min	24	-
Max	68	-
Average	50	-
Educational Attainment		
Elementary level	12	63.16
Secondary level	5	26.32
Vocational/Tertiary	2	10.52
Monthly Income from their main occupation (PhP)		
Min	300	-
Max	3,000	-
Average	1,521	-
Household size		
Min	2	-
Max	10	-
Average	5	-
Their HH members	N=84	-
Min	1	-
Max	9	-
Average	4	-
HH members working	N=35	-
Min	1	-
Max	4	-
Average	1.84	-
HH members	2,877.14	-
Average Income (PhP)		
Monthly income of SSA Members (PhP)	4,398.14	-

as cleaning the area and comfort rooms; they also prepare the headlights and assist visitors in wearing the head lights.

ECOTOURISM RELATED WORK

Twelve of the female members were engaged in cleaning the surroundings. However, among the 12, 4 were also into food preparation or catering. Two of them also acted as tourist guides; 5 of them were assigned as light persons and some of them sell goodies.

Some of the members of the SSA have undergone trainings in cave guiding, food preparation and food handling. The president, however had additional training in first aid, kayak guiding, business management and in souvenir items making. The trainings were provided by Department of Tourism.

INCOME DERIVED FROM ECOTOURISM

The >50% of the members of SSA were earning an average of PhP500.00 per month from ecotourism while 6% or 31.6% were earning PhP501.00-1000.00. Three respondents claimed that they were earning an average monthly income of PhP1,001-2,000.00.

In terms of income contribution, majority of the respondents claimed that their work in Sohoton contributes 25% to their income. Four respondents claimed that it contributes 26-50% of their income. Only

Table 2: Details of monthly income received by SSA members and family

Monthly income	In pesos	Distribution (%)
Average monthly income of SSA members	1,521	29.54
HH members average income (Ph.)	2,877.14	55.9
Average monthly income of SSA members from ecotourism activities	750.00	14.56
Total Monthly income of SSA Members (PhP)	5,148.14	100

one respondent claimed that ecotourism activity contributes the highest share of 76% of the income.

Based on income range from ecotourism activities, it is estimated that approximately, 15% of their family monthly income is derived from ecotourism activities (Table 2).

The SSA members accumulate their income on a weekly basis such that at the end of the week, their earnings are divided equally.

LOW INCOME OUT OF ECOTOURISM ACTIVITIES

A comparison between the income of SSA members with that of national statistics shows that the SSA members have low incomes. They are poor and are living below the poverty threshold that is PhP5, 148.14 total household income including ecotourism income compared with PhP8,022 monthly poverty threshold income (food and non-food items).

THE TOURISTS

A total of 538 tourists were interviewed from the months of november 2009 until february 2010. Majority of the tourists interviewed were local tourists coming from provinces outside samar. The average age is quite young at 35 years old. What's notable about the data is that majority of them are college-educated. In terms of gender, majority of the local tourists were females. Majority of them were first timers to visit sohoton cave.

With respect to foreign tourists, there were more males than females. The mean age is quite older which is at 39 years old and majority of them were high school educated (Table 3).

These tourists were asked on the factors that determined their decision to visit caves and it was found that they were very particular on the safety and security of the caves, its maintenance, number of tourist and the facilities found at the site like restrooms and cottages to be used as resting place.

While the tourists enjoyed the natural beauty of the Sohoton Cave, they suggested a lot of improvements that will enhance the tourist site and entice more tourists to visit the sohoton Cave. These are presented in Fig. 6.

Table 3: Demographic profile of tourist

Characteristics	Local (n = 470)	Foreign (n = 68)	Total (n=538)(%)
Gender			
Male	189	45	43.5
Female	281	23	56.5
Age			
Min	15	19	
Max	73	86	
Average	35	39	
Highest Educational attainment			
Elementary	1		0.18
High school	26	60	15.98
College	400	8	75.84
Post grad	43		8
Place of origin			
Within samar	36		6.7
Outside samar	429	68	92.3

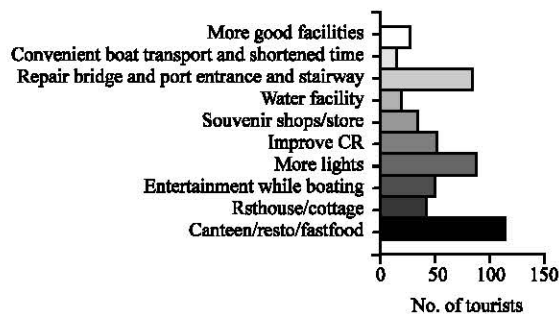


Fig. 6: Tourists suggestions to entice more tourist to visit Sohoton Cave

As shown in Fig. 6, convenient boat transport and shortened time, entertainment while boating, repairing the cantilever bridge and improved boat docking facility and provision of a staircase are the push factors for tourists to flock to sohoton cave.

On the other hand, improved rest rooms, availability of cottages or rest house, souvenir shops or mini stores and a water facility are amenities that will encourage more tourists to visit Sohoton Cave. These suggested facilities are value-adding features for the ssa members to put up.

VALUE ADDING

Value-adding is used here to refer to extra "features" of an item of interest (product, service, labor, etc. that go beyond the standard expectations). To achieve these, the ssa members have to maximize their time while rendering their task in Sohoton Cave.

The establishment of a souvenir shop. It is usual for tourists to buy mementoes from their travels and souvenir shops will not be a failure. Aside from keepsakes, basic items like drinking water, biscuits, candies and many more can be sold in the souvenir store. In this manner, their income will increase. Food items that feature the local delicacies of samar should be made available for sale to the tourists. Entertainment while boating (travelling to Sohoton Cave).

As pointed out earlier, a two hour-boat ride to some may be boring. So, an entertainment should be provided to the tourists. A serenade while boating will surely bring entertainment and enjoyment to the tourists. Another feature is a tour guide, perhaps, who could narrate the history of the place. This is both entertaining and educational for the tourists.

CONCLUSION

Knowing the limited time period used in interviewing the tourists, this study proved that while it is true that ecotourism activities in sohoton cave is on-going, the income derived by SSA is still minimal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the findings mentioned above, the following are recommended in order to add value to the tourist destination:

- To entice more tourists to sohoton cave, a lot of improvements have to be worked out in the site thereby increasing the monetary benefit of the sohoton service association. While several plans are in the pipeline, like the repair of cantilever bridge, the construction of a jetty port, the Sohoton puncheon and lighting system, they have to be in real terms
- These projects are to be implemented by the department of tourism in coordination with the local tourist office of basey samar and the local government unit
- These projects are capital investment that will usher more tourist to visit sohoton cave

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