

**COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT: THE BOJO  
ALOGUINSAN ECOTOURISM ASSOCIATION (BAETAS) CASE  
IN ALOGUINSAN, CEBU, PHILIPPINES**

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**ABSTRACT**

Participatory development has been used as a common framework of governance today. It is envisioned to tap human resources outside the traditional government-run or pure private sector operated development initiatives, believing that communities are capable of handling economic endeavors with proper training and start up investments. Under this framework, an assessment of a community-based ecotourism development initiative in the town of Aloguinsan in western Cebu was made to highlight its beginning, success stories, challenges met and its way forward, with the rapidly changing priorities and leadership of local politics. Key respondent interviews and actual field observations were made to gather data. Results show that the Bojo Aloguinsan Ecotourism Association (BAETAS) arose from the program of the Cebu Provincial Government's "Suroy-suroy Sugbu" (Tour Cebu), which encouraged participating municipalities to showcase their tourism potential. The municipal government provided the seed money of P1 Million as start up capital to develop the Bojo river. BAETAS is run by a group of fishermen and housewives, who facilitate a river tour, which includes on-site ecological lectures on mangroves and birds, handy craft making demo and a serenaded lunch. Over years of operation BAETAS has provided an alternative livelihood of its members and has helped promote the town of Aloguinsan. The uniqueness of the area and the community running it makes the destination admirable. With the community having the sense of ownership of the program, changing political leadership can be viewed to have minimal impacts on the project.

**Keywords:** community-based ecotourism; ecotourism; Bojo river

**INTRODUCTION**

Ecotourism is an extension of Alternative Tourism, whose term usage dates back around the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Coria and Calfucura, 2012 and Fennel, 2008), although evidences have shown that a lot of people during much earlier period travelled to the wilderness (Fennel, 2008). Ecotourism is viewed as more sustainable compared to conventional tourism (mass tourism), especially because it centers on wilderness resources. Its popularity nowadays is a result of continuous threats to world biodiversity, where conservationists together with many governments and non-government organizations work hard to conserve what are left in the natural habitats. Due to resources decline in many areas, those that have remained intact or hold a considerable number of unique species and ecosystems offer an opportunity



for ecotourism development (Loon and Palakov, 2001). Ecotourism contributes to both economic development and conservation (Ross and Wall, 1999 and Lee, 2004). It provides opportunities for both local and foreign investors to set up businesses thereby creating job opportunities for people and increased tax revenues of the government. For example, a 14-week season of whale shark based ecotourism in Seychelles is forecast to value at 4.99 million dollars (Rowat and Engehardt, 2004). On the other hand, wanting that nature's benefits will be sustained, resources need to be preserved and conserved.

Community-based ecotourism has been a trendy approach in ecotourism development (Kiss, 2004). As a community-based development initiative it falls within the concept of participatory development framework (Jennings, 2000), which allows local stakeholders among others to be involved in policy planning and implementation to better their lives with the belief that they are capable of building their future. Lai and Nepal (Lai and Nepal, 2006) also consider participation as one of the four dimensions of ecotourism. While the contributions of the private sector in ecotourism development is significant, Campbell (Campbell, 1999) emphasized that without a formalized planning or intervention, tourism development in general would be limited. This aspect can be best met through the involvement of the public sector. In this paper, we evaluated the Bojo Aloguinsan Ecotourism Association (BAETAS) as an emerging ecotourism destination in Cebu. Specifically, the study traced the BAETAS origins, its challenges encountered, how it succeeded and its way forward with the changing political leadership in the local government.

## METHODOLOGY

### The study area

The town of Aloguinsan is a fourth class municipality in the western part of Cebu province. It is part of the Explore the Midwest destinations together with Pinamungahan, Toledo City, Balamban, Asturias, Tuburan and Tabuelan among the four destinations developed by the provincial government to include the Southern Heritage Trail, the Northern Escapade and the Enchanting Camotes. The town of Aloguinsan is 73 km away southwest of Cebu City (Figure 1) and can be reached by bus (public transport) in approximately two hours.

Bojo River is a secluded area and stretches about 1.5 km, which is actually an extension of the sea inland. It has no pronounced tributary and its waters are flowing slow and are strongly influenced by rise and fall of tide. The river is approximately 10 meters wide and only enough to accommodate two small boats that can carry two tourists at a time. The water is greenish and averages to 5 meters deep during high tide. A very narrow strip of mangrove vegetation grows on the riverbank. The river is surrounded by greenery though vegetation is relatively short thriving on limestone areas. It exits to the sea between two mountain walls, such area was also historical having used as docking place of some Japanese forces during the Second World War.



Figure 1. The study area indicated by a red arrow.

