

TOURISM EXPANSION AND ITS ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES WITHIN THE MT. APO PROTECTED AREA

Michelle G. Savillo¹, Moises C. Jr. Torrentira²

¹University of Southeastern Philippines, College of Development Management, Graduate School Program, Mintal Campus, Davao City.

²Associate Professor, University of Southeastern Philippines College of Development Management, Graduate School Program, Mintal Campus, Davao City.

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is one of the major contributors to the local economic development of Davao del Sur in a post-pandemic scenario, doubling the number of tourist arrivals from its numbers three years after the pandemic. Due to the positive impact of its growth, the influx of tourist sites, especially in the protected areas, were neglected by local and national authorities. This paper examined the growth of tourism-related businesses in the Mt. Apo protected area and the difficulty of regulating bodies in balancing the environmental laws and local economic development. The study used a qualitative method of analysis and highlighted the gap in the implementation of crafted policies for the Mt. Apo protected area that resulted in various adverse effects on the environment. Local and national government agencies in the protected areas must review the enforcement in regulating businesses in the protected area, enforcing stakeholders to adhere to the environmental laws and regulations to ensure sustainable tourism.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, Mt. Apo Protected Area, tourist influx, tourism industry post-pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in the Philippines has been identified as one of the powerful engines for strong and sustained economic growth. It is a well-established industry in the Philippines that contributes to the equitable economic development of the nation (Añasco & Lizada, 2017). It plays a significant role in the Philippines' socio-economic development (Aquino & Porter, 2022). The tourism sector, being focused on products and services, has the potential to generate widespread benefits and effects on the economy and society. Tourism has the potential to generate income for the government through foreign exchange earnings and tax revenue. Additionally, it can stimulate local economic growth through its multiplier effect, creating development opportunities (Javier & Elazigue, 2011). Like most of the regions in the country, the Davao Region also provides a unique and immersive tourist experience for its visitors. The region promotes ecotourism and offers a wide range of attractions. One of the famous attractions in the Davao region is Barangay Kapatagan in Digos City, Davao del Sur where the famous Mt. Apo is located. The Provincial Tourism Officer acknowledged Mt. Apo as the ideal destination for eco-adventure activities (Dalumpines, 2023).

The Tourism Act of 2009 includes ensuring a balanced and healthful ecology through the promotion of activities that will help protect, conserve, and restore the environment in its objectives. But despite the emphasis of the Department of Tourism that tourism enterprises adhere to the goals and objectives of the law, violations of tourism sites have been at the top of the discourse in the media outlets, especially with the contribution of social media. Hence, this paper will look at the growth of the tourism sector within the protected area of Mt Apo and its effort to adhere to the laws and regulations, especially in the area of conserving and protecting the environment.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to examine the development of tourism sites within the protected area of Mt. Apo, focusing on their compliance with the laws and regulations governing the protected area and its environmental changes.

3. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology is appropriate when the researcher aims to identify and develop theories about significant issues. By adopting qualitative methodology, a prospective researcher is going to fine-tune the pre-conceived notions as well as extrapolate the thought process, analyzing and estimating the issues from an in-depth perspective. The most prevalent methods include interviewing and observation (Jamshed, 2014). This study conducted a series of interviews with the residents of Brgy. Managa, Bansalan and Brgy. Kapatagan, Digos City to look into how tourism affects the local community and their observations on the environmental changes following the growth of tourism in their area. Interview participants were selected via a non-random and convenience sampling method because it was relatively easy to decide on appropriate respondents (Gnanapala & Sandaruwani, 2016). The study

selected interview participants from the residential areas of the two barangays, residents doing business in the central business area of Brgy. Kapatagan, and residents living near the resorts with swimming pools. The study also conducted an interview with personnel of DENR in Bansalan and the Protected Area Management Office (PAMO) in Brgy. Kapatagan. Additionally, data on the tourist arrivals in the Davao Region from 2018 to 2023 and a list of resorts and tourist attractions were collected from the office of the Department of Tourism- Davao Region and the City Tourism Office in Digos City, respectively.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data gathered from different government offices and participants' responses to the interviews conducted resulted in a comprehensive review of tourist arrivals pre and post-pandemic, and revealed the gaps in the implementation of protected area policies due to the complexity of balancing environmental laws with local economic development, and consequently resulted to various adverse effects in the environment.

Increase in Tourist Arrival. Pre-pandemic, Davao del Sur recorded a total of 2,433,955 tourist arrivals in 2019, 2,184,506 were local travelers, 188,499 were foreign tourists and 60,950 were overseas tourists. In 2020, tourist arrivals dropped to 27% (722,649) from last year's record. However, as the pandemic implemented restrictions on movement and community quarantine, residents of Brgy. Managa and Brgy. Kapatagan observed an influx of people migrating to their locality, drawn by its spacious environment, good weather conditions, and reduced risk of contracting COVID-19. That was when vacation houses were built and turned into an income-generating facility.

