Promoting Sustainable Tourism in Coron Island, Palawan Province, Philippines - Policy Gap and Impact Analysis

Abstract: Tourism is an important source of revenue for the Philippines particularly remote and rural coastal and island areas such as those islands in Palawan Province. However, drastic increase of inbound tourists that surpasses the development of required infrastructure degrade the environment and undermine sustainability. While the national government, the local authority and tourism business associations strive to promote sustainable tourism through the compliance with the code of conducts in tour operations to safeguard the safety of the tourists and the environment, the risks associated with sustainable tourism are at the multifaceted and multiple-levels that can go beyond what the local stakeholders are able to squarely address to hedge such risks. The Coron’s Charter for Sustainable Tourism provides a useful policy and institutional framework. Yet, the challenges lie with its compliance and enforcement by the tour agents and business entities. The continuous monitoring, compliance and enforcement mechanisms need to evolve in a participatory manner and be operationalized with the more proactive involvement of local business associations and stakeholder groups.

Key Words: sustainable tourism, coastal and island, monitoring, compliance, risk management, public awareness, information

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a key revenue source for the Philippines particularly remote coastal and island communities. Tourism needs to be based on sustainability principles and contribute sustainable development by protecting the environment and ecosystems and improving local economies and people’s well-being (UN 2012). Sustainable tourism is geared towards balancing environmental protection and economic development (Dedeke 2017). As coastal and island communities and ecosystems are vulnerable, it is vital to prudently manage and balance economic development and environmental protection (Dvarskas 2017). The tourism sector has embedded the policies of promoting sustainable tourism by adopting relevant strategies and action plans (Budeanu 2016).

Like other sustainable development discourses, there is a gap in promoting sustainable tourism in the context of the local stakeholders’ aspiration and policy and institutional frameworks (Boley 2017). Policy and institutional gap analysis is an important part of the processes to forge policy and institutional capacity for achieving sustainable development by examining the discrepancy between the required policy and institutional set-ups and those that are currently in place (Deen 2015, Bigard et al 2017, Hoberg et al 2016, Pentz and Lkenk 2017, Snilstveit et al 2016, Janowski 2016). An analysis needs to be carried out over the policy and institutional frameworks for not just balancing economic development and environmental protection, but also for incorporating social aspects and intangible values through an integrated approach (Alexiadis 2017). In gap analysis, it is indispensable to identify key stakeholders and examine their respective distinctive and common interests within and between stakeholder groups in order to understand the barriers and opportunities attributable to respective stakeholder groups (Hardy and Pearson in press).

This paper is intended to analyze the current state of
tourism in Coron Island, Parawan Province, the Philippines, examine the stakeholders’ perspectives and analyze policy and institutional gaps. By doing so, the paper aims at presenting challenges in promoting sustainable tourism in Coron and providing perspective for future research and capacity development interventions.

1. RESEARCH TARGET

The Philippines is an archipelagic country of more than 7,100 islands in the north of the tropical equator and its abundant natural resources qualifies the country to be one of the mega-biodiversity countries (RoP 2008 and 2014). Rich and diverse biological resources are an important basis for providing ecosystem services including nutrient cycles, climate regulation, water supply, flood control, coastal protection and other education and aesthetic values. Tourism is one of the sectors that are supported by abundant natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Tourism sector has been prospering and its growth rate surpass the world average (Fig.1). Over the past 15 years from 2000 – 2016, the in-bound tourists for the Philippines have been tripled (339 per cent) while the global figure was doubled (229 per cent).

Coron Island located in Palawan Province, 130 km southwest of Manila is one of the islands (Fig.2). The tourists destined to Palawan has boosted since the inscription of the Puerto-Princesa Subterranean River National Park as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1999 (UNESCO). The Puerto-Princesa Subterranean River National Park is located 76 km northwest of Puerto-Princesa, a capital city of Palawan Province. The Subterranean River was named as one of the new seven wonders of nature by a global poll in 2012. The poll was conducted by the New7Wonders Foundation (Agence France-Presse and New7 Wonders of Nature). The number of tourists to Palawan has boosted from 160,000 in 2010 to 1.4 million in 2015. It has grown over 8 times for the five years (Exclusive Hot Properties. n.d.). It is projected to reach 2 million by 2020 with the 43 per cent growth rate, 2.5 million by 2025 with the growth rate of 79 per cent.

Coron Island is not an exception from the booming tourism in Palawan. Coron Island is located in northeast of Palawan Province. It is 20 km long from north to south, and 9 km from east to west with 600 m elevation. The population is 32,243 according to the census of 2000 (PSA 2002). Coron Island is dominated by steep cliffs and has 11 lakes. Wreck diving is popular in Coron Island as a number of Japanese battle ships of the Word War II are sunk and the aquatic views off Coron Island are listed as the top-10 best scuba diving sites in the world (NBC 2007). It is also important to note that there is an indigenous ethnic group called “Tagalaba” or “Cirilo Daguison” one of the oldest ethnic groups in the Philippines. Tagalaba has its own language while they are also proficient in Palawan language. They have their own indigenous religion, rituals and perform dance and music.

