

# **STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTION ON THE IMPACT OF DONSOL'S BUTANDING (WHALE SHARK) ECOTOURISM PROJECT: POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND HUMAN SECURITY<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years the importance of ecotourism and sustainable development has come to the fore. The whale shark ecotourism phenomenon in Donsol is worth exploring on the grounds that the Philippines consider tourism as an important industry. This premise served as the focus of the study. Donsol is located in the northeastern part of the Province of Sorsogon. Large numbers of whale sharks can be found off its shores feeding on planktons and provided tourists with interaction opportunities as it is completely harmless. From a simple fishing village Donsol has gained renowned because of a successful ecotourism project in place since 1998. Donsol is situated in a region where social, political and economic situations conspire to paint a picture of underdevelopment. The study was exploratory in nature and served as research laboratory for the students enrolled in a course in Field Research. Data from previous studies as far as from 2005 were utilized as well as those currently gathered by the research class under the direction of the professor. Community immersions, focus group discussions, interviews and observations were employed in data gathering. Secondary materials from previous researches and official documents supplied additional information. The study sought the stakeholders' opinion and attitude about the impact of the ecotourism, on conservation and threats to sustainability. The study revealed that the stakeholders considered the ecotourism project in positive light and that it has brought economic benefits for them. Although the respondents do not believe that the increasing numbers of tourists flocking to Donsol will affect the social balance there is however the apprehension among the few that in the future socially disruptive practices may disturb the social balance. The study also found out that there are enough laws and local ordinances that will protect the habitat of the Whale Sharks. The changing political landscape and the possible withdrawal of support received from outside organizations are considered major challenges to the sustainability of the program. Indeed this ecotourism project if it proves sustainable through time can become a showcase of sound environmental management that will promote and enhance human security and promotes sustainable development.

*Keywords: sustainable development, sustainable ecotourism, human security, eco-governance*

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## **Introduction and Background of the Study**

Tourism is considered an important industry in the Philippines. It is one of several strategies identified to alleviate poverty. This is because the Philippines is economically poor but rich in natural resources (Torge 2007). Hence putting to use the rich ecological landscape of the country through the promotion of tourism will provide economic benefits to the country through increased revenues and job opportunities for its people. Lacking in capital outlays and industrial assets, developing countries often has no other option but to utilize what is most accessible form of investment, the natural resources. The vast natural resources of the country offer manifold potentials for development. From this scenario the need for sound eco-governance becomes a necessary component for the promotion of sustainability and human security. Maintaining the delicate ecological balance is a challenge for the government because sound eco-governance entails not only conservation activities but a whole gamut of interrelated aspects of legislation, administration and regulatory practices. A sustainable development is the kind of development that will guarantee a satisfactory level of standard of living for the present generation, as well as ensuring the same for future generations to come, while at the same time preserving the integrity of the ecosystem. Poor eco-governance and management will certainly have its negative and irreversible consequences.

The Bicol Region where Donsol is located is a depressed and poor region but is rich in natural resources. Its flora and fauna are diverse and it has mineral deposits. But because of its current economic situation, poverty alleviation has become an overarching goal for its development plan. The limited time frame of the regional development framework (2005-2010) exerts considerable pressure on local government officials to achieve the goals. The poverty alleviation approaches employed especially in agriculture and mining have problems related to sustainability (Monge, Bismonte, Gonzales and Cabico). Furthermore it was said that "...upon careful examination of the strategies for poverty alleviation, there are significant components that will not really lead to sustainable development. Agriculture and mining are definitely problematic." There is a strong indication that poverty and environmental degradation are interrelated.

Because of the economic situation of the region and of the desire of the local government to address the issues of poverty, the strategies cited by Monge, et. Al. has found a niche in the economic activities of the region. The ever-growing need to promote human security has become more paramount and served as umbrella for all other advocacies. The concept of human security and sustainable development has become the central concept setting the tone of the study. The ecotourism in Donsol is just one typology or approach to promote sustainable development, human security and environmental conservation. It is now widely believed that economic development can be combined with environmental conservation. Furthermore Development to be sustainable will have to consider not only the present generation but must take into consideration future generations (Wikipedia).



