

## Chapter Nineteen

# Ecotourism Development Framework in the Philippines

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### Introduction

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil in 1992 (the Earth summit) resulted in the adoption of Agenda 21 which provides for the formulation and implementation of measures to promote sustainable development. Sustainable development was defined in the summit as it was in the Brundtland Report in 1987 as “meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”.

In response to this call, the Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) was created in 1992 to demonstrate the country’s commitment to operationalise Global Agenda 21. More importantly, the adoption of the Philippine Agenda 21 in 1995, after an extensive and intensive process of consensus-building among various stakeholders, illustrated the country’s leadership in sustainable development.

While the discussion on sustainable development was going on in 1992, the Philippine Department of Tourism (DOT) through the assistance of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Tourism Organization (WTO) had already initiated the formulation of the Tourism Master Plan (TMP) for the Philippines. The TMP is among the first government plans in the country that have pioneered sustainable development concepts, and made them a mainstream issue.

### Policies and Strategies

Among the objectives of the TMP is to position the country as a world-class destination under the guiding principles of sustainable development. Anchored on the TMP’s recommendation, the Second National Tourism Congress in 1992 took up the theme “Responsible Tourism: Policy, Environmental and Cultural Challenges”. It was during this conference that the

non-government organisation, Conservation International, formally introduced the concepts of ecotourism in the Philippines.

During the years 1994–1998, the DOT conducted regional ecotourism orientation and information seminars. Representatives of local government units, communities, non-government organisations and tourism practitioners took part in these activities. In 1998, a Technical Workshop on Sustainable Tourism was held under the sponsorship of the DOT, Philippine Council for Sustainable Development, National Economic Development Authority, and training and technology transfer organisations (in particular the Canadian Universities consortium and Asian Institute of Technology). The workshop disseminated information on sustainable development, identified the core elements of a sustainable tourism framework and defined key issues and obstacles to make sustainable development mainstream in the tourism sector.

These initiatives encouraged the development of ecotourism as an integral part of the sustainable tourism framework. They led to the issue of Executive Order 111 establishing the guidelines for ecotourism development in the Philippines. The Executive Order provided for the creation of a National Ecotourism Development Council (NEDC) composed of the Secretaries of Tourism, Environment and Natural Resources, Interior and Local Government, Trade and Industry, Finance, National Economic Development Authority, Education, Culture and Sports and representatives from the private and non-government sectors.

Realising the need for a conceptual basis for ecotourism development in the Philippines, the DOT together with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) conducted a national workshop in August 1999 to develop a national framework. The outputs from the workshop were validated during the National Ecotourism Congress organised by the DOT, with support from the United Nation Development Program (UNDP), DENR, Department of Interior and Local Government and the Philippine Women’s University, in October 1999 in Bohol, Philippines. The result was a structured national policy and strategic guidelines on ecotourism.

The ecotourism policy provides for the “encouragement, development, management and promotion of ecological tourism (otherwise known as ecotourism), as a tool to sustainable development, to support the development, management, protection and conservation of the country’s environment, natural resources and cultural heritage”. In 1998, DOT and DENR jointly issued Memorandum Circular No. 98-02, entitled “Guidelines for Ecotourism in the Philippines”. The circular defines ecotourism in the Philippine context as a “low-impact, environmentally-sound and community-participatory tourism activity in a given natural environment that enhances the conservation of biophysical and cultural diversity, promotes environmental understanding and education, and yields socio-economic benefits to the concerned community”.

The definition was further enhanced after the conduct of the national ecotourism congress held in October 1999. As agreed and defined during the congress, ecotourism is:

*“A form of sustainable tourism within a given natural and/or cultural area where community participation, conservation and management of biodiversity, respect for culture and indigenous knowledge systems and practices, environmental education and ethics as well as economic benefits are fostered and pursued for the enrichment of host communities and satisfaction of visitors”.*

## **Pillars of Ecotourism Development**

The ecotourism framework demonstrates the inter-relationship and inter-dependence among the stakeholders, the environment and the tourists. These three elements, which can be considered as pillars of ecotourism will provide the impetus to propel the development of ecotourism in the Philippines.

The term *stakeholders* refers to parties or groups whose interests are directly affected by any ecotourism-related activities. Stakeholders include the communities directly or indirectly affected by any development, civil society groups present in the area, local government units that have political and administrative jurisdictions over the particular site, and local branches of national line agencies, particularly those of tourism and environment departments.

The tourists, or ecotourists, are the market for ecotourism destinations. They differ from ordinary tourists as they seek to establish a deeper understanding, even communion, with the places and people they visit.

The environment, is the unique physical features or attributes of a locality that serves as its primary attraction. It also refers to distinct socio-cultural patterns exhibited by indigenous communities, resulting from centuries of intimate intercourse with the natural environment.

The relationship between the stakeholders and the environment is anticipated to result in better environmental education and consciousness, as well as increased community cooperation for protection of the environment, and preservation of local culture at ecotourism sites. The implementation of appropriate national and local policies and guidelines will help ensure environmental protection. Indirectly, these policies and guidelines also contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge, practices and systems.

