



IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES OF THE ECOTOURISM PROGRAM IN TAKLONG ISLAND NATIONAL MARINE RESERVE (TINMR)

FEMME P. PEÑAFIEL
ECOSYSTEMS MANAGEMENT SPECIALIST II (EMS II)
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES, REGION VI (DENR, REGION VI)
femmepenafiel@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research study assessed the Ecotourism Program in Taklong Island National Marine Reserve (TINMR), a Protected Area (PA) located in Brgy. La Paz and San Roque, Nueva Valencia, Guimaras in terms of the extent or level of the implementation and outcomes of the program. A coded, researcher-made questionnaire was used to gather data from 127 respondents who were purposively and conveniently selected from the stakeholders of the PA composed mostly of the residents and members of the People’s Organizations from the two barangays surrounding it. The results of the study showed a very good implementation and outcomes of the ecotourism program. The stakeholder’s level of satisfaction was also high. Further, the Program has indeed contributed to the conservation and protection of TINMR’s natural resources over the economic benefits to the surrounding communities. Despite a very good implementation, however, the

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Program could not fully take off due to major issues/challenges. Thus, valuable recommendations were enumerated to help further improve the ecotourism program implementation.

Keywords: ecotourism, program implementation, outcomes, Taklong Island National Marine Reserve (TINMR)

INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism or ecological tourism is nature-based wherein tourists are mainly motivated to travel to places to appreciate, to observe, and to enjoy the beautiful landscapes, the people, and their traditional cultures (UNWTO, 2002). Being a form of sustainable tourism, it mostly deals with nature and the environment than with recreation and mass tourism (Essays UK, 2013).

The conservation and protection of the Philippines' natural resources is mandated under the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) Act of 1992 or the Republic Act 7586 (amended by RA 11038 or the Expanded NIPAS Act of 2018). This law sets aside and manages Protected Areas (PAs) regardless of their nature and protects them from destructive human exploitation (RA 7586, 1992).

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Ecotourism has been strongly linked to the management of PAs because it does not only support local communities but also environmental conservation (Dologlou & Katsoni, 2016).

In 2013, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) made ecotourism a major program for managing and developing protected areas in the country whose objectives include: (1) institutionalization of processes on ecotourism planning in protected area management; (2) promotion of the concept and principles of ecotourism through advocacy; and (3) introduction of ecotourism businesses in protected areas both as a conservation strategy and economic development option through partnerships with the local government units or the private sector (DENR, DAO 2013-19).

Through the program, the Taklong Island National Marine Reserve (TINMR), one of the established PAs in Region VI, was funded for ecotourism development (DENR, 2021). TINMR is located in the barangays of San Roque and La Paz in the Municipality of Nueva Valencia in the Province of Guimaras. It has a rich biodiversity that is confined to its 46 islands and islets and the surrounding coastal waters with a total area of 1,143.45 hectares.

Several studies on the natural resources of TINMR were already conducted which contributed to its promotion as an ecotourism site. However, a practical assessment of the status of its ecotourism program has never been undertaken. Thus, the result of this study can give valuable insights on the status of the program and the information obtained can be used

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in the updating of its Ecotourism Management Plan. The result could also help determine the necessary interventions for better implementation of the ecotourism program.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Method

The study employed survey and documentary analysis to determine the ecotourism program implemented in TINMR; the extent of implementation in terms of visitors' management, provision of biodiversity-friendly enterprise/livelihood, collection of user's fee, establishment of ecotourism support facilities, and the engagement/ participation of the stakeholders; the level of outcomes of its implementation in terms of economic development of the surrounding community, the conservation and protection of the PA, and the level of satisfaction of the stakeholders.

Through the survey, the study identified the different issues/challenges encountered during the program implementation and the possible recommendations to improve the same.

Research Design

The study utilized the descriptive research design to obtain an updated information on the status of the implementation of TINMR's ecotourism program. The descriptive research design is widely accepted for gathering large amounts of data or information for detailed analysis. It involves accurate interpretation and understanding of findings which is seen as

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more contextual and specific, thus, lead to important recommendations (Anastas, 1999; McNabb, 2008; Miller and Yang, 2007).

