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Exploring the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) of Locals Towards Ecotourism in a Countryside Setting in the Philippines

Abstract

The ecotourism sector was highly impacted by the pandemic. And the income of these sectors also suffered from the health crisis. This paper explores the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of locals in the countryside of Samar, Philippines on ecotourism. The study utilized a survey-questionnaire Knowledge, Attitude & Practice (KAP) model by Roger (1995). The respondents were all adults who met the inclusion criteria which is 18 years old and above, employing purposive sampling to ensure a representative sample. The findings revealed that the locals have a positive perception regarding ecotourism. On one hand, the majority expressed a belief in the potential benefits of ecotourism, indicating a recognition of its positive impact on the community. However, a significant proportion of respondents exhibited a lack of awareness regarding the specific advantages associated with ecotourism. Interestingly, despite this knowledge gap, the majority of respondents displayed a positive attitude towards ecotourism and demonstrated active engagement in conservation practices. The study underscores the need for targeted policies and interventions to enhance awareness and understanding of ecotourism among residents. Strengthening these policies is deemed essential for fostering sustainable development in the countryside through the promotion and responsible management of ecotourism initiatives.

Keywords: Samar, Philippine tourism, sustainable ecotourism, tourism development, KAP model

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created devastating impacts on the ecotourism industry globally. And the pandemic-induced reduction in human activity has had adverse effects on wildlife tourism destinations, impacting local communities, wildlife populations, and the environment (Jones, et al., 2023). However, the pandemic has also created opportunities for the development and promotion of ecotourism, as it has affected mass tourism more than ecotourism (Lavinia, 2022). Studies have identified various effects of the pandemic on ecotourism, including a decrease in the number of tourists, reduced activity of hotels and resorts, and positive and negative environmental effects

Ecotourism, a rapidly expanding sector, experiences estimated growth rates of 10–15%

globally (Panos, 1997). It represents a sub-category of sustainable tourism that focuses on the natural environment. Ecotourism aims to harmonize conservation efforts, community engagement, and sustainable travel. Notably, it plays a pivotal role in promoting the sustainable development of protected areas, contributing to both economic growth and environmental well-being (Yitian & Chuanchen, 2022).

However, if not managed strategically and sustainably, ecotourism can have negative effects on natural resources and host communities (Shiwen et al., 2022). Underdeveloped areas face challenges in ensuring the sustainability of ecotourism, but several mitigation strategies can be implemented (Fabio, 2022). Moreover, Local Ecological Knowledge (LEK) of communities can provide vital data and information on local threats and impacts on conservation management (Maria et al., 2023). Governments in less developed regions should adopt scientific approaches to modern governance and sustainable development, with a specific emphasis on integrating ecological principles into industry and promoting the industrialization of ecological practices. Ecotourism is a very good tool for sustainable development, especially in underdeveloped and developing communities, such as the countryside, and can impact locals' income. According to King (2009), economic development and conservation efforts can and must coexist harmoniously. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of learning experiences provided by small-scale businesses to small groups, with a strong focus on local ownership, especially for rural communities.

Ecotourism in the Philippines is seen as a key strategy for promoting local development and biodiversity conservation. According to the study of Corazon (1997), the country has implemented policies and programs to integrate ecotourism into protected area management systems and national biodiversity strategies as supported by the study of Yueqing (2022). This national ecotourism strategy emphasizes the importance of effective conservation to achieve sustainable tourism development and economic growth (Cristina et al., 2012).

The Philippines, with its Department of Tourism (DOT) taglines such as *"We give the world our best"* and *"It's more fun in the Philippines"*, highlights the diversity of cultural and natural heritage sites. In fact, it is considered one of the world's biologically rich countries (Conservation International, 2005). Furthermore, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), through the Samar Island Natural Park (SINP), adopted Resolution No. 97 on August 6, 2019, officially endorsing the SINP Protected Area for inclusion in the Tentative List of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. This protected area spans 335,105.07 hectares across 35 municipalities, encompassing Brgy. Sto. Niño in Paranas, Samar. Notably, within this

region lies an undiscovered and undocumented waterfall, presenting significant potential as an ecotourism site.

