

# Going Green: In Coron, ecological zoning supports sustainable tourism

One's sojourn to Coron in Northern Palawan begins with a view of majestic mountain ranges and vast grasslands leading to the main town. Regular town folks walking on foot, small lodges and inns in quiet corners, and murmuring sounds of tricycles evoke Coron's utter simplicity.

The town's simplicity bears a stark contrast to the grandeur of Coron's natural resources – marine parks, lagoons and lakes, and pockets of white beaches which its community and the government sought to protect.

Salvador Mago, 41 years old, a native of Barangay Tagumpay in Coron lives by paddling a boat in Siete Pecados Marine Park, one of Coron's protected areas. He earns his living by collecting environmental fees from tourists snorkeling or diving in Siete Pecados. Despite being bathed by the everyday sun, his humble grin when asked about his work shows that working in the marine park is well worth it.

Like Mang Salvador, Aurora Patricio, 36, makes a living by watching over Siete Pecados. She is among the trainees under the Sustainable Environment Management Project in Northern Palawan (SEMP-NP). "We were trained to monitor the corals and help the rest of the communities surrounding Siete Pecados on proper waste segregation. *Dahil nasa marine park ang hanap-buhay namin, nagkaroon kami ng disiplina na alagaan ito. Kasama kami sa management council dito,*" said Patricio. (Our livelihood depends on the marine park and we learned to have discipline and concern to take care of it. The community is part of the marine park's management council.)

The preservation of the marine park and involving the local community in environment management are among the results of Palawan's Environmentally Critical Area Network (ECAN) Zoning. Under the SEMP-NP, this ecological zoning system is to be the basis of a tourism development plan for Northern Palawan, specifically the Busuanga-Coron Area.



Sustainable tourism concept is embraced by communities nearby Siete Pecados Marine Park

The SEMP-NP was in line with the sustainable development plan funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

"The ECAN Zoning has helped the local government in decision-making, getting baseline tourism data, and identifying designated investment areas. For example, if the area is under the red zone, investment projects no matter how big it is cannot be allowed," said Al Linsangan III, executive director of the Calamianes Cultural Conservation Network, a group composed of environmental non-government organizations (NGOs). He is also an advocate of community-based tourism through Calamianes Expeditions Eco-Tours.

He cited the case of Kayangan Lake whose preserved limestone landscapes provided tourism livelihood opportunities to the Tagbanua Tribe.

"What's important with ECAN Zoning is it helped highlight Coron's biodiversity and protected it," Linsangan added.

The SEMP-NP project, according to Linsangan, has also involved the private sector in promoting community-based eco-tourism, while providing Coron the green blueprint to proceed with its tourism development.

**"What's important with ECAN Zoning is it helped highlight Coron's biodiversity and protected it."**

-Al Linsangan, Calamianes Cultural Conservation Network

So far, the initiative seems to be working. At the LGU level, Amanda Pinoon, Coron's tourism officer said, "We met with the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) and we agreed to adopt the tourism master plan recommended by the SEMP Project. Aside from the technical assistance, the project has opened the eyes of the local community to the impact of sustainable tourism."

Tourist arrivals in Coron have grown by 30% in 2010 equivalent to 50,134 tourists compared to 38,489 tourists in 2009. Pinoon said that as of October 2011, Coron has already exceeded its target of 50,000 tourists.

Aside from the SEMP-NP project, JICA has helped Coron's local government enhance its tourism data collection through a technical cooperation project on developing tourism statistics system. "Tourism is a low-impact business but has high economic benefits to the community. The project has helped build the institutional capacities of LGUs to report accurate and reliable tourism statistics."

In the past, LGUs such as Coron would merely rely on the manual reports of hotel owners on tourism arrivals and behavior.

JICA's project has helped the local government in Coron standardize its data collection system to promote and sustain local tourism.

At the municipal hall of Coron, Japanese volunteer under the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) Program Naomi Kurosawa is kept busy with local tourism work, developing a Coron map for tourists, and doing surveys for Coron tourists.

As staff of the local tourism office, Naomi helps disseminate information about Coron by writing a blog and contributing in NaviManila, a tourism magazine for Japanese in the Philippines.

"Coron has a high tourism potential. I hope I will be able to help raise the level of awareness on Coron especially among Japanese," said Naomi. She has been helping the tourism office address inquiries from Japanese tourists. Like the rest of the Coron community, Naomi is also an advocate of sustainable tourism and is planning to help develop a tourism livelihood in Coron using available indigenous materials such as bamboo for souvenirs.

As for the meaning of Coron, from Corong - a Tagbanua term meaning enclosed or protected by mountains, this simple town's eco-tourism is protected by the positive symbiotic relationship existing between Coron's nature and its people.