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Ecotourism in a small insular fishing village in the tropics: Bane or boon?

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Coastal ecotourism has been hailed as a development strategy to alleviate poverty for sustainable development in the coastal zones as embodied by the new Philippines National Ecotourism Strategy for 2013-2022. However, very few empirical studies documented whether such expectations are met in the context of small island settings in the country. We evaluated the perceived impacts of the emerging ecotourism industry in Malalison Island, located 7.5 km east of the municipality of Culasi, Antique, Philippines. We used 14 impact indicators categorized in 4 impact criteria (economics, socio-cultural, environment and sustainability) to collect data on local perceptions of ecotourism and its impacts. The respondents viewed a ladder-like diagram with 10 steps, where step 1 represented the worst possible scenario and step 10 the best possible scenario for each indicator in 3 time frames: Before the onset of ecotourism (2010), present (2016) and 5 years into the future. Overall, except for water quality, all impact indicators of ecotourism in Malalison Island showed significant difference in perceived scores in at least one time frame (e.g., past vs. present vs. future) (Friedman test, $p < 0.05$). While economic indicators (income and job multiplicity) have significantly improved at present; these benefits have been offset by significant increase in the local living cost. Socio-culturally, while local pride and general external knowledge of the local fisherfolks have significantly improved due to encounter with tourists, these positive effects have been negated by the perceived increased of negative external influence to local culture by ecotourism, such as drug use and inequity of benefits. Ecotourism activities are also perceived to negatively affect the environment, particularly with the increase of uncollected solid waste in the island and the degradation of beach quality. Our study pointed out the risk that accompanied the perceived benefits in promoting ecotourism particularly in insular, resource-dependent fishing communities.

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