Samar, located in the eastern Visayas region of the Philippines, is the third-largest island in the country. It boasts a wealth of potential ecotourism destinations, including over 20 grand-sized waterfalls and more than 100 caves, with countless others waiting to be discovered (Orale, 2024). Notably, within the Samar Island Natural Park (SINP), you'll find iconic natural landmarks such as Sohoton Cave, Natural Bridge National Park, and Calbiga Cave—the largest cave in the Philippines and the second-largest in Asia. Additionally, the Ulot River in Paranas, Samar, stretches over 100 kilometers, offering a scenic and adventurous experience.

Although Samar is gaining popularity because of its promotion of ecotourism sites and the *"Spark Samar Project",* there are still undiscovered tourist sites such as waterfalls found in the upland barangays which can be developed as ecotourism sites. While these ecotourism sites are not a direct responsibility of local authorities, including barangay officials, efforts to implement for promotion, conservation, and development must be strengthened at higher-level policy-making bodies.

Hence, the aim of the study is to explore the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of the locals in the countryside of Paranas, Samar towards ecotourism and derive significant findings for the promotion and conservation of the local ecotourism site.

II. Literature Review

Ecotourism is recognized as a key tool for economic development and conservation, offering sustainable tourism experiences that benefit local communities economically and socially (Rana, 2021). Moreover, research highlights common challenges in ecotourism development, such as lack of government support, infrastructure, local knowledge, and specialized personnel (Sahahiri, et al., 2023). Recent studies emphasize the importance of managing sustainable tourism destinations through governance and stakeholder involvement, integrating concepts, and frameworks for ecotourism development (Siregar & Siregar, 2022).

Besides, Philippine ecotourism showcases the nation's abundant natural and cultural attractions, emphasizing the significance of sustainable tourism for economic prosperity, environmental preservation, and community engagement (Brillo, 2021). Additionally, the interplay between formal and informal institutions in ecotourism decision-making processes is critical. While formal institutions often receive more attention, the role of informal institutions is equally vital, influencing governance and sustainability efforts in various tourist destinations (Malogdos & Yujuico, 2015).

Moreover, Samar Island, in the Philippines, boasts diverse ecotourism destinations like forests, reefs, caves, waterfalls, and beaches, attracting tourists globally, although hindered by poor local government intervention (Orale, 2014).

III. Methodology

Research Design

This research utilized a quantitative-descriptive design. The researchers gathered data utilizing a survey questionnaire which is the Knowledge, Attitude & Practice (KAP) model by Roger (1995) which was modified to focus on the awareness, beliefs, and practices of the respondents towards ecotourism in the aforementioned locale.

Respondents

Purposive sampling was utilized, twenty-six (26) respondents of this study were identified who are all adults (18 years old and above), and are currently residing at Sto. Nino, Paranas Samar,Philippines that are aware of the existing local waterfalls as a potential ecotourism site.

Data Collection and Analysis

After securing clearance to conduct the study from the Samar State University – Institutional Ethics Review Board (SSU-IERB), a letter of approval was sought from the municipal mayor of Paranas, Samar, stating the objectives of the study. Data were gathered using a survey questionnaire and were administered to the respondents at their most convenient time. In addition, respondents also received written and oral information about the objectives of the study.

Furthermore, before the researchers initiated the data gathering, the proposed procedure and protocol by the researchers were submitted and approved by the SSU-IERB for the review of ethical considerations, relative to the interview, interpretation, handling, and disposal of data. Data were collected, sorted, and interpreted using descriptive analyses such as frequency counts and percentages.

Ethical Consideration

This study conformed to the national and institutional guidelines of the research conducted for human samples. Ethical approval was obtained before the commencement of the study. The respondents received written and oral information on the objective of the study through a general orientation at the said locale. The respondents were also informed that their participation is voluntary and they can opt to withdraw at any time without explanation. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured according to ethical research guidelines.

Moreover, informed consent was obtained from the municipal mayor, the barangay officials, and the respondents themselves.

IV. Results and Discussion

The following tables present the salient data and findings from the study on locals' Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) toward ecotourism. These tables encapsulate the essential information gleaned from the research. They highlight the key aspects of how locals perceive and engage with ecotourism.