*The municipal government of Donsol together with the Sorsogon Provincial Tourism Council and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) were instrumental in the introduction of the Community-based Ecotourism in Donsol.*

Development is a post World War II phenomenon resulting from the decolonization policies of the United Nations. The modernist concept of development entails the ability of humankind to exploit and manipulate its environment to ensure that daily needs and wants are addressed. It was also widely held that development, just like any field of scientific endeavor follows a predictable pattern. This point of view is contradicted by the post modern approach which sees harmony as the antidote for domination. One literature on *Eco-feminism and Ecotourism* as presented by Torge stated that there is a parallel between the two concepts mentioned above. That the subjugation of nature is similar to that of the subjugation of women. From a modernist standpoint nature stands as an object to be manipulated and controlled in order to bring about the fulfillment of the human objectives. While the post modern critique would state the humans just like the rest of the elements in nature are part and parcel of the totality of this cosmos and hence have the obligation, not to manipulate, but to cooperate and harmonize with the rest of the created elements.

Ecotourism is a recent development in the field of tourism. Torge in a research paper considered ecotourism as part of the overarching concept of *nature-associated tourism*. Environmentally sustainable tourism and nature-based tourism being the first and second type of nature associated tourism respectively. Ecotourism was considered as the third. Ecotourism presupposes not only sustainability and nature-based but it assumes that the tourist as well as the host of the tourism activity are well aware of the need to conserve and preserve the environment. Thus there is the presupposition that the tourist is educated enough as to the purpose of tourism. Ecotourism is an evolving term. Many literatures have cited that the concept of ecotourism was first articulated by Hector

Ceballos-Lascurain. Ceballos – Lascurain described ecotourism as “tourism where the attitude of the traveler is as important as the activity. He advocated a more holistic approach, instead of the conventional approach. By holistic approach, as it is meant that the ecotourist has to be sensitive to several issues behind and besides nature itself, such as culture, aesthetics.” (Hanneberg as quoted by Torge). Ecotourism is also a search for a model that would balance the need for economic development, equitable distribution of benefits and at the same time striking at the core, the need for conservation. It was also stated by Kilcollins that ecotourism is an attempt to portray tourism as a viable tool for sustainability. Furthermore it was cited that ecotourism can be an alternative type of tourism in contrast with the consumptive developmental activities like mining and the exploitation of forests. Ecotourism aims to provide economic benefits for the members of the host community but at the same time aims to preserve the integrity of the environment, taking into consideration the welfare of future generations.

Furthermore the concepts of ecotourism as a form of sustainable tourism can be gleaned from various international instruments and declarations. The earliest citation was by the *UN Conference on Human Environment, Stockholm, 1972*, then there was too the Brundtland Commission of 1987, the Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, 2002, World Conference on Sustainable Tourism, Lanzarote 1995 and the Agenda 21 for Travel and Tourism Industry (As cited by Cruz). The Philippine Tourism also had its Master Plan which becomes one of the bases for the Donsol Ecotourism project. A more detailed discussion of Philippine Policies on sustainable tourism can be read from the work of Cruz entitled: “Towards Sustainable Tourism Development in the Philippines and Other ASEAN Countries”.

The locale of the study was the community-based ecotourism project in Donsol, a municipality located in the north-western part of Sorsogon Province, approximately 500 kilometers from Metro Manila. Farming, fishing and livestock raising are the main source of income. Although it was cited in some sources that the population growth in Donsol is faster compared to others, there are also reports that young people and people of working age whenever there is opportunity move temporarily to urban centers in order to work on jobs and be able to send money back home. Donsol can be reached by land transport. Tourists usually transit from Legazpi City towards the municipality of Donsol. Transportation is by Land usually by Jeepney and taxi vans. There is a reported presence of communist insurgents, but the rebels do not interfere with the tourism activity. There has not been any report of harassment or untoward incident arising from the conflict between the government and the rebels.

The community based ecotourism in Donsol had its beginning in 1988 when the WWF and the Sorsogon Provincial Tourism Council conducted studies as to the possibility of promoting a whale shark ecotourism project (Tolosa and Padilla). Donsol was known to have one of the worlds highest density of whale sharks (Alava, 2000 as cited in Tolosa & Padilla). Legal provisions both national and local were enacted to protect the area and its greatest wealth, the whale sharks. The development of the ecotourism project in Donsol underwent a process of development. First the studies identified the different stakeholders and what will be their participation in the project.