Coron Island was affected by Super-typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in November 2013 and the tourists plumbed as low as 200. However, it was restored to 400 arrival per day by 2015, almost a year after the disaster. It is reported that the disaster didn’t change the pattern of tourist visits to Coron (Palawan News 2015).

While there were spin-off economic benefits from the boosting tourism in Palawan, and more specifically Coron Island, there is also a mounting concern over the degradation of environment (Manalo 2017). With the basic and limited infrastructure, concerns were raised over the waste and sewage from local guest houses and hoteliers that could damage the environment.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Department of Tourism (DOT) has adopted in February 2014 the “National Ecotourism Strategy & Action Plan 2013-2022”. The aid
Nonetheless, the central government is unable to intervene in each of the numerous tourist destination islands and districts. In Coron Island, local people used to be engaged in subsistent farming and fishing. It is also a home of Tagalaba, an indigenous ethnic group. In the light of socio-economic and cultural sensitivity and susceptibility to external pressures including the rapid increase of tourists, Coron Island was chosen as a study area for examining the local people’s perception about the impacts of tourism and analyzing the policy and institutional gaps towards promoting sustainable tourism.

2. METHODS

In order to conduct gap analysis on policy and institution for promoting sustainable tourism in Coron, focused group discussions were conducted three times in March 2013, September 2013 and March 2014. The questionnaire survey was also conducted in March 2013 and March 2014.

A stakeholder theory (Hardy 2017) is applied in the analysis by identifying key stakeholders such as analyzing hotel operators, travel agencies, tour guides, local governments and local communities and NGOs. The Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) is applied comprehending the stakeholders’ perception on the impacts of tourism and gaps by examining the outcome of the questionnaire surveys and the focused group discussions.

In the focused group discussions, it was mainly intended to exchange views among the participants on the impacts of tourism on the local environment and livelihood, policy gaps and suggested actions. The questionnaire surveys were developed and conducted to illustrate the perception of local stakeholders in quantitative manners and draw its tendency and variation.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Focused group discussions and sustainable tourism charter development

In the stakeholders focused discussions in March 2013, 35 participants (10 hotel operators, 4 travel agencies, 5 local tour agencies, 3 tour guides, 7 local governments, 6 local communities and NGOs). They have first reviewed the impacts of tourism and raised a concern over its negative impacts without proper regulatory frameworks and voluntary actions. At the same time, the participants broke into two sub-groups and reviewed the selected four major tourism sites namely Siete Pecados, Kayangalan Lake, Dimanglet Island and Lajala Island. They have discussed the characteristics and conditions of respective sites for tourism. As a part of the conclusions, it was proposed to develop a draft charter of sustainable tourism for Coron. The local government also had an intention to develop a sub-regional plan for promoting sustainable tourism in northern Palawan.

In September 2013, 66 participants attended the stakeholders’ focused group discussions. The participants included 25 tour operators, 13 hotel operators, 7 local government officials and NGOs and experts. Four persons attended the workshop in March 2013. The participants have discussed the measures to protect the environment in different tourist destination sites such as beaches, lakes and snorkeling sites. The measures included not just those aimed at reducing pollution and waste, but also raising the safety and comfort of tourists.

The participants also addressed policy and
institutional gaps such as the shortage of qualified staff members for promoting sustainable tourism. Reference was also made to the absence of user fees, insufficient docking areas. Lack of first medical aid kits and lifeguards were also raised. Danger in the trailing, fire hazard from cigarette smoking, and lack of toilet facilities were also raised. It was also interesting to note that the participants underlined the importance of informing the tourists of the socio-cultural features of Coron Island.

Stakeholders particularly those from the Society for Sustainable Tourism and Development Inc (SSTDI), the Municipal Government of Coron, the Calamianes Cultural Conservation Inc, the Department of Tourism and any other stakeholder groups have collaborated in devising a draft charter for sustainable tourism in Coron. Inputs were also provided by the United Nations Environment Programme, the Thailand Environment Institute and the Yokohama National University.

The draft charter laid out the objectives of (i) conservation of local ecology and biodiversity, (ii) public and private partnership, (iii) social responsibility and environmental equity, and (iv) guideline development for sustainable tourism. The charter stipulates 31 environmental, social and economic action points. The text provided useful elements for uniting stakeholders towards promoting sustainable tourism. The charter was reviewed at the focused group discussions with the participants over 30.