#### Collection of Data

The study used descriptive qualitative approach in collecting data. It involved exploratory interviews among key respondents and actual field observations. Key respondents considered were the municipal tourism officer, the officials of BAETAS and some boatmen. Researchers were enjoying a day's package of BAETAS to gather as many observations as possible in the field that could help substantiate findings in the interviews and analysis of data. Furthermore, other pertinent documents were looked to cross check some information.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### The beginning of BAETAS

The town of Aloguinsan was never known for anything beautiful especially because of its being a small town with only 15 barangays. Its population is only 27,650 as of 2010 and many of its people work out of the town. When the provincial government of Cebu, under the leadership of its former governor Gwendolyn F. Garcia first initiated the Suruy-Suruy Sugbu (Travel Cebu) in 2005 in cooperation with the Department of Tourism and the Cebu Chamber of Commerce and Industry to promote Cebu's local culture, traditions and destinations in a form of tourism caravan (Cerna and Solano, 2011), municipalities were encouraged to participate in the said program. The Suruy-Suruy Sugbu originally started with the Southern Heritage Trail tour. Having noticed that the Southern Heritage Trail worked, other groups of destinations were crafted. This gave birth to the Explore the Midwest tour in 2009, where the western towns of the province including Aloguinsan will be showcased. Learning from the then mayor of Aloguinsan ( Mayor Cynthia



Moreno) to support the provincial government's endeavor key employees seemed surprised as to what Aloguinsan can offer. "What can we show in Aloguinsan? Our town is very small and people generally go to Cebu City for work, leaving only a few in the municipality", the immediate reaction in contemplating of the town's present tourism officer who cannot think of what the town can offer at that time. It appears that it is beyond imagination for people in Aloguinsan that their town can become a beautiful ecotourism destination.

#### **Challenges along the way**

It was truly a very challenging endeavor for the town. With nothing else to think about, the Bojo River was thought to be the lone resource that people of Aloguinsan could possibly show and invest on. Conditioning the minds of the people to support the conversion and promotion of the Bojo River into a destination was not really easy, especially because people have not seen whether or not the proposed ecotourism development will work for them. Moreover, their negative practices such as undermining pollution activities in the river like dumping of wastes to include plastics and even detergents from washing had to be significantly reduced; and harvesting of mangrove twigs to feed livestock had to be stopped. Series of consultations were made with different consultants hired by the local government.

The ecotourism development started with seed money of P1 Million from the local government. This initial investment was used to train people and provision of infrastructures to support the program. Various consultants were tapped to help many aspects of tourism for the Bojo River. Capacity building activities such as handling and entertaining guests among others were conducted. Other forms of training also include proper food preparation; housekeeping and even on creating souvenir items that the community can share to their guests before leaving the place. Many volunteer biologists also helped in training the locals on knowing and understanding the connectivity of various resources found within and in surrounding areas of the river. Particularly, the locals were trained on identification of birds and mangroves species. Such trainings were some of the most challenging moments especially with the low educational backgrounds of the participants, when they were expected not only to identify species but also know both the common names and scientific names. At the end of the challenge, participants felt so glad that they were able to meet the expectations although they have to refresh themselves every now and then.

#### **Success of BAETAS**

The municipality of Aloguinsan believed that the Explore the Midwest tour of Suroy-Suroy Sugbu is instrumental in their success. Without the Suroy-Suroy Sugbu they could have not started developing Aloguinsan and the Bojo River in particular. The tourism caravan approach of the provincial government has introduced domestic, balikbayan (Filipino returnees) and foreign tourists to visit Cebu's hidden treasures, a strategy that make people discover that Cebu is another paradise to enjoy. People have never thought that their small and remote town has now become very known for ecotourism. Recently, Aloguinsan has been awarded for ecotourism at the national level; An outcome that truly is a pride of all the people in Aloguinsan and of those people who helped in its realization. Since 2009, BAETAS, composed of 40 household members had catered more than 25,000 visitors and generated



more than five million pesos in revenues. As the figures imply, ecotourism development in Bojo has really worked. It provides additional income to the community whose livelihood primarily relied on fishing. The fisher folks now have alternative means to earn money especially when weather conditions are not favorable for fishing. It is in earning that its members are more encourage to protecting and conserving the river environs.

#### **What does BAETAS offer?**

The Bojo River environs have recorded and identified more than 30 species of birds and 17 species of mangroves. Birds include some species endemic to the country although the three species endemic to Cebu are not found. Interestingly, the river environs have a record of Tui *Delichandron spathacea*. The said species of mangrove was not recorded in various mangrove research inventories in Cebu based on the works in the town of Sibonga (Melana, *et al.*, 1996), Moalboal (Alburo *et al.*, 2000), Camotes Islands (Alburo *et al.*, 2001) and Argao (Medico *et al.*, 2009). We suspect that this is the first record of the species in Cebu especially because the species is only presented as an illustration in a mangrove field guide in Cebu while the rest are pictures.