Region/Province/City	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Davao City	2,393,395	2,574,895	618,034	304,342	897,269	1,291,985
Domestic	2,150,185	2,345,468	580,442	295,082	850,440	1,210,140
Foreign	184,495	183,730	30,326	8,169	40,930	71,386
Overseas	58,715	45,697	7,266	1,091	5,899	10,459
Davao del Sur	40,560	80,462	104,615	97,926	90,078	221,619
Domestic	34,321	79,932	104,595	97,731	90,072	206,887
Foreign	4,004	530	20	195	6	14,732
Overseas	2,235					
Total	2,433,955	2,655,357	722,649	402,268	987,347	1,513,604
Domestic	2,184,506	2,425,400	685,037	392,813	940,512	1,417,027
Foreign	188,499	184,260	30,346	8,364	40,936	86,118
Overseas	60,950	45,697	7,266	1,091	5,899	10,459

Source: Department of Tourism – Davao Region

Figure 1. Davao del Sur Tourist arrival in 2018-2023

In 2022, the growth of tourist arrivals doubles from previous years and exceeds that of the tourist arrivals during the pandemic. Though the number of visitors in 2023 did not exceed yet its numbers pre-pandemic, the growth of tourist arrivals already shows that the tourism industry in Davao del Sur is growing and continues to grow this year. The provincial Tourism Office is confident that Davao del Sur will attract a larger number of tourists, who will be able to easily visit its captivating tourist sites due to its improved accessibility (Dalumpines, 2023).

Poor Implementation of Protected Area Policies Due to Complexity in Balancing Environmental Laws with Local Economic Development. Following RA 9237, the creation and demarcation of zones within Mount Apo Natural Park will guarantee the efficient administration of the protected area and its surrounding areas, while also fostering the sustainable growth of all authorized stakeholders (DENR RXI, 2013, p. 192). The National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) Act does not classify the core zone as a zoning category, but the MANP General Management Plan (GMP) uses the term "core zone" instead due to the inherent characteristics of MANP as the ancestral domain of the Indigenous people.

The NIPAS Act states that strict protection zones are off-limits to human activities except for scientific studies and Indigenous People's religious or ceremonial use. However, the Indigenous People (IP) may utilize not only areas specifically designated for religious and ceremonial purposes, but also areas where they engage in traditional resource uses to support their way of life and survival in the "core zone". The core zone of MANP comprises closed and open

canopy forests, steep-sloped areas, and critical habitats and ecosystems, covering 27,804 hectares. The multiple-use zone of MANP covers 36,306 hectares of land for settlements, traditional land use, agriculture, agroforestry, extraction activities, and other income-generating activities, with land tenure for tenured migrants. Lastly, the buffer zone covers 9,078.13 hectares designated as an energy support zone for geothermal installation, ensuring power security and allowing compatible land uses (DENR RXI, 2013, p. 193-194).

During an interview with MANP PASu Archelito Mallari, some of the structures present within the multiple-use zone of Mt Apo protected area have pending applications for special use agreement in protected areas (SAPA) but were not able to proceed with acquiring the said permit due to the strenuous process which includes securing Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC), Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) clearance, endorsement from the local government unit (Barangay), and endorsement from National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) considering that the MANP is under the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) area.

Out of 96 establishments under the multiple-use zone, two utility provider companies are fully compliant and have completed the required clearance from the PAMB, ECC, and SAPA, 6 establishments have PAMB clearance and ECC and 34 have PAMB clearance only while 53 have not complied at all (Relator, 2024).

PASu office already issued a show cause order back in 2022 to all establishments without permits ordering them to justify why DENR should not file a case against the business owners operating without a permit. PASu mentioned during the interview that after the issuance of show cause order to business establishments without permits, there were appeals for consideration and requesting enough time for them to comply with the required permits, and interventions from the LGU on the premise that it also desires development in its jurisdiction.

Environmental Changes Due to Increase of Tourist Sites. The prevailing change in the environment brought by the increase of resorts and tourist attractions is the volume of people coming to Brgy. Kapatagan which alters the peace of the place. Increasing traffic volume has led to heightened noise levels along the road and in the surrounding environment. The slow and quiet Sunday mornings of the residents in both barangays are now elusive and gradually disappearing.

Additionally, residents who live next to the main road are complaining that tourists are throwing away plastic water bottles and other trash, compelling them to pick it up to keep the road clean. Portions in Brgy Managa, Bansalan also experience low water supply during weekends and holidays due to the peak number of visitors who share in the water demand. Most of the residents within MANP drink water from the spring source which is free of use.

The increase of establishments, especially those with swimming pools, has also led to an increase in the volume of wastewater being discharged into natural water bodies, which negatively affects the water quality considering that there are residents drinking water from natural springs.

5. CONCLUSION

The growth of the tourism sector is evident from the increasing number of tourist arrivals and the ongoing efforts to enhance accessibility. It is anticipated that this trend will continue to expand not only this year but also in the years ahead. Along with the growth of the tourism industry is also the growth of the local economy. However the development of the tourism industry also has its trade-off when government organizations and industry stakeholders will not work together to make sure that policies in place to protect, conserve, and restore our natural resources are prioritized. Policies in place to safeguard our protected areas are specifically crafted not to keep the locality from enjoying it but for it to be used and enjoyed responsibly, hence its implementation plays a pivotal role in its protection and conservation. Given these considerations, it is of vital importance for both local and national government agencies operating within protected areas to review the consistency of laws and land use zoning, utilizing their authority to actively enforce environmental laws and regulations, ensuring sustainable tourism and conservation of our natural resources.

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