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Assessing Eco-Friendly Initiatives in Local Destinations: The Case of Davao City

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Abstract: Davao City, one of the leading urban centers in the Philippines, has positioned itself as a pioneer in integrating sustainability into local tourism. This study evaluates the eco-friendly initiatives undertaken by the city and assesses their impact on tourism, local communities, and environmental management. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach combining surveys, interviews, and field observations, this research explores the implementation, effectiveness, and challenges of programs such as ecological waste management, community-based tourism, and sustainable accommodations. The findings reveal a high level of awareness among tourists and a strong commitment among stakeholders, yet point to persistent challenges in infrastructure, policy enforcement, and community engagement. This paper concludes with recommendations to reinforce eco-tourism strategies in Davao City and offers insights for other urban destinations in the Global South.

Keywords: Eco-tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Davao City, Environmental Initiatives, Community-Based Tourism

I. Introduction

Eco-tourism has become an increasingly important strategy for balancing economic development with environmental stewardship. As global concerns regarding climate change, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable tourism practices intensify, many destinations have begun integrating eco-friendly policies into their tourism sectors. Eco-tourism is not merely about visiting pristine environments; it also entails minimizing ecological footprints, fostering environmental education, and contributing to the welfare of local communities (Honey, 2008; Fennell, 2008). In Southeast Asia, eco-tourism is emerging as a vital tool to address both environmental degradation and socio-economic inequality.

The Philippines, with its rich biodiversity and cultural heritage, offers unique opportunities for eco-tourism. The Department of Tourism (2020) has emphasized sustainability as a guiding principle in national tourism strategies. Programs such as the National Ecotourism Strategy and the Tourism Act of 2009 have been pivotal in shaping local tourism development agendas. Yet, implementation often varies at the local level, where resource constraints and governance structures influence outcomes. Among Philippine cities, Davao has demonstrated significant momentum in institutionalizing sustainable practices across sectors, particularly in tourism.

Davao City has implemented a broad range of environmental initiatives aligned with global and national frameworks on sustainable development. The city is notable for its solid waste management programs, plastic ban ordinances, green urban planning, and community-based conservation projects. Moreover, efforts to integrate cultural heritage through tourism, such as the Panunod project involving indigenous communities, reflect a holistic approach to sustainability (Davao City Tourism Office, 2024). These local initiatives are further supported by collaborative actions involving government agencies, civil society, and business sectors.

Despite these achievements, there remains a lack of empirical research evaluating the real-world impacts of these initiatives on tourism sustainability and community outcomes. Existing literature tends to focus on either environmental policy or tourism trends without a comprehensive assessment of how eco-friendly initiatives influence tourism dynamics at the city level. This study aims to fill this gap by examining Davao City as a case study, focusing on three dimensions: program implementation, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability outcomes. The findings will provide empirical evidence to support policy formulation and offer replicable insights for similar urban destinations.

II. Literature Review

Eco-Tourism Principles and Global Practices

Eco-tourism is founded on the principles of environmental conservation, community involvement, and education. According to The International Ecotourism Society (2015), eco-tourism should promote responsible travel to natural areas while conserving the environment and improving local livelihoods. Globally, successful eco-tourism models have emerged in countries like Costa Rica, Kenya, and Bhutan, where natural resource management is tied to tourism revenue and community participation. Fennell (2008) argues that effective eco-tourism depends on multi-stakeholder governance, transparent benefit-sharing, and ongoing environmental monitoring.

Furthermore, the role of certification systems and sustainability indicators has gained attention in the literature. Standards such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria (GSTC) provide benchmarks for evaluating tourism destinations. Research by Weaver

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(2006) highlights that adherence to such criteria correlates with increased tourist satisfaction and long-term destination viability. These insights underscore the importance of systematic planning and evaluation in achieving eco-tourism goals.

Sustainable Tourism in the Philippine Context

The Philippine government has prioritized sustainable tourism development as a response to environmental and social challenges. The National Ecotourism Strategy (2013–2022) outlines objectives including biodiversity conservation, poverty reduction, and cultural preservation (Department of Tourism, 2020). Key initiatives involve capacity-building for local government units, development of eco-parks, and institutional partnerships. However, UNWTO (2018) and recent evaluations by the Asian Development Bank indicate that many local tourism programs suffer from inconsistent implementation, inadequate funding, and weak monitoring systems.

