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Maintainability of a Local Government-Instituted Ecotourism Development: The Tayak Adventure, Nature, and Wildlife Park in Rizal, Laguna, Philippines

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Abstract

Ecotourism is one key growth strategy of the Philippine Government. Expansion of ecotourism is often challenged by untapped natural resources and unique cultural/heritage assets. This situation is aggravated by the literary deficit where one important aspect has been often overlooked—the maintainability of small/medium-scale enterprises once in place at the local level. This paper explores and understands the sustainability of the TANAW de Rizal Park, an ecotourism enterprise of a fifth-class municipality. Based on a case study design, the paper delineates circumstances to fathom out local ecotourism development. First, leadership is top-down driven, but the bottom-up manner is more significant to ensure sustainability. Second, financial issue is complicated thus, the ideal is to continue the operation of government agencies and integrate commercial businesses. Third, the traditional Holy Week events are the town’s single-month focal point, thus extending supplementary activities on a regular and all-year-round basis can boost continued revenue. Fourth, the park is strategic if connected and/or associated with neighboring towns and nearby natural resources. Lastly, the park’s strengths are anchored on its unusual intermixing of assets, while its weaknesses are the risks of becoming a “white elephant project.”

Keywords: local government, Rizal municipality, small/medium-scale ecotourism, sustainable ecotourism

Introduction, scope, and main objectives

The Philippines is one of the world’s largest archipelagos and the abundance of both natural and cultural assets makes it a viable tourism destination. Since 2009, the tourism sector’s contribution to the domestic economy has been steadily growing, posting around 10.7, 12.2, and 12.7 percent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2016, 2017, and 2018, respectively (PSO 2019a, PSO 2018, PSO 2017).

In the context of sustainable development, ecotourism was elevated into a development agenda of the country in 1991, when the Department of Tourism (DOT), in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), formulated the Philippine Tourism Master Plan (TMP) which embraces the principle of sustainable tourism development following the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report (NESC-ETWG 2002, UN-WCED 1987). To date, the National Ecotourism Strategy and Action Plan 2013-2022 serves as the country’s road map for enhancing competitiveness and expanding the ecotourism market of the country (DOT 2018, NESC-ETWG 2014).

Amidst the abundance of natural resources and cultural/heritage assets suited for ecotourism, the Philippines lags among ASEAN countries and midpoint in the Asia-Pacific average on tourism's absolute contribution to GDP (WEF 2019, WTTC 2018). This indicates that the country still has a lot to do in developing ecotourism, despite the steady growth in recent years. A key factor impeding the expansion of ecotourism in the country is the presence of untapped natural resources and cultural/heritage assets in many localities which are either unidentified, undeveloped, or underutilized. This fact particularly applies to the lower-class municipalities and rural communities where small- and medium-scale ecotourism remains in the infancy stage despite the Local Government Code of 1991 and the Tourism Act of 2009 which mandate the local government units or LGUs to develop and promote tourism in their respective areas (DOT 2014).

Such imbalance aggravates the situation in ecotourism development literature, with substantial attention given since the late 1990s. Scholarly works are heavily concentrated on three broad-ranging and overlapping categories: 1) discussions on the concept of ecotourism and its evolution in the country, 2) effects and impacts of ecotourism, and 3) assessment of the potentials and challenges of ecotourism. These literature classifications illustrate that one aspect of ecotourism development has been overlooked— the sustainability of established small/medium-scale enterprises (SMEs), specifically ecotourism projects in the lower-class municipalities and rural communities. Although some scholarly works dealt with this aspect, the discussions in general terms or the cases are well-established ecotourism destinations. Consequently, this literary deficit indicates minimal discussion and understanding of the sustainability of SMEs once in place— that is: How can an established local government-instituted ecotourism enterprise maintain development? With the recent proliferation of small/medium-scale eco-tourism sites (government-led or private sector-led) at the municipal level of the country, this observation signifies the need to supplement the existing literature through empirical case studies about locally established SMEs.