An Ecotourism Plan was also developed through workshops. A highly specialized group of people such as the Butanding Interaction Officers were trained and coupled with the distribution of fliers and other educational information in order to help tourists and the locals work together towards conservation. A municipal tourism office was created to coordinate the tourism activities and to facilitate whatever was necessary. A more detailed report and narrative of the community-based ecotourism in Donsol can be read from the paper of Tolosa and Padilla, entitled: *Towards a Business Plan for Donsol Community Based Ecotourism and Coastal Resources Management Project*.

### **Objectives of the Study**

Several studies have been undertaken to provide a description of the Donsol's Ecotourism project. This study does not seek to duplicate the previous studies. This study is exploratory and sought to describe the stakeholders' perception of the impact of the Butanding (Whale Shark) ecotourism project in Donsol. It is not however, the aim of the study to provide a strict measure of the impact but rather from a stakeholders perspective since the stakeholders are the one who has a direct interest and are affected by whatever is decided upon relating to the ecotourism project. The subjects of the study were asked as to how they perceived the influx of tourists, the adequacy of the facilities, whether the tourism activity in Donsol has affected or changed their lives and as to whether it has improved their sources of income. Aside from these the subjects were also asked to relate what social changes are evident as a result of the ecotourism activity.

### **Methods**

This study is considered a sequel to the others undertaken by the Department of Peace Studies in relation to Human Security, Sustainable Development and Sustainable Ecotourism. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed by the study. Previous studies were also employed as sources of both primary and secondary data. The students enrolled in the field research class and those that were required to do field work served as interviewers, collators and researchers. A community field immersion activity was organized to realize the objectives of the study. The data was also presented to the stakeholders for comments and verifications. Interview and observation guides were formulated to facilitate the data gathering procedure. Before undertaking the data gathering process the students were trained on the methodologies like conducting observations, interviews, summarizing notes and synthesizing qualitative data. Simulation activities were undertaken to ensure that the researchers and study leaders have mastered the data gathering techniques. The researchers were also briefed on the ethics that governed field research. One limitation of the study was that it did not include the indirect recipients of the community-based ecotourism project. Although in one sense they can also be considered as stakeholders. Time constraints and plans for expanding this study provided positive expectation that future investigations can be done along this line.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The stakeholders' perception about the impact of the ecotourism project in Donsol, Sorsogon became the basis for this study's analysis. Stakeholder for the purposes of this study was defined as those... "Significantly affecting or affected by someone else's decision-making activity." (Nuheimer 2005). The description for each of the stakeholders are summarized as follows:

**The Local Government Officials.** One of the main stakeholders of the community-based ecotourism project in Donsol are the government officials. The Local Government of Donsol together with the Provincial Government and with the assistance of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) are the main initiators of the community – based ecotourism project in Donsol. Owing to their elective office they possess the administrative oversight and legislative powers on which the success and future of the project depends. In this study "Local Government Officials" refers to the elected officials of the Municipality as well as the appointed officials who have direct hand in the community-based ecotourism project.

Majority of the respondents observed the increased influx of tourists in Donsol. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of the local government officials interviewed expressed this perception. On the otherhand forty-eight percent of the respondents perceived that the facilities in Donsol are inadequate to accommodate the number of tourists coming to Donsol. The perception that there is an increasing number of tourist influx to Sorsogon is corroborate by existing data coming from the Municipal Tourism Office of Donsol. The tourism authority in Donsol as well as the municipal officials has encouraged homeowners to open their homes to guests for a fee. This move is supportive of the very core concept of ecotourism which is to provide employment opportunities to the locals. This is in contrast to the idea of building huge hotels which might encourage mass tourism. In recent years however there was an observed increased in number of persons investing in building tourists facilities to cater to this need. These facilities offer basic amenities. Although there are bars but it is not as sophisticated if compared to those found in urban centers. This is because most of the tourists come to Donsol for the sole purpose of whale shark interaction. Beyond these the tourist has no other interest. After the interaction experience most of them move on to larger urban centers such as Legazpi City that has more to offer to the tourists other than whale shark interaction. As for the employment opportunities, 94.73% of the respondents perceived that the ecotourism project generates employment for the locals. Since the project implementation in 1998 this ecotourism project has provided supplemental income to fishermen and boat operators. The supplementary benefit generated from participation in this project has contributed to a marked improvement in the standard of living. As indicated by the beneficiaries ability to improve the quality of their housing and their ability to send their children to school. The supplementary income derived from this ecotourism activity is compensatory for the restriction imposed by law on their fishing activities as a result of protecting the habitat of the whale sharks. Other direct beneficiaries of this ecotourism project are the resort owners, shopkeepers and those who sell food and toiletries. Indirect

beneficiaries of this project are the residents who are not directly involved in the project and yet benefited from the improvement of the infrastructure and the security provided for by the tourism police.