3.2 Perception on environmental changes

The stakeholders were inquired about how they view the environmental changes. In March 2013 (n=13), 67 per cent of the respondents stated that the environment has been degraded and 17 per cent stated that the environment has been severely degraded. Thus, 84 per cent stated that the environment has degraded moderately or severely (Fig.3). A year later in March 2014 (n=25), 43 per cent stated that the environment is improving and 35 per cent stated that the environment is degrading. By combining “moderate” and “severe or significant”, it can be said that 48 per cent regard the environment improving and 43 per cent consider the environment degrading. A greater percentage of stakeholders consider the environment improving.

3.3 Perception on tourism and its impacts

The questionnaire survey of March 2013 revealed the level of concerns held by the local stakeholders in relation with tourism. By applying weighted scoring (very concerned = 2, concerned =1, neutral =0, not so much = -1, not at all = -2) to the identified phenomena, the most concerned phenomenon was the increase of tourists (34) followed by deforestation (32), coral reef damage (32), marine water pollution (32), mangrove depletion (29), waste increase (24) and fish stock depletion (21) as shown in Fig.4. The tourist increase wasn’t a direct environment impact, but included in the questionnaire as it has collateral environmental impacts. The same question was asked in March 2014 a year later, and its comparison result was shown Fig.5. The rate of increase in the stakeholders’ concern was the highest for typhoon and flood risks (2.57) followed by rain scarcity (1.07), fish stock depletion (1.05), mining (0.88) and river water pollution (0.82).
Fig. 5 Changes of stakeholders' perception over 2013 – 2014

3.4 Evaluation of the draft Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Coron

The draft Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Coron was developed and presented at the focused group discussions. The draft Charter was the conceptual framework document to promote sustainable tourism in Coron through the suggested measures such as those aimed at conserving ecosystem and nature, reducing wastes, conserving quality water, promoting environmentally sound energy and fostering sustainable local livelihood. The participants were inquired in the questionnaire survey in March 2014 about their evaluation of the components contained in the draft Charter, related documents and mechanisms. The outcome is compiled with the weighed scores (well developed = 2, reasonably developed = 1, deficient = -1 very deficient = -2). The participants viewed the draft Charter as a useful document (30). Participants also gave positive notes to the consultation mechanisms created in this process of stakeholder discourses on sustainable tourism in Coron (26), and partnership forged in this process as well (25). However, limited evaluation was given to information dissemination mechanism (22), compliance and enforcement mechanism (21), benchmarks and indicators (21) and monitoring mechanism (18).

3.5 Assessment of the suggested measures for promoting sustainable tourism in Coron

The stakeholders were also inquired in the questionnaire survey in March 2014 about their views on the suggested measures for promoting sustainable tourism. Awareness raising, private sector involvement, regulations and penalties were almost unanimously supported as shown in Table 1. On the other hand, the idea of introducing tax on natural resource use was poorly supported. The questionnaire was not specific enough to distinguish the tax for the livelihood use and the tax for the commercial use, and this needs to be clarified in the future research. Fiscal support and subsidies faced a certain level of disagreement.

4. DISCUSSION

Through the series of focused group discussions, stakeholders have expanded their knowledge base and partnership. Multi-stakeholder partnership was forged to undertake measures for promoting sustainable tourism. The Super-typhoon Haiyan was a major external shock to the Philippines including Coron Island. The reconstruction process might have made local people perceive environmental improvement. Haiyan might have shifted their attention from the tourist increase to disaster and rain scarcity. The local stakeholders can reinforce disaster preparedness and resilience. However, holistic and multi-scale actions are required to overcome climate change impacts.

Table 1: Stakeholders' views on Suggested Measures for Promoting Sustainable Tourism in Coron

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Propositions</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Do not know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We should teach the importance of protecting the environment more in the schools.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector should support environmental conservation</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government must strengthen environmental regulations</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should enforce the penalty against those who damage the environmental.</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should engage stakeholders in consultations and decision making.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should disseminate information to the public about the environment, compliance and rule violations</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should strengthen the local government by giving them more budget and people to monitor the local environment and train local people for sustainable natural resource use.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government should subsidize the environmental conservation.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should recourse to judicial proceedings (bring a case to the court).</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should raise the tax on the users of natural resources.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is nothing we can do to improve the environment.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSIONS

Tourism is an important source of revenue for local communities. However, enabling policies and institutional set-up are required to capitalize upon the potential of tourism for promoting sustainable development and improving local livelihood. They are also important to ensure environmental and social safeguarding. As the demands for tourism grow so rapidly and the local managerial capacity is limited, international partnership and cooperation including in the field of research are deemed essential. A mode for sustainable tourism needs to be developed through interdisciplinary and pragmatic research through the evident based and participatory approach.

NOTE

REFERENCES
UN. Resolution 66/288. The future we want. 11 September 2012.