Based on the above premises, this paper investigates the ecotourism development experience of a small or lower-class municipality. It explores and understands the maintainability of a local government-instituted small/medium-scale enterprise — the Tayak Adventure, Nature, and Wildlife (TANAW de Rizal) Park located in the Municipality of Rizal, Province of Laguna, Philippines (see Figures 1 and 2).

Methodology/approach

As qualitative research, a case study design is used in exploring and understanding the specifics of locally instituted ecotourism development. The status-contextual aspects, the assessment of ecotourism enterprise, and the facilitating-constraining factors in TANAW de Rizal Park's sustainability are used to describe local ecotourism development. Data are generated through key informant interviews, site observations, and documentary research. The information is analyzed from the following criteria: a) contemporary evolution and b) the facilitating and impeding aspects of maintaining the park.

As a concept, this study broadly defines ecotourism development as sustainable tourism of natural resources and cultural/heritage assets, which are intended to promote socio-economic improvements in a locality (*e.g.* see Brillo, B.B. 2016c, UNWTO 2013, UNEP-WTO 2005, Wood 2002, Weaver 2001, Acott, LaTrobe & Howard 1998). This ecotourism development definition aims to be inclusive (rather than restrictive) and sensitive to the progress capacity of many lower-class municipalities in the Philippines (as imposing strict definitions [such as “hard ecotourism” or “deep

ecotourism”] would disqualify most SMEs in the country). Consistent with the ecotourism development’s inclusive criterion, an SME is defined as a limited size ecotourism project, with capitalization ranging from PHP 3-100 million (USD 61,802,757.00- USD 206,009,190.00) and employs 10-199 workers [Aldaba 2012, SMEDC 2003]) that is established by local stakeholders in a municipality, usually lower-class or rural community.

As a limitation, this study does not tackle environmental science sustainability but is mainly concerned with the political, economic, and cultural aspects of the local ecotourism development.