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were the 130 respondents identified based on prior knowledge of their participation or involvement in the ecotourism program of TINMR. However, out of the 130 respondents, only 127 participants (98%) were able to return the survey questionnaire. These respondents were chosen based on their availability during the survey and they comprised mostly of the members of the five (5) People’s Organizations (POs) or the local communities that are residing around TINMR area, namely: La Paz Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Management Association (LAFARMA), Inc., San Roque Coastal Environment Project Association (SARCEPA), La Paz Motorbanca Operators and Fisherfolk Association (LAMOFA), Luzaran Motorboat Owner Association (LMBOA), San Roque Motorbanca Operators Association (SARMOA), Inc. and Integrated Women’s Association Group (IWAG), a women’s organization. A total of eighty (80) PO members joined in the survey, representing 63% of the respondents of the study. Other respondents of the study were comprised of eighteen (18) local business owners (14%) who are operating in the area such as resort operators, sari-sari store owners, and other small-scale entrepreneurs, eleven (11) or nine percent (9%) of the respondents are members of the PAMB comprised of the Regional Line Agencies such as the DENR, DA, DOST, NEDA, and OCD; the governor of the Province of Guimaras; the municipal mayor of Nueva

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Valencia; the barangay captain of San Roque; the PO chairmen from Barangay La Paz and San Roque, Nueva Valencia; and the academe (represented by the UPV). Eight (8) visiting tourists during the period of the survey in February 2023 were also included, comprising seven percent (7%) of the respondents of the study. Five (5) or four percent (4%) of the respondents were DENR-PENRO Guimaras PASu staff. Other survey respondents were the three (3) youth members and two (2) LGU key officials who represented a total of three percent (3%) of the survey respondents.

In terms of residency, 103 or 81% of the participants are residing around the TINMR area; 55 from Barangay La Paz and 48 from Barangay San Roque. These people have been residing in the said barangays for an average of 35 years. In terms of gender distribution, the majority of them are females (65%).

In terms of occupation, the majority (50%) of the survey participants are fishers, 14% are housewives and 12% are government employees. About six percent (6%) of the participants are private employees and seven percent (7%) are entrepreneurs. The remaining 12% of the survey participants are either not working or students.

The majority or 53% of the survey participants have a monthly income of Php10,000.00 and below. Fourteen percent (14%) have income between Php 10,001.00 to Php 15,000.00, three percent (3%) have income between Php 15,001.00 to Php 20,000.00, and

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six percent (6%) are earning monthly between Php 20,000.00 and above. About 24% of the participants have no income.

Sampling Design

The study employed a combination of non-probability sampling methods such as purposive and convenience samplings. In the study, all 14 PAMB members and the DENR protected area staff of TINMR were completely surveyed. These groups of respondents are manageable to survey because of their small number and they share the same role and interest over the PA as governing body and as implementer of the ecotourism program. On the other hand, convenience sampling was used to gather data/information from the visiting tourists and local communities in the barangays surrounding TINMR such as the PO members (fisherfolks, motorbanca/motorboat operators, and women’s group), barangay officials, business owners, and youth. Convenience sampling is cost-effective and the respondents of the study are chosen based on their availability.

Research Instrument

The study used a researcher-made survey questionnaire to gather the primary data. The survey questionnaire was composed of four (4) parts. Part 1 dealt with the respondents’ profile; Part 2 focused on the implementation of the ecotourism program; Part 3 was about the outcomes of the program; and Part 4 enumerated the issues/ challenges and recommendations/measures to improve the program implementation. The answers in the

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survey questionnaire were number coded to facilitate easy processing for data analysis later on.

Validity of the Research Instrument

A jury validation was sought to establish the validity of the contents of the questionnaire. Upon approval from the thesis adviser, three (3) members of the thesis committee who are experts in research and public administration, ascertained the validity of the survey questionnaires. The jurors used the eight-point criteria suggested by Good and Scates (Leuterio, 2020).