A package in the Bojo River Cruise is worth 600 per head but they give discounts to students or if the number of guests is higher (minimum of 7). At P600 one can already enjoy a sumptuous meal with deserts and drinks as well as snacks. As part of the warm hospitality shown by members of BAETAS, arriving guests are meet along the road and given native leis made by the members themselves. The tour will start with a 5-10 minute trail walk from the road to the main facility. Upon arrival at the main facility, guests are entertained by the women of BAETAS mainly wives of fishermen with native Cebuano songs and dressed with traditional Filipino costumes. Some men also sing with them or play the guitar to add melody. It appears that the Cebuano cultural spirit is in the air when guests hear them sing especially that many of the old and pure Cebuano pieces are rarely played nowadays. A visit to the place especially those balikbayans with age will reminisce the good old days. It is also an opportunity for foreign guests to learn the local culture. The entertainment is also a way of keeping Cebuano culture alive as traditional costumes are often worn only in special cultural programs.

After the meal BAETAS staff gives a lecture focusing on the coastal environment, reminding guests of species connectivity with one another and their relations to the environment. For those who may not find the lecture very interesting, posters highlighting some of the species found in the area are exhibited on the walls. While the lecture is done just on the side of the river, its calm and greenish waters are tempting and would make guests more excited for the boat ride.

After the necessary preparations including the wearing of life vest, guests will embark on the boat. Considering the size of the boat, only a maximum of two guests are allowed for each ride plus the paddler. While guests may be busy taking pictures along the way, the paddler will also identify the various mangrove species. Birds seen on the path are also identified making the ride more educational as well. As the boat approaches the river's exit to the Tañon Strait, magnificent scenery of two opposing steep and green mountain slopes decorate the view.

Analyzing the way paddlers handle the ride appears that they really put their heart on their work. Their articulateness in Introducing the different



species and even in discussing some of their important functions indicate their interests and passion to learn and understand the environment even better in spite of their generally low educational attainment. Paddlers who are at the same time fishermen were mostly up to their elementary grades only. If one finds it interesting to learn deeper about their local culture, guests can at the same time ask questions to them. One can even ask the boatman on his personal capacity, his own story about what he does and what generally people in the area do prior to the development of the Bojo River. On the other hand, if one wants a closer encounter with the mangroves, a 400 meters boardwalk is constructed on one side of the river.

After about 30 minutes boat ride, guests are also served with snacks and finally taught on how to make a mat out of locally sourced materials. Although one can buy souvenir items such as bags and fans among others, guests can also take their own sample of a mat. Truly, the fun, thrill, excitement, food, entertainment and the learning that one can experience in visiting the Bojo River is amazing and may also bring one closer to nature.

#### **The way forward**

BAETAS and the LGU of Aloguinsan jointly believe on the limits of nature. As such, they strongly consider the carrying capacity of the area with the understanding that their success today will not be sustained if they will not set limits. Though quite subjective, carrying capacity is an important aspect to consider making ecotourism sustainable (Chawla, 2006). During peak periods, it is advisable that earlier booking be made to facilitate ones travel to the town.

BAETAS have also considered synergy in development. They view it important to support and partner other tourism facilities operators in town such as those who owned lodging houses. The Bojo facility does not provide lodging for guests to stay overnight. Instead, they recommend that people stay in lodging houses available in town. In such manner, they are able to maintain the placidity of the river environs especially during the night and also offer business opportunities for others. Perhaps, BAETAS started from scratch and since Aloguinsan is only a small town, development activities taking place may be easy to manage than those respective LGUs that are big.

Having started to develop other potential areas in Aloguinsan such as reef diving and organic farming adds up package tour choices. Such variation may result to an increased number of people who will visit Aloguinsan in more than a day to relax and enjoy nature. This manner will also help the lodging facilities to improve to cater the increasing volume of guests.

With ecotourism development strongly anchored in the community, the existence of BAETAS will not be at risk even with changing local political leaderships. As new leaders come and development priorities change, BAETAS will continue to operate because they are managed by the people independent of government control although the LGU has supported them financially and technically. As an organization, BAETAS is now registered at the Securities and Exchange Commission and at the Department of Labor and Employment, which means that it already has a legal personality. As long as the Bojo River continues to provide benefits to the community, BAETAS will always be there to educate and make people enjoy a life closer to nature. The development concept that is rooted in the people makes BAETAS a truly concrete display of a sustainable community-based ecotourism development.

One thing though that BAETAS and the LGU in Aloguinsan should look at is to see to it that a greater part of the revenues either direct or indirect should



go in the mainstream society of Aloguinsan particularly with BAETAS because in many instances the bulk of benefits in ecotourism goes with people who are outsiders such as those who own lodging or hotel establishments (in larger scales) and makers of souvenir items (Scheyvens, 1999). To avoid these things to happen, the LGU should give priority to people from Aloguinsan to invest and provide the necessary training to members of BAETAS or other peoples group in the town to craft souvenir items that can be sold to support ecotourism development.

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