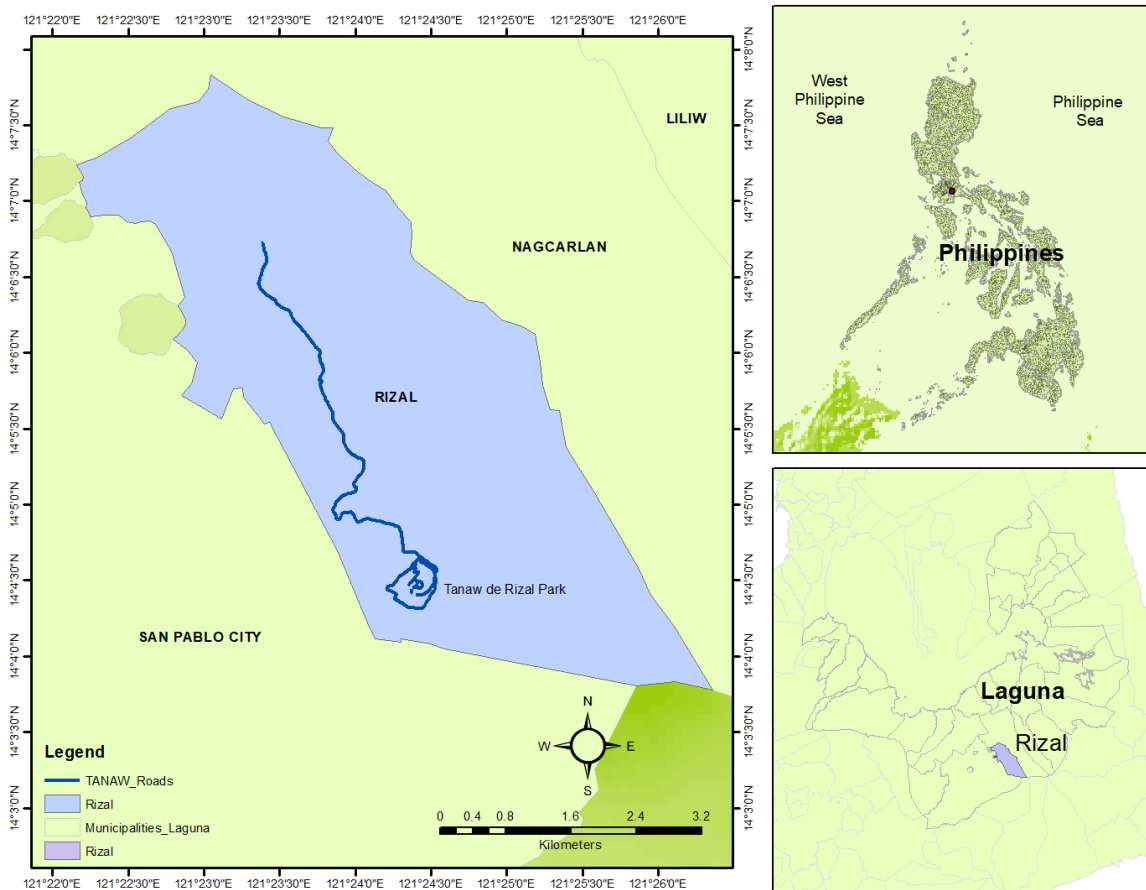


Fig. 1: TANAW de Rizal Park and the Municipality of Rizal in the Province of Laguna, Philippines (Source: PhilGIS, Philippine Statistics Authority, and ASTER Global Digital Elevation Model).



Fig. 2: Aerial view of TANAW de Rizal Park. (Source: Municipality Government of Rizal, Laguna).

Results

Status and contextual aspects

The park is an ecotourism development located in Sitio Malaseña, Barangay Tala, Municipality of Rizal, Laguna. It is about seven kilometers away from the town proper and is situated in the south of Mount San Cristobal and the east of the mythical Mount Banahaw. The principal aim of the park is to elevate the town into a popular tourist destination in the province. The broad-ranging purposes of the ecotourism enterprise are to generate revenue for operations and development, to impress a distinct identity of the municipality, and to provide livelihood opportunities to the local community. TANAW de Rizal Park serves as the centerpiece of Tayak Hill (called 'Tilos' or 'Parang' by locals), a naturally raised area of land that provides a scenic panorama of the town proper, Nagcarlan Municipality, Liliw Municipality, San Pablo City, and the majestic Mount San Cristobal. The park is covered by a central area of 24 hectares and surrounded by various forest and forestland as follows: Open Access (35.487 hectares), Protected Area (6.814 hectares), National Greening Program or NGP site (152.858 hectares), and the Malabanban-Cabunsod Watershed Forest Reserve (31.914 hectares). The park's land resource is under the administrative authority of the local government via the Local Government Code of the Philippines (see Republic Act 7160). On the ground, the park is under the supervision of the barangay officials of Tala and assisted by members of the Santo Niño Agroforestry Farmers Association (SNAFA) as well as the Citizen Armed Force Geographical Unit (CAFGU) in maintaining and securing the place (OFR 2016).

TANAW de Rizal Park's project was set in motion due to development. The primary context was the socio-economic and identity issues on the municipal government, which impede economic growth. In the socio-economic issue, Rizal is considered a low key player in development being a fifth-class

