

Resource management

Whose paradise?

There are some lessons to be learnt from the Philippines' oldest experiment in community-based coastal resource management

The Philippines is blessed with 7,000 islands and there is certainly one among them to suit most dreams. Mine is Apo Island, which has a stunning underwater world. Apo is a small volcanic island near the southeast coast of Negros, one of the main islands in the Visayan region. Apo Island is where, in the late 1970s, the Siliman University started its first experiments with community-based coastal resource management. Apo Island has one of the earliest marine sanctuaries in the Philippines' contemporary history, set up in 1985.

The simplest way to go to the island is to sit on the beach and wait until enough people have gathered to fill a motorized *banca*. The locals are always happy when some tourists travel with them, because then they do not have to pay for the trip. The women enter first, while the men push the boat from the shore into the sea. We sit in twos, densely packed atop the luggage hold. Soon we enter the swell and waves splash high. Within a short while, we are soaked. Our gaze is fixed to the pitch-black rock with the green toupee, which is slowly looming nearer.

We land on the beach and walk into the village. The village is small and densely built. The people greet us in a friendly way. Fewer than a hundred families live on the island, all of whom are related to one another. Most of them are fisherfolk and poor.

We look for Damian, who is the caretaker of a small cottage owned by a doctor from the mainland. The cottage is more of a dusty cabin than a holiday home! but it is near the sanctuary and so, every morning, we can just step out and dive into the sea to enjoy the beautiful underwater world. As the water is crystal

clear, we need to use only a mask and snorkel. The magnificent colours underwater and large variety of corals and the fish make us almost breathless. We join a shoal of silver, shining skipjacks swimming in large circles as if they were doing their morning exercises. We play with the curious, bright orange clownfish and are given a sudden fright when a long seasnake ascends from the depths for a breath of air.

Damian often passes by the cottage to see if we are alright, but mostly for a good chat. Damian is a retired fisherman, who for many years, had worked on Indonesian deep-sea trawlers to earn a living. He was thus able to save some money to educate his children. One of his daughters now works as a customs officer and sends him money every month. Once his daughter got employed, Damian could retire to enjoy his old days. "Those days on the trawlers were hard times, always wet, always cold, always full of work", Damian told us, appearing still filled with horror.

Like his fellow islanders, Damian is very proud of their sanctuary. The environmental awareness programmes of the Siliman University had certainly borne good fruit, and all fisher families, who are organized in a Marine Management Committee, support their sanctuary and serve as voluntary wardens.

Darker side

But there is also a darker side to the Apo Island success story. After the marine sanctuary was established, the fisher community lost access to a large part of the traditional fishing grounds. There was practically no alternative employment avenue for the generally poorly educated islanders, except as workers on deep-sea trawlers or as housemaids on the

mainland. The rocky island also offers few opportunities for agriculture.

In the early days, there was some development in tourism., but the visitors were primarily marine biologists and a lone adventurer. But Apo Island has recently been discovered by the luxury tourist business. On a shining white beach, surrounded by coal-black rocks and bordered by a sea of various hues of blue, an Australian has built a luxurious beach resort. It is constructed entirely of natural materials, such as hardwood, bamboo and nipa, and in the traditional Filipino style of architecture. A second resort is being built by a Britisher.

Since there are no other eating places on the island, we went to the resort for dinner. The resort was fully booked. The guests were wealthy Filipino youths who had come here as part of some ecotourism club, but the plastic bottles and candy wrappers which they left strewn around everywhere showed their true colours.

On Sunday, a large cruise ship with foreign tourists had dropped anchor in front of the village. Within minutes, the peace was shattered by the piercing sounds of water scooters. Boats from the ship transported tourists, equipped with complete diving equipment, to and from the sanctuary. In the meantime, boats with tourists from other ships run by dive operators also arrived. It became a real

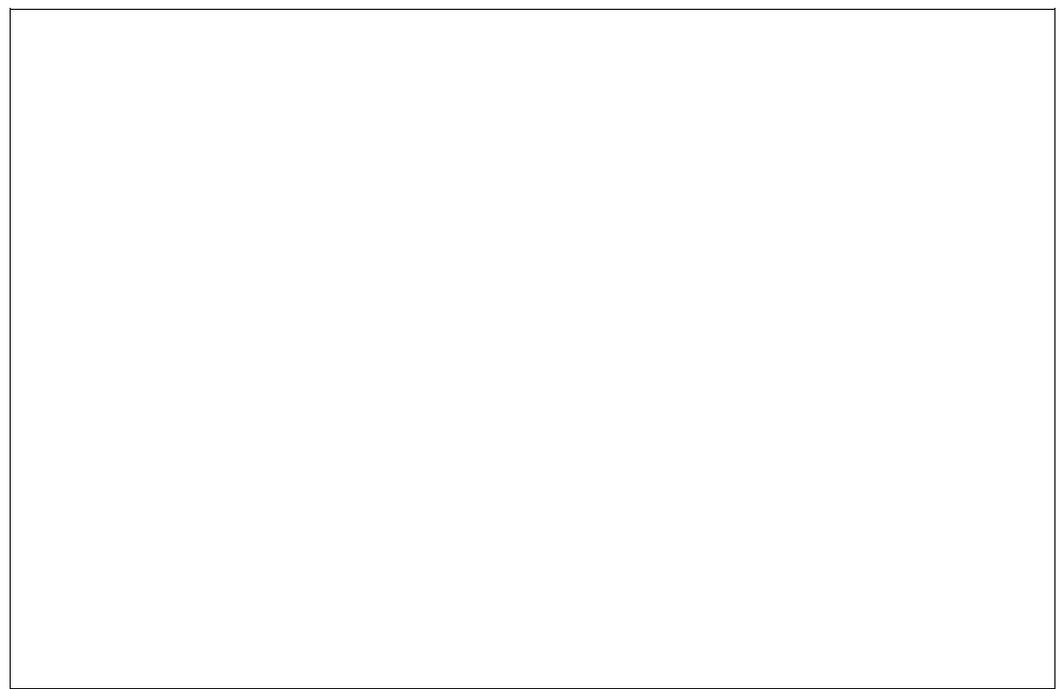
traffic jam near the sanctuary and a real fright for us simple snorkellers.