The influx of tourists to an ecotourism destination generates much needed revenue for the local and national economies. Viewed from a broader

perspective, the benefit derived from ecotourism activities goes beyond the realm of the economic. The interaction between the locals and visitors serve as an informal process of cultural exchange which may contribute to the furtherance of international understanding and cooperation between people of different nations.

The integrity of the natural environment enhances the quality of visitor experience. A deeper understanding of the ecosystem and socio-cultural fibre of the community is the core of an ecotourist's quest. Positive ecotourist experiences offer opportunities for generating funds for environmental protection and management.

The concerted actions among the pillars of ecotourism will bring about an empowered community characterised by improved quality of life; an enhanced visitor experience demonstrated by quality tourism experience; and an enriched biodiversity that is safeguarded and protected by both local communities and visitors. Consequently, the linkages between the pillars will actualise cooperation, volunteerism and partnership among all concerned sectors, and institutionalise networking as an integral to day-to-day activities.

The way forward in the Philippines is set out in the Vision and Mission Statements and the Action Plan and Goals and Strategies for Ecotourism. These are presented in Boxes 1 to 3.

## **Box 1: Statement of Vision and Mission**

### **Vision Statement**

A world-class ecotourism destination with a balanced ecosystem and a rich cultural heritage where empowered and committed stakeholders, guided by environmentally-sound policies, pursue sustainable practices for the best interests of the present and future generations.

### **Mission Statement**

Our mission is to position the Philippines as a leading ecotourism destination in the world, centred around a network of complementary ecotourism experiences to ensure total visitor satisfaction. To this end, we will work towards providing a favourable investment climate for both domestic and foreign partnerships with multi-stakeholders who formulate appropriate policies and guidelines that promote the conservation of our natural and cultural resources as well as ensure socio-economic benefits to host communities. We will pursue all these, through sustainable development, to improve the quality of life for present and future generations of Filipinos.

## Box 2: Action Plan for Ecotourism

After the national ecotourism workshop and congress, the government has taken cognisance of, and has planned for its activities accordingly.

1. Undertake the formulation of the national ecotourism plan with the requisite terms of reference drawn up in accordance with the output of the congress. The development of a network of complementary ecotourism sites to achieve our vision of making the country a leading ecotourism destination.
2. Program follow-up on capability building activities for the local stakeholders to develop or improve their competence in planning, marketing and product development. Corollary to this, tap international and multilateral agencies to organise or fund similar fora that will tackle networking, develop an accreditation system, and finance ecotourism projects.
3. Move to the appropriate legislation (both at the national and local levels) to translate the recommendations made in the ecotourism congress into concrete actions and, thereby reach fruition in the development of a system that will:
  - facilitate the active involvement of major groups, local and indigenous communities, at all phases of the tourism development process;
  - promote the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises;
  - maximise the potential of tourism for poverty alleviation;
  - continue the development and implementation of voluntary initiatives; and
  - promote self-regulation against abusive, exploitive forms of tourism.

## Box 3: Goals and Strategies

Five major goals have been identified to help the Philippines realise its vision of becoming a world class ecotourism destination while preserving its rich biodiversity and enabling its government, business sector, civil society and communities to collectively pursue sustainable development.

**Goal One: Institutionalisation of policies for ecotourism development in consonance with sustainable tourism development principles and practices**

- Strategy 1: Standardisation of systems and procedures for ecotourism development
- Strategy 2: Establish institutional mechanisms to implement ecotourism development

Strategy 3: Insert ecotourism development concepts and principles in the Philippine education system

Strategy 4: Establish policies, guidelines and standards for human resource development, networking and resource mobilisation

Strategy 5: Generate awareness and appreciation of ecotourism development principles and practices

**Goal Two: Develop world-class ecotourism products**

Strategy 6: Identify and develop sites for ecotourism activities

Strategy 7: Enhance existing ecotourism sites and products

Strategy 8: Mobilise communities as partners in ecotourism development

Strategy 9: Promote ecotourism products

**Goal Three: Develop the ecotourism market**

Strategy 10: Establish a market database

Strategy 11: Establish local/international linkages

**Goal Four: Ensure adequacy of support infrastructure and services**

Strategy 12: Development of off-site infrastructure facilities to support ecotourism development

Strategy 13: Develop alternative livelihood/entrepreneurial programs for host communities

Strategy 14: Enhance capability of communities in the management of ecotourism enterprises

**Goal Five: Ensure adequate funding support for ecotourism development**

Strategy 15: Establish linkages with local and foreign funding institutions

Strategy 16: Conduct special projects and activities.

## Conclusion

With all these policy initiatives being undertaken by the Philippine Government to ensure the success of ecotourism in the country, we are optimistic that the tourism industry will propel economic growth from the national down to the local level, while at the same time promoting the protection of the environment and preserving our cultural heritage.