



SOEC

NO-FRILLS, NATURAL-HIGH TOURISM: BRINGING RELIEF TO PEOPLE AND NATURE



Sam Mabitag, former president and current marketing manager of the Suba Olango Ecotourism Cooperative

Vital to the global ecology but little known to the public is Olango Island, just off Cebu. Twenty minutes by pumpboat from Lapulapu City is the Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary, comprising nearly 1,000 hectares of Olango Island itself. The site is a major part of East Asia Migratory Flyway route of migratory shore birds. The globally threatened Chinese egret, Asian dowitcher and Eurasian curlew, for example, journey southward from China, Mongolia, Siberia, Japan and parts of Korea, to Olango island in the Philippines, or to Hong Kong and Malaysia; down to Australia in the months of September to November. Then, from February to April, the birds fly back to their places of origin.

The birds stay in Olango Island, which is an intertidal wetland, for as long as two months. “When the birds come, you can see they are skin and bones,” recalls Sam Mabitag, who was born and raised in sitio Suba in barangay Sabang, the village nearest the sanctuary. Sam is the marketing manager of the Suba Olango Ecotourism Cooperative.

The birds feed off the fish, crablets, shrimp and

The women of Suba village: hosts, entertainers, cooks, guides and cleaners during a tour – strategic stakeholders of the ecotour



lugworms teeming in the thick mangrove forests and seagrass of the island. “When they get going to Australia, you can see the birds have really put on weight,” Sam continues.

The birds have been a fixture of Olango Island long before the island came to public attention. Then, only the ornithologists knew of Olango Island, and a few had visited the area. Despite the cooperative’s numerous information, education and communication (IEC) efforts among the residents of Suba, a few of the old folks stick to a “rural legend” that the birds are owned by the “White Lady,” for how else can it be that the birds come one day, literally in hundreds of thousands, only to vanish after a few weeks?

Some of the villagers would occasionally catch them for their meat. The birds were also just a sport for some of the men who would practice target shooting. It was local belief that the birds, cooked in a dish not unlike the Scottish haggis, was “energy” for some of the young men who had gone on a drinking spree the night before. Socrates “Boy” Saġarino, a childhood friend of Sam’s and now a park warden of the Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary, admits to once trying this concoction in his youth when he had a hangover. Was it effective? “No,” was his quick reply. “I suppose among us it was all psychological,” he chuckles.

Initial Misgivings

The residents of barangay Suba were at first wary of the delineation of the Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary as a protected zone. At least 75 percent of the island population had lived on fishing and harvesting shells, starfish, sea cucumber and other marine species from the start. The designation of a resource-rich portion of the island as a no-fishing zone was equal to disenfranchisement, more so because this meant as well round-the-clock monitoring against illegal fishing

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methods, including dynamite fishing and “chemical” fishing, which were rampant up to the '80s. Although they do not use cyanide per se, Visayas fishers had taken to dousing the seas with synthetic farming insecticides to paralyse the fish. Their intention was just to stun the fish, not to kill them. But most of the fish would die all the same.

The mangroves, moreover, served as a source of free fuel and lumber for the residents.

An ecotourism development project initiated in 1998 by the USAID-funded Coastal Resource Management Project allowed the people a glimpse of the income that could be earned if illegal fishing stopped altogether and local tourism flourished. The tourism potential of the island was awesome, with the migratory birds, white sand beaches, and coastal-village culture. The project considered Suba the best host for the ecotourism livelihood project.

Meetings and consultations with residents of Suba took place, and those interested were given further orientation on the potential benefits, constraints and problems related to tourism and ecotourism development. They were then trained in booking tours, handling visitors and meal preparation. They also went on study tours to other local places of interest to see for themselves the income potential from ecotourism. The first tour in March 1998 was with members of the country’s largest association of tourism operators and developers, who gave the experience an A rating and the project participants tips on how to further develop the island’s ecotourism potential. With Canada Fund’s support in 2001, the project was able to open a booking office, organize more training in bird migration and migratory shorebirds, in tour guiding, and in organizational development, including bookkeeping. Canada Fund’s support also enabled the coop to purchase

The colourful, festive welcome awaiting clients of the ecotour, complete with a refreshing drink of coconut juice straight from the nut.





Socrates "Boy" Sagarino, park warden of the Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary

two high-powered telescopes and binoculars for use by the tourists. Two years later, the Suba Olango Ecotourism Cooperative, originally an association, became a full-fledged cooperative.

Today, practically the whole village of Suba is involved in the venture. At least 69 households benefit directly from the project. These are the families of the paddlers (men), and the kitchen and food attendants (women). The women are also in charge of most of the cultural performances and skills demonstration activities, as well as preparing, decorating and cleaning the sanctuary's recreation zone. The others who benefit from the ecotours are the families of the men who act as snorkelling guides of visitors who chose to take a dive in the nearby Gilutungan marine sanctuary, and the fish vendors, tricycle drivers, and children who gather shells along the shore that are crafted into necklaces and souvenir items sold to the tourists.