The respondents were also asked how the ecotourism activity helped improved the quality of their lives. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the respondents believed that the ecotourism project has helped improved the quality of life of the Donsolons. The durable housing materials, the water system, the improvement of roads and bridges are some of the indicators that the quality of life is improving. In the overall assessment on the impact of ecotourism, 63.15% said that the effect of the ecotourism was positive.

The LGU Officials as stakeholders are important because it is in their hands that the future success and sustainability of this project hinges. Laws and ordinances to protect the habitat of the whale sharks are good enough. Furthermore the WWF and other conservationists have provided technical assistance to ensure the sustainability of the project and have provided enabling programs for the LGU and other stakeholders. The eventual departure of the WWF from Donsol should not be construed as a threat to the sustainability of the project but should be looked upon as a challenge for the LGU and the other stakeholders. The Butanding as the whale sharks are known to the Donsolanons have coexisted with the people of Donsol for sometime. Previously the Butanding were perceived by the fishermen as pests who thread and break their nets. While commercial fishers hunted the Butanding for their meat and fins. Today with the implementation of the community-based ecotourism project the Butanding has found an ally among the Donsolanons.

**Members of the Boat Operators Association (BOA).** Whale shark interaction is serviced by individual outriggers. The Local Government of Donsol with the help of WWF organized the operators of these outrigger boats. The owners and members of this operators association provide services to tourists. The BOA is an important stakeholder in this ecotourism project. The BOA members provide vital services to the tourists in Donsol. Seventy percent (70%) of these are fishermen before their involvement in the ecotourism project while the rest were laborers or self-employed. The study interviewed thirty members of the BOA. Majority of those interviewed were married. They had an average of five children for each family. Their monthly income ranges from one-thousand to three thousand pesos monthly. However it is difficult to determine the exact amount of income as it varies from time to time. During peak season they could earn as much while on lean months they have to engage in other forms of occupation to augment their income. However, the owners of the outrigger could earn as much as ten thousand to twenty thousand pesos per month during peak season. All the respondents were of the idea that the government as well private investors should invest in the building of tourist facilities that would cater to the needs of the tourists. Moreover, the BOA members were also of the perception that the ecotourism project in Donsol provides job opportunities for locals.



*The researchers together with the staff of WWF-Donsol, Sorsogon on an interview visit to the WWF field office.*

Both the direct beneficiaries and the indirect beneficiaries can be provided with the opportunity to be employed. The increasing number of resorts and accommodation facilities will certainly be an opportunity for the locals to find employment. Ninety-nine percent of the respondents said that their involvement in the project has done something positive to contribute to the improvement of their lives. The respondents expressed fear and apprehension that if at any rate the ecotourism project would fail or come to an end then it will negatively impact on the quality of their lives. Most admit that their involvement in the project increased their income and their buying power. The appearance of concrete housing is an indication of a good life. The improvement of the infrastructure was considered as indicators of an improved life. When asked as to whether the influx of tourists will impact on the lifestyle and outlook of the youth, the respondents were ambivalent in their replies. They expressed the idea that perhaps the attitude of the youths towards life may change or it may not depending on the degree of influence brought about by tourism. As for prostitution and other related vices that are common in tourist centers, the respondents expressed little apprehension that this would ever happen. They expressed confidence that the tourism police will do their job of preventing illegal activities. The itinerant nature of the tourists would likely discourage the promotion of prostitution. Tourists stay in Donsol for a day or couple of days. Thus the short stay spent by the regular tourists will not result in prostitution. The respondents did not entertain any idea that prostitution will become a phenomenon in Donsol just like in areas where mass tourism is promoted. The members of the BOA suggested that the tourism office of Donsol should promote a more comprehensive instruction to the tourists regarding whale sharks and the interaction activity so that tourists will behave predictably while undertaking interaction activities. Furthermore the respondents also expressed that there is a need for the interaction officers to undergo more training so that the safety of tourists can be ensured and that the welfare of the whale shark are also protected. Whale