While, previously, we had peacefully swum with the fish, as one with them, now the fish were chased in all directions by the lights of underwater video and still cameras. Sometimes we saw a diver pocket a live shell or break off a piece of coral to take back as souvenirs. Both these acts are officially prohibited.

Meanwhile, boats had come from the cruise ship to bring a picnicking party ashore. Lounge chairs and parasols were arranged on the beach and food laid on tables. At the side, women from the fisher community had installed themselves in a disciplined line, displaying their merchandise, mostly T-shirts printed with dolphins or sharks and slogans like 'Apo Island', 'Diver's Paradise' and 'Shark Attack'. But the tourists just lay on the lounge chairs and practically ignored the women. The women had no aggressive selling tactics and I wondered how much these poor women would earn from this business.

Few benefits

"How do the islanders benefit from this type of tourism?," we asked Jeffrey, a US Peace Corps volunteer who works on the island. "Not very much," he answered. "It is mostly dive operators and hotels from the mainland who bring loads of tourists. They bring everything with them and do

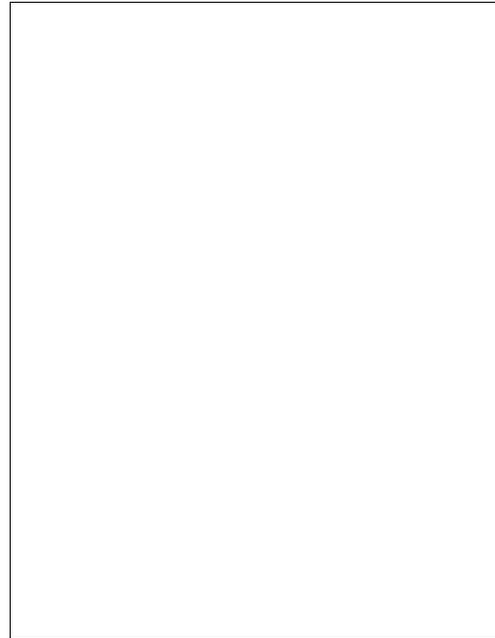


not even pay an entrance fee. The resort pays tax, but to the municipality and not to the islanders (Apo belongs to the municipality of Dauin on the mainland) and, as such, the money disappears into a big pool.”

He also said that even though most families have been living here *for* generations, they are actually squatters’ as they have no title deeds to the land. The growth in tourism had led to speculation, as entrepreneurs from the mainland started buying tax certificates, which are *de facto* land titles and can be used to obtain legal titles. Fortunately, in 1995, Apo Island was declared a protected area by the Department of Environment and Natural resources (DENR) and this will prevent further selling and transfer of land. The DENR also recently started meeting with the dive operators to get them to abide by the environmental rules and regulations of the sanctuary. Some did promise to co-operate and also pay an entrance fee to the islanders Marine Management Committee.

We realized that had the Siliman University helped the islanders to develop the tourism business by themselves, the islanders might have benefitted more. (The university organized only mat weaving training as an alternative income-generating programme, but it was not very successful.) The islanders could have then decided themselves how to direct the development of tourism.

When we spoke to some of the islanders, particularly the women T-shirt sellers, many of them did express concern about the development of tourism on their island. They said that the tourists did not respect their culture. Some islanders complained about nude sunbathing. Women disclosed that they have more work now and less income. After the sanctuary was established, they were no longer permitted to collect shells. Earlier, that was their major source of income. Most of those who work as sea wardens of the sanctuary are women, but the work is voluntary and not paid. All of them, however, said that they are very proud of their sanctuary and all the publicity and attention it has received.



When we went for our last dinner in the luxury resort, the Filipino yuppies had left and we were alone with the dogs. In front of us the lit cruise ship looked like a luminous Christmas tree. We heard music drifting up. After a while, the ship weighed anchor and, slowly, the mass of light disappeared from sight. For a moment, we thought we were the only tourists on the island. But soon, a new light arose from the sea. A motor boat landed on the beach and dark figures in diving suits, carrying bright shining torches, came ashore. A new group of tourists had returned from their nightly diving adventure. “Even at night the fish are not left in peace,” I mused.

Goodbye

Early on Monday morning, Damian came to take us to his cousin’s boat, which would transport us back to the mainland. Once again, we mixed with the islanders going to and from for their shopping and trade. And back we went to the rich and stressful city life, refreshed and relaxed by the gifts of Apo Island and its people. But what do we have to give them in return. 3

This piece is by Cornelia Quist, who works with the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) and advises on the SNV CB-CRM support programme