Despite these limitations, several community-driven eco-tourism projects in the Philippines have gained international recognition. For instance, the Buhatan River Eco-Adventure in Sorsogon and the Bojo River Cruise in Cebu showcase best practices in community participation and environmental education. These models offer valuable lessons for cities like Davao aiming to expand eco-tourism while ensuring inclusivity and environmental integrity.

Environmental Management Initiatives in Davao City

Davao City's environmental agenda is guided by comprehensive legislation and multi-sectoral engagement. The city's Ecological Solid Waste Management Ordinance and the Local Climate Change Action Plan represent cornerstones of its sustainability strategy (Davao City Government, 2023). Initiatives such as the Anti-Smoke Belching Unit, plastic-free campaigns, and marine litter action plans reflect the city's commitment to environmental protection.

The implementation of these initiatives has generated measurable improvements in urban cleanliness and waste diversion. Reports by the Davao City Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO) highlight reductions in air pollution and increased recycling rates. However, gaps persist in enforcement and community adherence. Research by SunStar Davao (2024) emphasizes the need for enhanced civic education and stronger incentives to ensure sustained behavior change among residents and tourists alike.

Community-Based Tourism and Cultural Heritage

Community-based tourism (CBT) has gained prominence in Davao City as a strategy for inclusive development. Projects such as the Panunod initiative involve indigenous communities in crafting cultural experiences that educate tourists while preserving heritage (Davao City Tourism Office, 2024). CBT aligns with the principles of eco-tourism by placing local communities at the center of tourism planning and benefit distribution.

The impact of CBT in Davao has been multifaceted. It has provided alternative livelihoods, strengthened cultural pride, and reduced environmental degradation through community-led conservation practices. Nonetheless, there are challenges related to commercialization, authenticity, and capacity. According to Weaver (2006), sustainable CBT requires ongoing training, organizational support, and fair market access, all of which remain areas of concern in the Davao context.

Barriers to Eco-Friendly Tourism Implementation

Implementing eco-friendly initiatives is not without barriers. Among the most frequently cited constraints are inadequate funding, lack of technical expertise, limited infrastructure, and fragmented governance (UNWTO, 2018). In Davao City, these challenges are compounded by rapid urbanization and population growth, which place additional stress on local ecosystems and tourism infrastructure.

Stakeholder interviews and media reports suggest that coordination among agencies is often ad hoc and dependent on individual leadership. Furthermore, policy enforcement remains inconsistent due to resource constraints. Addressing these barriers requires a shift toward integrated tourism planning, increased public-private partnerships, and robust monitoring and evaluation systems.

III. Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods design to gain a comprehensive understanding of eco-friendly tourism initiatives in Davao City. The methodology integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to triangulate findings and ensure robustness.

The quantitative component involved the administration of structured surveys to 200 domestic and international tourists visiting eco-tourism destinations such as the Eden Nature Park, Malagos Garden Resort, and People's Park. The survey instrument measured tourist awareness, satisfaction levels, and behavioral responses to the eco-friendly features observed during their visit. A five-point Likert scale was used to capture variations in attitudes and perceptions.

For the qualitative component, 20 key informant interviews were conducted with tourism officers, environmental planners, resort operators, community leaders, and NGO representatives involved in environmental conservation. Interview questions focused on the design, implementation, challenges, and perceived impacts of eco-tourism initiatives. In addition, field observations were

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conducted across selected sites to assess the visibility and physical infrastructure of eco-friendly practices, including signage, waste segregation bins, energy-efficient technologies, and nature-based activity facilities.

Data analysis was undertaken in two stages. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. Correlation analysis was also employed to explore relationships between tourists' satisfaction and awareness of environmental policies. For qualitative data, thematic coding was performed using NVivo to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes from the interviews and observational notes.

