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Manyukos Island Marine Sanctuary,
Barangay Buenavista

Bringing tourism benefits closer to the locals: the Puerto Princesa experience

If the Province of Palawan has been considered the nature sanctuary of the world and continues to amaze tourists with its scenic wonders, Project Coordinator Meliez Zapanta of the Palawan Network of NGOs, Inc (PNNI) thinks it is “because there are people and communities that keep it that way.”

Against the waves of profit-oriented tourism, Zapanta said how communities are usually overlooked in the process of tourism development is the reason her organization ventures into an enterprise that “not only showcases the physical beauty of Puerto Princesa, but also empowers communities and recognizes their roles in the preservation the country’s last ecological frontier.”

As PEF’s Partnerships and Access Center (PAC) for Palawan, PNNI has developed various programs aimed at sustaining poverty reduction and community empowerment for the poor communities of the province of Palawan, the most recent of which is the one-million peso Pasyar Developmental Tourism Project. Pasyar means “to travel leisurely” in the native language of Palawan.

Aptly called for its focus on facilitating community development via ecotourism, the project seeks to provide market option for tourists looking for alternative forms of tourism while building capacities of local communities to become active players in Palawan’s tourism industry. It also aims to help promote and maintain cultural integrity of the province.

PNNI articulated these objectives in a business plan submitted to PEF in 2006 which the Foundation turned into a P1-million fund for Pasyar project.

“We want tourists to realize that attractive tourism does not necessarily entail destructing the environment,” said Ma. Cleofe Bernardino, PNNI Executive Director. “We call it developmental tourism because it’s involving people’s participation in their own development through the way they define it, and not through the ‘prescription’ of others.”

As the term ecotourism becomes increasingly murky and overused by resorts and tour companies, this kind of community-based tourism is trying to bring the ideas of ethical and environmentally-responsible travel closer. For the local people it’s a way to retain more control over the types of tours in their area, as well as bringing the benefits of tourism closer to home.

Through the Pasyar project, at least six (6) people’s organizations (POs), which were already organized by various partner NGOs, have been strengthened by PNNI-Pasyar team and are now ready to showcase their indigenous tourism attractions, thanks to the community organizing work of the Environmental Legal Assistance Center (ELAC), Conservation International and Palawan Conservation Corps, among others.

The POs-turned-tourism partners are the Honda Bay Boat Owners Association, Inc. (HOBBAI) mainly from Barangay Sta. Lourdes; Bacungan Coastal Development Resident Association, Inc (BCDRAI) of Barangay Bacungan; Puntod Ilis Marine Sanctuary Management Board of Barangay Babuyan; Mangrove Paddle Tour Association of Barangay Cabayugan; Ugong Rock



Community Tour Guide Association of Tagabinet; and the Samahan ng Maliliit na Mangingisda (Association of Small-scale Fishermen) of Barangay Buenavista. More organizing work for other POs is in the pipeline.

Among others, the project wants to showcase the following destinations through their respective organized communities: Puntod Ilis Marine Sanctuary (Babuyan), San Carlos Mangrove in (Bacungan), Honday Bay, Ulugay Bay, Manyukos Island Marine Sanctuary (Barangay Buenavista) and Ugong Rock Spelunking and Summit View Park (Barangay Tagabinet).

MORE INCOME FOR LOCALS

Instead of commercial tour operators transporting tourists around Honda Bay, the total of 44 members of HOBBAI are now the ones touring guests using some 62 boats they own which operate daily by rotation. PNNI is providing loan assistance to its marginalized members through the project.

“Whereas before, our only source of livelihood was just fishing, we now have more income as we have been tapped in the local tourism,” shared Jessie Unico,

Bacungan mangrove



member of HOBBAI. “There are no better local guides for tourists than locals themselves.” Honda Bay is host to Palawan’s several fishing villages, white beaches and rainforests, and is a favorable destination of adventurers and nature lovers.

Marlon Tamsi, a former community organizer of ELAC, which helped organize HOBBAI, recalled how tourism services around Honda Bay used to be monopolized by rich families from Barangay Sta. Lourdes. “Today, it is great to see ordinary residents gaining access and earning from the Honda Bay tourism,” said Tamsi. He said this opportunity has turned many illegal fishermen into legitimate service providers through their motorized boats.