sharks are often sensitive due to the fact that they have a long maturation process. Although these sharks are completely harmless as far as humans are concerned. These, however may develop avoidance behavior that will affect the numbers of whale sharks feeding on the resources provided for by the shores of Donsol. The subjects of the interview also suggested that they should undertake more intensive trainings on the proper handling of passengers, tourists and on how to maintain their outrigger boats. The members of the BOA expressed further the need for residents to be educated about the importance of ecotourism and conservation. The residents should be made aware of the need to treat tourists with respect and hospitality. The residents should further be informed on the importance of a balance ecosystem from which the whale sharks and other creatures off the waters of Donsol lived. Whale sharks are highly migratory animals; they seek out the warm waters of the tropics to feed and to mate. But once their needs are no longer met by a particular location, they will move again to other places. The lack of information dissemination and inconsistency in doing so were considered by the BOA members as one major threat to the well being of the community-based ecotourism project in Donsol. Before undertaking interaction activities tourist needs to be instructed thoroughly on how to interact with the whale sharks. The video slides shown on TV before every interaction activity is undertaken is not enough. The instruction should be made more personal and interactive. Furthermore there is also the perceived need to ensure transparency and accountability in the management of the ecotourism project. Regulations governing interaction activities should be implemented consistently. Because some BIOs and BOA members violates some of the rules specified on how to undertake interaction activities.

**Resort Owners and Operators.** The resort owners and operators are primary stakeholders of the ecotourism project since they provide primary services to the tourist. Donsol is rather located in a remote area of Sorsogon Province. Prior to the implementation of the ecotourism project, Donsol was a remote town, where people's lives were simple and earn their living through fishing and farming. Economic opportunities are rare hence most young people and young adults become temporary migrants to urban centers in the Philippines in order to work and be able to send money back home. While the luckier ones go abroad to work and send their salary remittances to families back home. But since the start of the establishment of the ecotourism project in the late 90s coupled with active marketing strategy, the locality has witnessed the steady influx of tourists both local and abroad. Although there is no empirical data to prove that the ecotourism project has helped diminish the temporary migrant activity of the population and that no conclusion can be given on this regard, it must be admitted that somehow this project has helped the locals improved their means of income. Initially the local government in order to respond to the need to accommodate the tourists has encouraged residents to open their homes as homestead for tourists. This strategy answered the need temporarily and provided a sort of income to the residents making them also a stakeholder in the project. But as time goes on the homesteading become inadequate and created a need which was readily filled in by those who invests in the resort business. To date there are several resorts with basic amenities located in Donsol. Some of these resort owners try to provide basic accommodation and entertainment to tourists. The resort owners identified most of their guests as foreign tourists and there is

increasing number of visitors during the feeding season. The aggressive marketing/promotion of this ecotourism activity has caught the attention of visitors from different places abroad. This is because interaction experience in Donsol is cheaper compared with those in other places that offer the same experience with whale sharks such as in Australia. In Donsol a tourist will spend around 50 USD for an interaction experience (Quiros 2007). Aside from these Donsol has the highest density of whale sharks during feeding season. The respondents perceived that the ecotourism project has provided jobs to some. The paved roads, street lights, running water are some form of benefits enjoyed by indirect stakeholders. This is because a large portion of the income of these tourism activities goes to the coffers of the municipal government. However there are perceptions that these development infrastructures were late in coming. Sometimes the implementation of infrastructures and other projects may even be the subject of partisan debates and discussions. The subjects also believed that the ecotourism activity has provided business opportunities for entrepreneurs. Just like the rest with similar business interests in Donsol, the departure of the whale sharks or its diminishing numbers were considered threat to the well being of the project. Almost every one of the respondents perceived that the ecotourism project has somewhat contributed to the enhancement of the stakeholders quality of life. They also believe that education is an important investment that parents and families should provide for their children. The respondents expressed apprehension about the changes that this ecotourism project will bring to the youth as they interact with tourists on a regular basis. However, the space of time and length of interaction with tourists will determine whether these apprehensions are founded or unfounded. The ill effects of mass tourism such as the spread of vice and prostitution are still not evident in the locality as there are no establishments or groups of people that caters to this kind of need. But the respondents expressed the apprehension that there is the possibility that this could happen in the future. The subjects of the study also observed that NGOs like the WWF are very active in promoting conservation activities. The LGU was not perceived as such. But the need was expressed that conservation education should be promoted. They are aware though that there are on-going conservation education for BOA and BIOs. Furthermore the increase in income provided by jobs generated by tourism has the capacity to improve the lives of the members of the community.