town in income and the second at the bottom in the population [17,253 censuses in 2015 (PSO 2015); 20,425 projections in 2022 (DOH 2018)] among the 24 municipalities of Laguna Province (see PSO 2019c). Based on the 2018 financial profile, the municipality's assets and the revenue, PhP 95,572,000.00 and PhP 73,657,000.00 (USD 1,969,154.00 and USD 73,657,000.00), respectively, are in the last and the second-to-last among the municipalities of Laguna (see COA 2019a). In the competitiveness index of Rizal Municipality in 2019, the overall rank is 293, which is 11th out of 18th among third-class municipalities. In terms of barangays, the smallest administrative division, all 11 barangays are rural areas and predominately agriculture-based. As regards to Internal Revenue Allotment or IRA (i.e. the local government's share of revenues from the national government), Rizal received PhP 48,990,582.00 (USD 1,009,307.00) in 2016 and PhP 20,209,041.00 (USD 416,364.00) in 2017, which are the lowest and second-lowest among all Laguna municipalities (see BLGF 2019). In terms of identity issues, the municipality has been missing its distinct recognition and for a long time has been little known (often erroneously as a Rizal Province), with no distinct tourism trademark. Its neighboring towns, San Pablo City has the Seven Lakes and Nagcarlan municipality has the Underground Cemetery. These circumstances prompted the local government of Rizal to address the enduring issues immediately.

TANAW de Rizal Park evolved when the municipality thought of ways on how to make the small town known on the map through a distinct brand or emblem. After the 2010 elections, one of the priorities of the new administration was to accelerate local development and enhance the municipality's low status. The elected mayor and vice mayor were receptive to new ideas and initiated an ecotourism enterprise in Tayak Hill- a historical landmark that served as a "landing strip" to supply depot of arms, ammunition, and foods to all guerilla fighting units in Laguna and some parts of Quezon during the Japanese invasion in the 1940s. The municipal government, through the vice mayor, set in motion the preliminary steps for establishing ecotourism development. Initial activities included the launching of the awareness and information campaign among the local people and synchronizing the local government's overall development strategy to include Tayak Hill's ecotourism project. In 2011, the municipal government laid the groundwork, which promoted the label as Tayak Adventure and Nature Park and the Landing Point. Two years after, the local government formally launched the ecotourism enterprise and its official name as TANAW de Rizal Park. TANAW de Rizal Park was elevated as a flagship tourism project of the local government and envisioned as a broad ecotourism project, which includes a nature park, an adventure-sports activity, and agritourism. The park incorporated a religious component in ecotourism development such as putting up a giant cross on the hill's peak, symbolic stations of the cross, and a grotto. Overall, the municipal government via the municipal tourism office commenced the campaign to promote TANAW de Rizal Park.

Discussion

Facilitating-constraining factors in sustainability

The leadership of the local government has been the driving force in the development of TANAW de Rizal Park. From 2010 to the present, its political leaders have been the prime mover of the ecotourism enterprise's agenda from envisioning to implementation. Thus, the initiative to the establishment of the park by the local government has been top-down driven, where efforts of the local executives are crucial. Having the top-down manner is reasonable considering that the

ecotourism enterprise is novel and extensive. Novel since it was the first time to establish such project in Rizal, and extensive since it integrates the adventure, nature, and wildlife park apart from the historical and the cultural assets. Moreover, the limited time of office for the government officials (*i.e.* the election of the mayor and the vice mayor takes place every three years) in planning and completing the project, then the top-down manner was somewhat acceptable. In addition, consultations with communities were less practiced at the start of the park's ecotourism project. Accordingly, consultation meetings were not held to discuss the possible direction or the effect in the implementation, but to present or inform the community, on the onset of the project. But at present, TANAW de Rizal Park needs to modify by augmenting the involvement of the townspeople, especially the members and officials of Barangay Tala. Since ecotourism enterprise is already established, the bottom-up driven should be adjusted and employed more since most activities now require local people and managing works. Thus, adjustments are needed since the ecotourism enterprise's situation, and tasks are now different— from establishing to maintaining the park. Community participation is one crucial aspect that ensures the sustainability of any ecotourism endeavor. Since lack of tourism personnel is one identified problem, the residents may be trained and tapped for the operation and management of the park. After ecotourism skills training (*e.g.* park interpretation, environmental conservation, waste management), they can serve as local tour/trek guides, hosts for homestays, providers of local transportation, emergency response team, and even staff to oversee the buildings and tourist information center. Locals can be involved to manage and sustain the ecotourism enterprise and more importantly, act as a partner to resolve conflicts and challenges rather than by the local government alone.