Community participation has been more apparent in the residents’ involvement in conceptualizing and organizing travel tours. In Barangay Bacungan, BCDRAI members, also earlier organized by ELAC, went through some strategic planning facilitated by PNNI to decide on ‘what to market’ from their mangrove-rich community. BCDRAI is on a Community-Based Forest Management Agreement (CBFMA) with the DENR to rehabilitate 378 hectares of mangrove areas, but the need for immediate economic gains prompted locals to resort to developmental tourism.

Tamsi, also board member of the BCDRAI in Barangay Bacungan, said the community planning has resulted in members suggesting a number of packages such as mangrove paddle boating where guests will explore the local mangroves using a paddled boat tour through the assistance of the PO members as boatmen. BCDRAI has also proposed, and PNNI has agreed to provide assistance, to set up a floating house/restaurant which will serve as reception area for guests before they start their mangrove cruise. Other proposed tourist activities in the area to be supported by Pasyar are firefly watching and mangrove boardwalk.

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“The way we facilitate the community involvement in ecotourism is to focus and develop their resource management skills in proposing tourism activities,” Tamsi said.

Tourist’s education is among those that developmental tourism sells best. In Bacungan experience, it was attested by Julie Simpson, a British-Filipino tourist who recently visited the area through the Pasyar tour services.

“Learning how a community thrives, and how locals protect their land from intruders in the case of Bacungan, is such an interesting experience.” Simpson said. “They truly demonstrate a genuine sensitivity to the environment.”

Simpson said Filipinos must learn that a number of foreign interests are not interested in high-rise buildings and other technological advancements as destinations but are instead keen in seeing how nature is preserved.

The sites of Pasyar, she said, are perfect examples of this kind of tourism.

TARGETED SHARE IN THE MARKET

After the infamous Dos Palmas kidnapping in 2001, Palawan tourism has, without a doubt, recovered fully and is continuing to attract tourists more than majority of the country’s tourism destinations. In 2007 alone, the Puerto



Princesa city tourism office disclosed that tourist arrivals increased by 19.07 percent compared to year 2006 (Figures showed 176,347 arrivals in 2007, or 28,241 higher than the previous year). Of these numbers, PNNTI is aiming to get 8 percent of total tourist arrivals on the first year of operation (2008) and 2 percent increase on the succeeding years.

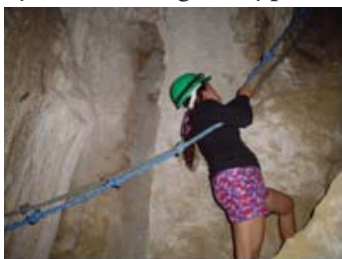
Initially, PASYAR offers three major tours: Day Tours for those who want to explore the city; Pasyal Bayan-Bayan (4 days/3 nights or 3 days/2 nights) covering travels around the city and out to the rural barangays where development projects are being initiated; and Pasyal Palawan covering 5 - 7 days of travel to the adjacent municipalities outside Puerto Princesa City.

Pasyar later improved the packaging of tour products by customizing the type of tours based on the needs of the guests.

These tour packages were evaluated during three batches of test runs from May 2007 to February 2008 which Zapanta said “affirmed the marketability and viability of the project.”

“The tour we had in Palawan was one of the

Other tour sites and activities promoted by Pasyar



Pasyar booth at the Baragatan Festival in time for the celebration of the founding of the Civil Government of Palawan last June 17-24

most interesting because not only did it take me to the famous sites in the island, but also enriched my awareness of preserving nature while meeting kind-hearted people along the way,” shared a guest in one of the test runs.

In addition, the Pasyar project, with business center at the heart of the city, runs a souvenir shop as additional source of income. PASYAR souvenirs are also sold during Trade Fairs providing an avenue for partner communities to market their products.

Of late, Pasyar has forged partnership with TV Network ABS-CBN for its *Bayan Ni Juan* project, an advocacy program encouraging Filipinos to help marginalized fellow countrymen. Stressing the value of Bayanihan, a Filipino trait which refers to a communal unity to achieve a particular goal, *Bayan ni Juan* has chosen Pasyar-organized communities as target sites for ecotourism.

To view Pasyar’s complete list of tour packages, visit <http://pasyarpalawan.tripod.com/pack.html>.



Participants in one of the Pasyar test runs touring Honda Bay