This methodology is grounded in prior studies on eco-tourism assessment that advocate for multi-method evaluations to capture the dynamic interplay between policy, perception, and practice (Weaver, 2006; Honey, 2008). Ethical protocols were strictly followed, with informed consent obtained from all participants and anonymity assured in data presentation.

IV. Results and Discussion

The findings from the survey and interviews provide a multifaceted understanding of how eco-friendly initiatives are perceived, implemented, and sustained in Davao City's tourism sector. Results are organized around four thematic categories: tourist awareness and perception, institutional implementation, community engagement, and barriers to sustainability.

Tourist awareness of eco-friendly initiatives in Davao City is relatively high. Survey data show that 74% of respondents were aware of the city's environmental policies, such as the plastic ban and green spaces. Tourists also noted visible sustainability features like waste segregation bins, nature trails, and eco-friendly accommodations. Satisfaction with these features was positively correlated ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$) with overall experience ratings. These findings align with the work of Dodds and Joppe (2005), who highlight that visible eco-practices contribute to tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

In terms of institutional implementation, key informant interviews revealed that Davao City's local government has played a critical role in initiating and funding eco-friendly programs. Respondents cited the enforcement of environmental ordinances and partnerships with NGOs as instrumental in sustaining these efforts. However, some initiatives lack continuity due to changing political priorities and budget constraints. This mirrors findings by Bramwell and Lane (2011), who argue that sustainable tourism initiatives require consistent policy support and cross-sectoral coordination.

Community engagement is a vital component of the city's eco-tourism strategy. Initiatives like the Panunod cultural heritage tours and barangay-led eco-guides have helped strengthen local participation. Interviews with community leaders emphasized the value of inclusive planning and benefit-sharing mechanisms. However, concerns were raised regarding insufficient training and lack of access to tourism markets, echoing the challenges identified by Scheyvens (1999) regarding empowerment in community-based tourism models.

The analysis also uncovered several persistent barriers. While tourists and stakeholders appreciated the intent behind the initiatives, there were recurring issues related to infrastructure maintenance, insufficient eco-tourism promotion, and limited integration with regional tourism circuits. Moreover, some projects were described as "tokenistic," implemented for compliance rather than impact. These limitations are consistent with those noted by Gössling and Hall (2006), who critique the superficial adoption of eco-tourism frameworks in developing countries.

Overall, the data suggest that Davao City's eco-tourism initiatives have created meaningful environmental and social impacts, yet greater alignment between policy, community capacity, and market access is needed. The results confirm that a systems-based approach, involving all stakeholders and sustained over time, is crucial to achieving long-term sustainability in urban tourism contexts.

V. Conclusion

This study set out to assess the eco-friendly initiatives implemented in Davao City and examine their impact on sustainable tourism development. The findings underscore the city's progress in promoting environmental consciousness through robust waste management policies, community-based tourism projects, and green infrastructure investments. The data revealed that tourists are generally aware of these initiatives and consider them integral to their positive travel experiences. Likewise, local stakeholders acknowledge the significant role of policy frameworks and inter-agency cooperation in sustaining eco-tourism efforts.

Despite these advances, several systemic challenges remain. These include inconsistent policy enforcement, limited infrastructure capacity, funding constraints, and gaps in community training and empowerment. Furthermore, the superficial implementation of some programs suggests a need for stronger monitoring mechanisms and performance indicators. Addressing these limitations will be critical to ensure that Davao City's eco-tourism strategy evolves beyond compliance into a truly transformative framework.

To enhance long-term sustainability, the study recommends the institutionalization of multi-stakeholder platforms for collaborative planning, expansion of education campaigns to build environmental literacy, and the development of incentive schemes for businesses that adopt eco-friendly practices. Moreover, it is essential to connect local initiatives with national tourism circuits and global eco-tourism networks to attract responsible tourists and foster knowledge exchange.

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In conclusion, Davao City exemplifies a promising model of urban eco-tourism in the Philippine context. While challenges persist, its integrated approach—grounded in environmental governance, community engagement, and sustainable development—offers valuable lessons for other localities. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts, the role of digital technologies in promoting eco-tourism, and comparative assessments with other ASEAN cities to deepen the discourse on urban sustainability and tourism.

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