Completing the primary and supplementary facilities and maintaining the ecotourism enterprise of the park have complications— both issues are financial matters. In completing the amenities, the local government has finished the main facilities such as the Noah's Ark, gazebo, pavilion, stone trails, the station of the cross, tourism information center, and green restrooms, but the remaining amenities, such as the hotel and restaurant (completed but not yet operationalized), clubhouse, greenhouse, environment center, bamboo village, and mini zoo, are still incomplete (Municipality of Rizal 2019). In the past, government agencies such as DA, DOT, ADB, WB, and the provincial government have contributed to building the infrastructures, but at present, the ecotourism enterprise needs more linkages and external supports. This is critical in requiring steady supports to complete all park plans since the Rizal municipality has limited funds being a small-scale local government (*e.g.*, in the asset, revenue, and Internal Revenue Allotment, Rizal Town is in the last and the second-to-last among the municipalities of Laguna [see BLGF 2019, COA 2019a]). Although the government agencies persist in providing the ecotourism enterprise, the private sector, specifically the big commercial businesses within the town seems to be lacking. These businesses can contribute to the completion of the remaining park facilities and create more local employment opportunities. One of the immediate and basic needs in the area is electricity and an ample supply of water. There is no electricity in the area and its natural springs often dry up especially during the dry season (April-July). Although the local government has plans to augment these basic needs, partnerships with businesses that provide alternative sources of electricity (*e.g.*, solar energy/harvesting) and tap other sources of water (*e.g.* rainwater harvesting) are worth looking into. Commercial enterprises may also be explored to act as partners in promotion as well as in the establishment of livelihood and/or trading posts so the local people/farmers can both sell agricultural produce to visitors and neighboring towns. With this, it is important for local government to explore and connect the big companies, whether entering or inviting the ecotourism enterprise; as well as integrate the commercial businesses.

In maintaining the park, the local government started the soft operations in 2015 via Executive Order 15 where a promotional package entrance fee of PhP 30.00 (USD 0.21) per visitor, with an additional PhP 10.00 - 30.00 (USD 0.21 – 0.62) for parking and PhP 5.00 (USD 0.10) for restrooms. From these collections, the ecotourism enterprise generated PhP 202,600.00 (USD 4,174.06) annual gross income. In 2018, TANAW de Rizal Park started to pay the total loan amount of PhP 5,138,000.00 (USD 105,856.48) from the WB, where the Principal is PhP 358,000.00 (USD 7,375.79), and the Interest is PhP 1,476,000.00 (USD 30,409.66) (COA 2019b). The outstanding balance of the loan is PhP 4,780,000.00 (USD 98,464.04), which is a long-term liability that the Rizal enterprise will have to pay every year until completed. So, juxtaposing the proceeds of the ecotourism enterprise's revenue and the maturing debt of the loan's principal and interest, evidently, TANAW de Rizal Park solely is not enough to remunerate without the support of the Rizal municipality. With this, there is a need to improve the revenue generation of the ecotourism enterprise to be self-sufficient and slowly reduce the local government subsidy. The subsidy is normal and vital in starting the enterprise, but it must be temporary and not permanent since the goal is to make TANAW de Rizal Park self-reliant and not perennially dependent on the local government.

Strategically, the park needs to connect with the two adjacent municipalities— San Pablo City and Nagcarlan. Both towns are larger in market demand and have long been established assets in tourism compared to Rizal. Thus, linking both municipalities to TANAW de Rizal Park can spread effects by swaying the prospering areas to support ecotourism enterprise. In pivotal resources, TANAW de Rizal Park can supplement the two natural assets— the Nalagalas Falls (in Barangay Tala) and Calibato Lake (in Rizal Municipality's side). Both natural resources are in the same area and untapped assets. These two natural assets can harness and augment the ecotourism enterprise and expand the tourism opportunity.