**Small Business Entrepreneurs.** The small business entrepreneurs are also stakeholders in this ecotourism project. Since their means of livelihood is bolstered by the presence of tourists. The small entrepreneur referred to in this paper are persons that operates the souvenir shops, small restaurants, those that sell stuffs and toiletries as well as itinerant vendors of souvenir crafts. The researchers interviewed thirty small business entrepreneurs. Most of them were married, many of whom sell food items and toiletries, while a good number of others sell souvenir items like pendants, t-shirts, crafts symbolizing or featuring the whale sharks of Donsol. Sharing the same perception as the other groups of respondents the small business entrepreneurs perceived that there is an increasing number of tourist influx to Donsol. More than half of them perceived that the tourist facilities in Donsol are not sufficient to meet the need. However a few express the idea that perhaps more has to be done in order to accommodate the growing number of tourists. The respondents perceived that ecotourism contributed to the positive economic

prospects of the small business entrepreneurs. The increasing number of small shop operators is noticeable. Many of the subjects held to the idea that the government should encouraged investments in building hotels and accommodation facilities. Furthermore the small entrepreneurs perceived that ecotourism has provided the locals of Donsol with job opportunities. Some of these job opportunities include utility workers who work in the resorts and lodging houses, small craft production, workers in restaurants, as well as interaction officers and boat operators. The ecotourism activity has improved their income capacity. The greatest fear expressed by the subjects was that someday the ecotourism activity will come to an end. They expressed fear that if the Butanding will no longer frequent the waters of Donsol to feed then that would signal the end of the benefits they are now enjoying. The subjects also perceived that this tourism has provided their family additional income and that this ecotourism activity has brought them an improved awareness of the importance of conserving the natural resources. For the meantime there is the perception that the added income has made their lives a little bit more comfortable than it use to be. This is because with the added income there is also the increased ability to purchase and the ability to satisfy their basic needs and wants. The influx of tourists in Donsol has ushered in a sense of “modernity” in the once backwater community. Not only in terms of economics but also the attitude of the youth is changing as they encounter and interact with tourists. Tourists brings in with them their culture, outlook and way of life. These can have an impact on the outlook of the youth. The consumerist values could find their way into the mentality of the youth. The subjects were positive in the perception that there is enough conservation activity going on. They recognized the WWF as having a major role in the promotion of the conservation activity. The subjects strongly expressed the idea that there is a need to educate people, both locals and tourists about conservation and the importance of preserving the natural habitat of the whale sharks. Most respondents perceived that lack of information dissemination about conservation could be a major threat to the wellbeing of the habitat of the whale sharks.

### **Discussion / Conclusion**

The community based-ecotourism project in Donsol by the LGU and the WWF is a showcase for ecotourism, which at the moment is still undergoing a conceptual evolutionary development. Hence there is room for incorporating concepts that will cross lines with other developmental concepts like sustainability and human security. This study does not seek to duplicate the existing researches on this topic but serves to compliment and confirm the findings of said researches. Donsol’s community-based



*One of the ancestral houses in Donsol opened for homesteading of tourists. The Local Government of Donsol has encouraged homeowners to open their homes to tourists and transients in order to meet the demand for accommodation of the ever-growing number of tourists visiting Donsol.*

ecotourism project serves as an example of a best practice. There have been studies and literature about the ecotourism in Donsol since 1998. One of the most comprehensive is the study submitted by Tolosa and Padilla to the WWF-Donsol Community – based Ecotourism Project. It provided an analysis of the economic and social benefit derived from the project and looked into the sustainability of the same. Another study which analyzed the Donsol community-based ecotourism project was the research undertaken by Torge which sought to provide a theoretical paradigm to understand the phenomenon and the sustainability of the eco-tourism project. And another highly informative literature is the study undertaken by Quiros. The development of conservation values are needed only if the stakeholders realize that they are part of the phenomenon and thus cooperation is needed. That these stakeholders should be there not to manipulate or control but to cooperate and promote harmony in the ecosystem. Quiros also made a study on the whale shark ecotourism in Donsol, Philippines and Placencia, Belize. Sustainability and the socio-economic aspects of ecotourism were discussed.