Reliability of the Survey Questionnaire

After approval from the thesis adviser and members of the thesis committee, the items in the questionnaire were validated and tested for consistency using an interrater reliability test. Three (3) subject experts from the DENR, Region 6 were consulted and asked to answer the survey questionnaire at the same time. Thereafter, the reliability of the survey questionnaire was computed using the Two-Way Mixed and Absolute Agreement Interclass Correlation with Cronbach's alpha to determine the reliability coefficient. The tool was reliable with Cronbach's alpha value of 0.740 for Program Implementation and 0.702 for Program Outcomes. Research instruments to be accepted and reliable must have a Cronbach's alpha score between 0.60 to 0.80 (Heliyon, 2022) and a reliability coefficient of 0.70 to 0.80 (Vega Falcon, 2021).

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Data Gathering Procedure

The gathering of the data commenced after establishing the validity and reliability of the survey questionnaire. With the approval of the research adviser, formal letters were sent to the DENR Region 6 and other PAMB members to seek permission for the conduct of the study. A presentation was made before the members of the PAMB that eventually resulted in the issuance of a PAMB Resolution allowing the conduct of the study in TINMR.

The survey questionnaires were distributed to the target participants with a cover letter, explaining the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of the gathered data. Due to time limitations in the conduct of the survey, the assistance of survey enumerators was sought. They were briefed about the survey tool to have a common understanding. The duration of the survey and retrieval of the accomplished questionnaires lasted for a month (February 2023). After collection, the data were encoded, processed, analyzed, and interpreted with the help of a statistician.

Secondary data were collected from DENR, Regional Office, and PENRO Guimaras, especially at the Office of the PASu. Other relevant data were obtained from the LGU and the POs such as project profile, status of income derived from the ecotourism projects in TINMR, visitor's logbook, and the like.

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Data Analyses

The gathered data was analyzed through descriptive data analysis wherein raw data/information were transformed into ways for better understanding and interpretation, thus, providing insightful information (Rawat, 2021). For easy understanding, the data/information were presented in tables with quantitative descriptions and these were supplemented with narratives.

A Likert Scale was used to evaluate and determine the extent of the implementation and the level of outcomes of the ecotourism program. It involves a series of statements that respondents may choose from to rate their responses to evaluative questions. It is commonly used to measure attitudes, behavioral changes, knowledge, perceptions, and values (Vagias, 2006).

For the study, using the Likert Scale, the values that were generated and analyzed for the program implementation and outcomes were interpreted as follows: if the mean score is 1.00-1.80, the program is poorly implemented and the outcome is poor; with a mean score of 1.81-2.60, the program is fairly implemented and the outcome is fair; with a mean score of 2.61-3.40, there is a good implementation of the program and the outcome is good; with a mean score of 3.41-4.20, there is a very good implementation of the program and the outcome is also very good. However, with a mean score of 4.21-5.00, the program is excellently implemented which resulted in an excellent outcome.

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All surveyed questionnaires were encoded, processed, and analyzed with the aid of statistical software through the assistance of a Statistician. The following statistical treatments were employed in this study:

Frequency Count. To determine the number of responses from respondents on the extent of the program implementation and the level of outcomes. This was also used to describe the profile of the respondents and the issues/challenges identified by the respondents.

Percentage. The frequency of each category of responses was divided by the total number of respondents and multiplied by 100 to get the percentage. Percentage was used to describe the category in the profile of the respondents.

Rank. The top five most cited issues/challenges by the respondents relative to ecotourism program implementation were determined and these were ranked from one to five, with one corresponding to the issue with the highest frequency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was an assessment of the extent of the implementation and the level of outcomes of the ecotourism program in Taklong Island National Marine Reserve (TINMR), one of the established protected areas in Region VI that is located in the barangays of La Paz and San Roque, Nueva Valencia, Guimaras. It was also conducted to identify the various

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issues/challenges encountered during program implementation and to propose recommendations to improve the same.

The study was conducted from February to April 2023 and utilized both primary and secondary data gathering. The primary data was obtained using a coded survey questionnaire that was validated and subjected to an Inter - Rater Reliability Test using a Two-Way Mixed and Absolute Agreement Interclass Correlation with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 and higher. There were 127 respondents who answered the survey, mostly composed of the residents and members of the People's Organizations from the two barangays surrounding it. The secondary data were taken from the official documents and reports of the DENR, Regional Office VI; the DENR-PENRO in Guimaras; the Office of the PASu; the barangay and municipal LGUs; and the concerned POs.