TANAW de Rizal Park has multiple resources— the natural, agricultural, historical, and cultural assets, which can be tapped to stimulate the ecotourism enterprise. The strengths of the park are supplying the unusual intermixing of assets that arouse interests, which can provide multiple earnings. However, the weakness of the park is the massive agenda that offers numerous assets. This is uncertain to be realistic on costs and revenues in the long run and limited on market and finance being an SME enterprise. The local government can fulfill the intent plan but must be cautious about sustainability and must make certain that the flow of tourists is continuous. The risk is to avoid being a "white elephant project" where the government venture is finished but costly and fails to live up to the expectations. One way to evade this is to group the different ideas of the ecotourism enterprise and analyze the most important via expected earnings, then prioritize the main and focus on that.

Conclusions/ wider implications of findings

The study explores and understands the maintainability of TANAW de Rizal Park as an ecotourism enterprise of Rizal municipality. The main intent is to develop the park into a well-known destination in the Laguna province, generate revenue for operations, inscribe a distinct town identity, and provide livelihood opportunities to the community. The key to TANAW de Rizal Park's project is the socio-economic aspect and the identity issues that hinder the economic growth of the local government.

The facilitating and impeding aspects are tackled in sustaining the local ecotourism enterprise. One, leadership is the driving force in developing TANAW de Rizal Park. The local government has been top-down driven since the park's establishment but in maintaining, the bottom-up manner is more significant since the ecotourism enterprise's situation and tasks are now different. Two, the financial issue is complicated in completing and maintaining the park's facilities. The limited funds are due to being a small-scale town, and the big commercial businesses are deficient. The ideal scenario is continuing the government agencies and integrating the commercial businesses into a regular component. Also, the revenue and the maturing debt are not enough to remunerate without the support of the local government. The remedy is to augment the revenue generation to be self-sufficient and gradually reduce the local government subsidy. Three, earnings of the ecotourism enterprise largely hinge during the Holy Week, a single-month focal point where the remaining months are offseason. Thus, it is suggested that supplementary year-round events be held to increase revenue. Fourth, TANAW de Rizal Park is strategical if connected to the critical neighboring towns and nearby resources. The two adjacent municipalities are larger in market demand and have well-established assets, and the two natural environments are linked areas and untapped assets. And last, the park's strength is the presence of the unusual intermixing of assets— an adventure, nature, and wildlife recreation, with integrating sports activities, an agritourism, a historical site, and a pilgrimage event. The enterprise's weaknesses are the risks of becoming a "white elephant project" where instituting numerous agendas that cannot be sustained due to the costs over earnings and the limited capacity of the market. The practical way is to categorize the different assets and focus on the priorities emphasizing sensible proceeds.

Overall, TANAW de Rizal Park is a noteworthy and tangible contribution to the local government and communities within. Noteworthy, since the ecotourism enterprise has *de facto* accepted the undertaking, dealt the identical concern, and addressed the socio-economic issue. Tangible, since the enterprise has been slowly trying to enhance the livelihood opportunities and elevate the town's status. Despite past drawbacks, the park as an ecotourism enterprise has markedly been put in place, and thus, making the fifth-class municipality proud. In the broader theme, the ecotourism development of TANAW de Rizal Park serves as encouragement and direction to other localities, especially the SMEs and the lower-class town. It can provide information to improve the development of SMEs and offers a guide to harness the underutilized or untapped natural, historical, and cultural assets of municipalities. Also, it intends to augment the database on ecotourism development in the Philippines and abroad, particularly the omnipresent practice and the distinct experiences. Moreover, the research embraces the conviction that SMEs are an effective way to foster inclusive growth and shared prosperity in the countryside, where the proportion of the people is generally indigent.

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