The stakeholders identified by the study perceived that economically the project has helped uplift their standard of living. And keeping the project community-based is the only option that will make it sustainable. There is much expectation and to some extent the whale shark ecotourism project in Donsol has made the Donsolanons proud because it placed their once obscure village into the map of the world. The paved road and other infrastructures present plus the presence of the tourism police provided some form of benefits to the residents of Donsol. Most of the people of Donsol are subsistence farmers and fishers. Building farm to market roads would truly provide an incentive for agricultural production. However the slow paced by which these economic benefits are

translated into public services can provide a point for negative criticism. It does appear that some people do not clearly understand the meaning of ecotourism. This is evident in the subjects' perception and expectation that in the future tourists would come in more in droves and will increase. Some even spoke of providing world class amenities to tourists. However this expectations are somewhat tempered by the apprehension that perhaps the whale sharks may disappear and thus Donsol will also loose its vital and new found ecotourism industry. Whale sharks are migratory; they frequent tropical waters that contain planktons which serve as the staple food of these animals. The challenge lies in educating people about conservation. The biodiversity found in the coasts of Donsol and adjacent areas are the source of the staple of these animals. Once these sources of food are gone the whale sharks will again be looking for other places to feed. Hence, while this is something to be considered seriously, the LGU officials and other concerned bodies should take the utmost care to wisely put to use the income derived out of this ecotourism project in order to maximize the benefit for the community. Investing these incomes to projects that will help the Donsolanons improve their crafts, industries and agriculture will be a form of good governance.

As for the social and cultural impact of the ecotourism project several literatures have cited the impact of tourism to the local populace. The tourists who visits a locality does not only bring in cash but they also bring and leave with them bits of cultural influences. There was the apprehension that perhaps gambling or prostitution commonly associated with mass tourism may also appear in Donsol as the volume of tourists increase. But this apprehension is allayed by the fact that there is only one reason why tourists come to Donsol, and that is to experience interaction with the whale sharks. Other than this motive the tourist won't stay longer in Donsol. After undergoing a whale shark encounter the tourists would move on to urban tourists' center. In this case Legazpi City, the capital of Albay Province becomes a transit point because the airport is located there and that the city has more to offer in terms of leisure and recreation than Donsol. Thus at the moment there is no evidence to show that these forms of negative influences are present. The subjects of the interviews also expressed vehemence at the idea or suggestion that perhaps these negative influences will come to Donsol.

Thus, if conservation issues are to be brought to the fore, there is a need to provide a more coherent conceptual framework for the management of the community-based ecotourism project in Donsol. Economic considerations should not the only main consideration but also the education of the stakeholders and the local people regarding the importance of conservation. The "domination" culture has characterized many developmental activities in the region raging from mining to agriculture and on tourism. The un-sustainability of some of these activities has already been noted by other authors. Hence there is the need to provide a strong program on educating the stakeholders. The need to generate income will always remain a legitimate aspiration but it should be tempered by a serious consideration of the impact of these activities. Development cannot be measured solely on material assets but also by other things such as the quality of the ecosystem and in terms of culture and values. After all whether to say that the impact of this ecotourism is negative or positive cannot be assessed at this moment. There are different typologies of development assessment that can be used in the context

of sustainability and human security. But the community-based ecotourism project in Donsol may at this stage serve as a form of best practice in community-based ecotourism that seeks to preserve the present, improve the quality of its people and at the same time ensures the conservation of the wealth of nature for the future generations to come. There is no doubt that this project has poured in additional income for the municipality. For this reason there is the need to create a clear program on how to convert these incomes into assets that will assure the economic development of the locality and the creation of alternative livelihood opportunities that can outlive the ecotourism project. Changes in political leadership and sometimes partisan politics may hamper or adversely affect the operation of the project, but there is a need for political leaders and other non-political leaders to exert effort to remove partisan considerations in the operation of the project.

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