Based on the results of the study, the extent of the implementation of the ecotourism program was "very good". Among the different ecotourism program components, the high mean scores were computed on the engagement/participation of the stakeholders to the program, visitors' management, and collection of user's fee. While the low mean scores were obtained on the provision of BDFE and the establishment of ecotourism support facilities.

The result of the study also revealed a "very good" level of outcomes in the implementation of the program. However, a higher mean score was obtained on the conservation and protection of the PA than the promotion of economic development of the

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surrounding communities. The stakeholders' level of satisfaction on the implementation of the program was also high.

Despite the very good implementation and outcomes of the ecotourism program in TINMR, several issues/challenges hindered the program from attaining an excellent status. Most of the respondents are concerned about the lack of ecotourism support facilities/equipment, insufficient/limited training, and insufficient livelihood projects/assistance provided. They are also concerned about the un-maximized collection of user fees, limited ecotourism activities, and visitors who are not properly informed about TINMR and its policies.

To address the issues/challenges, these recommendations were enumerated as follows: establishment of ecotourism support facilities; provision of materials/equipment and additional budget; assessment of the status of the BDFE and its beneficiaries; diversification of ecotourism activities to include capacity building/training and marketing assistance; advertisement or establishment of information about user fees including installation of signage/billboards, use of virtual and social media platforms, and improvement of the collection system; conduct of regular planning, monitoring, and evaluation with key stakeholders; and assigning personnel/PA staff regularly in every entry point to orient the visitors on PA policies.

The issues and challenges, and the recommendations enumerated based on the findings of this study demonstrated the difficulty and complexity of managing resources in

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protected areas and keeping developments within sustainable level while at the same time,
not depriving the surrounding communities of the benefits of these natural resources.

CONCLUSION

Based on the result of the study, the Ecotourism Program in TINMR is a manifestation of its Ecotourism Management Plan (EMP) and its implementation has been anchored on the various PA laws and policies. Other potential ecotourism activities are not yet implemented in TINMR but these are embodied in its EMP.

The result of the study also suggests that TINMR has already started to formalize and make functional the mechanism/process of managing visitors inside the PA. Also, it was revealed in the study that the importance of engaging the stakeholders during planning/consultations has been well-recognized by the stakeholders, and this has been instituted already in the management of TINMR.

The stakeholders perceived the implementation of the ecotourism program as very good as it also generated very good outcomes. Generally, the results on the mean scores were indicative of what areas in the implementation of the program still need focus and improvement.

Further, the result also suggests that the ecotourism program could not fully take off due to issues/challenges that hindered its excellent implementation. It also shows that the

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economic benefit of the program to the surrounding communities was not yet realized by the stakeholders. Despite that, this study somehow proved the assumption that the ecotourism program has been an effective strategy in conserving and protecting the natural resources of the PA.

In the light of the inclusion of TINMR in the ecotourism loop of the Province of Guimaras and the whole of Western Visayas, it is expected to get a boost, thus, improvement in the implementation of the program is imperative.

In consideration of the Ecotourism Management Plan (EMP) of TINMR that is now due for updating, the results of the study are crucial and how it would form an integral part of the plan, will largely depend upon a careful and participatory consultation or strategic planning with the various stakeholders.

The recommendations that were based on the prioritized issues/challenges identified in this study could serve as the cornerstone to enhance the EMP. These would include the establishment of additional ecotourism support facilities such as those that could provide convenience and safety for tourists; diversification of ecotourism activities to include potential livelihoods or BDFE to encourage more members from the surrounding communities to participate in the program; the establishment of an effective and functional mechanism to inform the public about TINMR, and to encourage more visitors to come in the place; and development of an effective and efficient collection system to increase the PA's income.

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It was revealed in this study that the strength of the implementation of the ecotourism program in TINMR is the engagement/participation of the stakeholders in the program. In this case, the PAMB should evaluate the design of the Ecotourism Management Plan, and come up with an updated version where more members of the local community are engaged in the implementation of the ecotourism program.

The findings of the study could best serve its purpose when copies of it are furnished to the PAMB and the DENR, especially the PASU as its implementing arm.

On the other hand, some results of the study could be further evaluated using other indicators or research methodologies and survey designs. If the researcher may suggest, one potential aspect could be the assessment of the economic benefit of ecotourism to the surrounding communities.

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