Table 1

Knowledge towards Ecotourism

Indicators	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Knowledgeable about ecotourism	12	46.15
Not knowledgeable about ecotourism	14	53.85
Total	*26*	*100%*
Awareness of the potential of ecotourism	14	53.85
Not aware of the potential of ecotourism	12	46.15
Total	*26*	*100%*
Awareness of the benefits of ecotourism	12	46.15
Not aware of the benefits of ecotourism	14	53.85
Total	*26*	*100%*

As gleaned in the above table, 14 out of 26 respondents are not knowledgeable about ecotourism, or 53.85 percent. Furthermore, the same number of respondents are also not aware of the potential and benefits of ecotourism. This implies that people living in the countryside of Samar, Philippines are not well-informed of the impacts of ecotourism.

In community contexts, it is crucial to ensure that diverse interest groups—such as women and youths—have meaningful representation in decision-making bodies. To enable local communities to exert influence over ecotourism activities, the authority related to ecotourism must shift from the national level to the community level, as proposed by Akama (1996).

Furthermore, Stronza (2006) posited that ecotourism elicits sentiments that extend beyond what economic analyses can easily measure. These sentiments include individuals' willingness to engage in ecotourism work, even when the economic returns are relatively modest. This perspective suggests that ecotourism serves not only as an economic vehicle for conservation but also as a catalyst for the emergence of new values and social relationships.

Table 2

Attitude towards Ecotourism

Indicators	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Believes that the community can benefit from ecotourism	19	47.5
Do not believe that the community can benefit from ecotourism	21	52.5
Total	*40*	*100%*
Believes that there are potential ecotourism sites within the barangay	14	35
Do not believe that there are potential ecotourism sites within the barangay	26	65
Total	*40*	*100%*
Believes that ecotourism needs cooperation	16	40

between the locality and other agencies		
Believes that the community can benefit from ecotourism	24	60
Total	*40*	*100%*

As observed in the above table, the majority of the respondents, or 22 of them believe that they can benefit from ecotourism, there is a potential ecotourism site within the locality, and the success of the ecotourism project needs cooperation between the locals and partner agencies.

The execution and realization of ecotourism ventures by native networks is not an exception, and it does not consequently infer protection or financial advancement. Ecotourism must be able to make decisions about how to use land in that area and promote deeper social and political justice goals to the local communities. These factors prevent individuals from reaping the economic benefits of ecotourism if left unchecked (Charnley, 2005).

Moreover, ecotourism is a highly fragmented industry that includes both large corporations and small and medium-sized businesses, and this diversity has led to a wide variety of sustainable tourism initiatives (Clarke, 2002). This data implies that the people living in the countryside of Samar, Philippines are optimistic about the beneficence of ecotourism.

Table 3

Practices towards Ecotourism

Indicators	**Frequency (f)**	**Percentage (%)**
Practices waste segregation and proper waste disposal	26	100%
Does not practice waste segregation and proper waste disposal	-	-
Total	*40*	*100%*

Supports the protection and promotion of potential local ecotourism sites	26	100%
Does not support the protection and promotion of potential local ecotourism sites	-	-
Total	*40*	*100%*

As presented in the above table, all locals practice waste segregation and proper waste disposal as well. Additionally, they are willing to protect and promote the local ecotourism site for development. This data implies that the people living in the countryside of Samar, Philippines have good environmental practices considering the municipality of Paranas Samar has a good waste segregation program.

The booming population in the world also entails an increase in material use – such as waste affecting the environment because of degradation (Grassroots Recycling Network, 2000). In addition to safeguarding biodiversity, ecotourism in indigenous communities aims to enhance community members' means of subsistence. However, research data asserts that many indigenous ecotourism endeavors have not significantly affected local livelihoods (Kiss, 2004).

V. Conclusions & Recommendations

Even though ecotourism has been around for a long time, there are still a lot of gaps in our industry, especially when it comes to using sustainable tourism practices, especially in third-world countries such as the Philippines. In recent years, efforts to develop the best method for measuring travel's effects on the environment and society have grown in tandem with conservation concerns. Efforts to improve ecotourism's planning, management, and marketing strategies as well as to increase its value are still insufficient.

The results revealed that the locals of Samar, Philippines have a positive attitude toward ecotourism and are willing to cooperate towards the development, sustainability, protection, and promotion of ecotourism sites. It is, therefore, necessary that policies toward the development of ecotourism in a countryside setting must be addressed and strengthened most specifically in areas with potential ecotourism sites.

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