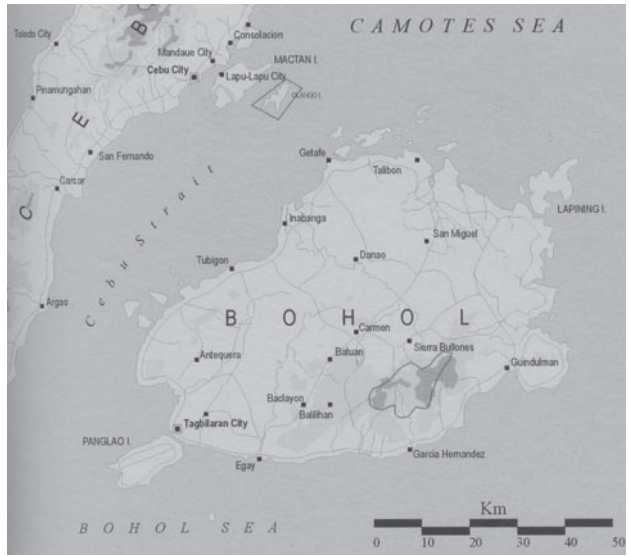
A Splash of Colour

A typical Olango Bird and Seascape tour booked with the cooperative starts from any point in Lapulapu City. The visitors are first taken to the four surrounding islets via a pumpboat. Along the way, a naturalist expert in bird migration patterns acts as tourist guide, providing local history regarding the surrounding islets. On arrival at Olango Island, the women, in their *patadyong* (white tops) and floral *sayas* (skirts) welcome the visitors with songs and dance. "Mind you, the songs are original compositions of the mothers," Sam says. No welcome ritual is complete without the coconut juice sipped straight from the ubiquitous giant nut.

The visitors are then taken around the bird sanctuary proper in canoes by the paddlers, one visitor to one



Olango Island is notable for concentration of the globally threatened Chinese egret.



canoe. Back at the recreation area, the mothers have laid out a lauriat of seafood for lunch. There are also smaller demonstration gazebos made of bamboo and grass where the locals show the visitors indigenous fishing techniques (hook and line fishing), and the stringing of seashells into necklaces and leis. Clients have included personalities from government, business and media, as well as the ambassadors and their entourages from five countries including New Zealand, Canada and the United States. A few colleges have also held study tours of the island with the assistance of the cooperative.

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Community Pride and Vigilance

The ecotour project has restored to the residents of Suba, and of Olango island in general, pride of self and pride of place. It has provided ecologically responsible occupation, while instilling a sense of ownership of the sanctuary. The people of Suba are now conservationists with high personal stakes in maintaining the sanctuary. The community's initial misgivings have been replaced with vigilance against any violation of the provisions governing environmentally protected areas, including the ban on fishing and cutting of mangroves. Today, any encroachment or intrusion into the zone is reported to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) forthwith. So far, the cooperative has successfully conducted its Olango Bird and Seascape Tour building any permanent structure on the island.

As a result, the Olango Bird and Seascape Tour has won international and national recognition, winning the



Pride of self and pride of place – the fruits of ecotour project among the residents of Suba.

They teach other communities who visit them how to conduct coastal cleanups, implement coastal resource assessments, reef monitoring and ecotourism operations.

2001 British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow Environmental Experience Award, and the prestigious Anvil Merit Award from the Public Relations Association of the Philippines. The project also won for the original proponent of the ecotourism development of Olango Island, the Coastal Resource Management Project, the Highly Commended Award from the International Excellence in Ecotourism Award in 2000.

To be sure, some violations still happen, specifically the cutting of mangroves. “But these are perpetrated by outsiders,” Sam notes. Illegal fishing has been stopped. Zealous of its position as the only group authorized to conduct ecotours around the island, the coop works actively with the Protected Area Management Board of the Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary, specifically in resolving disputes and violations of protected areas.

Initially shy and timid, the coop members are now at ease entertaining all types of visitors. They share their views on tourism development as commonly conceived, their direct experience of ecotourism development, and their suggestions on how to further promote this with visiting dignitaries and press confidently. They teach villagers from other communities who visit them how to conduct coastal cleanups, implement coastal resource assessments, reef monitoring and ecotourism operations. They teach the students about the imperatives of environmental protection and ecological biodiversity.

Some coop members have assisted the DENR in its recent bird-banding and bird-counting exercises. The mothers are eager to learn more about food preparation for more sumptuous lunch fare. The rationale of ecotourism has taken root – both the people and the birds are now more secure.

Source of illustration of the Chinese egret on page 42 and the map of Olango Island on page 43: Neil Aldrin D. Mallari, Blas R. Tabaranza Jr. and Michael J. Crosby. *Key Conservation Sites in the Philippines: A Haribon Foundation and Birdlife International Directory of Important Bird Areas*. Manila: Bookmark Inc., 2001.