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Research Article

Indigenous Tourism in Nueva Ecija: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous tourism played an essential role to help build local and national economy. It served as the spine of every municipality which hold attracting tourism sites. Hence, indigenous tourism as emerging tourism attraction also held a frontier of economic power that help boost local economy. It was concluded that ICCs/IPs encountered certain challenges as to cultural sensitivity, economic stability and environmental preservation which hampered the continued development of indigenous tourism. Meanwhile, the results also showed that in spite of these challenges, opportunities were also seen in which, indigenous tourism provided wider avenues for the development of ICCs/IPs way of living through creation of more employment and business opportunities which helped them generate more income to meet their needs. Conclusively, indigenous tourism in the province empowered ICCs/IPs cultural, environmental and economic opportunities.

Keywords: *Cultural, Environmental, Economic, ICCs/IPs/Nueva Ecija, Indigenous tourism*

Introduction

Consistent development of local tourism is Nueva Ecija has been revitalized for more than three (3) years already after the influx of Covid-19 pandemic. Being part of the province pre-colonial and colonial past, natural tourist destinations are one of its vital organs in the development of the province's tourism sector. It serves as the bloodline of any tourism industry among provinces in the Philippines. Along this line, indigenous tourism in the Philippines is a growing industry which offers visitors a unique ambiance and glimpse into the country's diverse culture and traditions while it also

embraces the environmental situations of Indigenous Peoples as they are recognized as the preservers of the habitats. Substantially, there are many indigenous communities in the province that offer unique experiences which include environmental tourism apart from their cultural heritage.

In the words of Padaen and Kim (2019) as they explored the challenges of indigenous tourism in the Cordillera region which revealed that indigenous tourism had a positive impact on the livelihoods of indigenous communities. Further, the study also stressed that Indigenous People exerted beyond means and

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efforts to preserve and promote their cultural heritage which also include environmental tourism. Along this line, digital natives primarily concerns on the development of technology and innovation which resurfaced the social scenes meanwhile, the condition by which Indigenous People in Nueva Ecija face different perspective. They are continually thriving to preserve and promote their local tourism in which their norms and cultural traditions have entrusted to their capacities as preservers of the environment. Most indigenous tourisms in Nueva Ecija have not yet completely known by the public but they are presently facing different challenges as to the preservation and promotion of the latter. Indigenous tourism has become an increasingly popular way for travelers to experience the unique cultures and traditions of the Philippines. The country is home to many indigenous communities, each with their own distinct way of life. These communities often live in remote areas and have historically faced marginalization and discrimination (Aguila and Ragot, 2019). However, tourism can provide them with an opportunity to showcase their traditions and generate income. One of the most popular destinations for indigenous tourism in the Philippines is the Cordillera region. This area is home to several indigenous groups, including the Igorot people. The Igorot are known for their distinctive clothing, which includes woven fabrics and intricate beadwork. Visitors to the region can learn about traditional farming practices, try local cuisine, and participate in cultural activities such as dance performances.

This study aimed to describe and examine the challenges and opportunities encountered by Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous People in the preservation and promotion of indigenous tourism industry in the province. Specifically, it aimed to:

1. describe the current situation of ICCs/IPs in the province as to geographical conditions, ancestral domains and ancestral lands
2. describe indigenous tourism as to cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and economic stability
3. determine the challenges encountered by ICCs/IPs in the promotion and preservation of indigenous tourism as to access to lands and resources, cultural sensitivity, economic stability and environmental preservation

Time and Place of the Study

The conduct of the study covered from June 2023 to December 2023 among selected Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous People in the province of Nueva Ecija.

Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study focused in the description and examination of the challenges and opportunities encountered by ICCs/IPs in the preservation and promotion of indigenous tourism industry in the province of Nueva Ecija. The study was limited to the description ICCs/IPs current situation as to geographical conditions, ancestral domains and ancestral lands. Further, the study was limited to the description of indigenous tourism as to cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and economic stability. On the other hand, the study was also limited in the determination of the challenges encountered by ICCs/IPs in the promotion and preservation of indigenous tourism as to access of lands and resources, cultural sensitivity, economic stability and environmental preservation.

Research Methods

This study utilized descriptive research in order to describe the challenges and opportunities encountered by ICCs/IPs in the promotion and preservation of indigenous tourism industry in the province of Nueva Ecija. The study utilized researcher-made survey questionnaire which was tested and obtained a Cronbach alpha result of .783 that verbally described as "Acceptable." Apparently, the survey-questionnaire contained indicators relative to the challenges and opportunities encountered by ICCs/IPs in the promotion and preservation of indigenous tourism industry.

Respondents

Participation of sixty (60) Indigenous people who were preserving and taking care of indigenous tourist attractions in the province will be purposively drawn by the researcher. As such, there were fifteen (15) respondents from the Kalanguya Tribe who protects and promotes the Spanish trail and Aloha Falls in the Municipality of Caranglan. Meanwhile, there were fifteen (15) respondents from Dumagat

Tribe in Palayan City who promote and protect their Indigenous tourist attraction named Bacao Falls. Apparently, there were fifteen (15) respondents from Agua-Dumagat Tribe in the Municipality of General Tinio who promote and protects the Minalungao National Park. And, there were fifteen (15) respondents from Bago and Kankana-ey Tribe from Palayan City who help promote and protect Aulo Dam constituting Aulo reserves in the City.

Table 1. Current Situation of ICCs/IPs in the Province of Nueva Ecija

Aspect	Mean Score	Verbal Interpretation
Presence of suitable geographical conditions	4.47	Strongly Agree
Ancestral Domains	4.50	Strongly Agree
Ancestral Lands	4.30	Strongly Agree
Grand Mean	4.42	Strongly Agree

Presence of Suitable Geographical Conditions. Based from the findings, ICCs/IPs strongly agreed that access to clean and potable water was obtained by the respondents which gave them opportunities to cultivate healthy crops, produce well-nourished agricultural products most especially in times of dry season and drought. Along this premise, they would be able to sustain their living through vegetable plantations while ensuring that their health and safety were protected by drinking clean and potable water. In addition, suitable geographical conditions favored ICCs/IPs way of living since with the presence of suitable geographical conditions, they were able to enjoy them by means of having food resource as well as sell of freshly harvested fruits and vegetables.

Ancestral Domains. Based from the findings, ICCs/IPs strongly agreed that their ancestral lands/domains were dominantly covered with thick canopy of trees which also showed that the area held a high level of forest

vegetation and potential biodiversity. Apparently, the respondents also agreed that their ancestral lands/domains were characterized by towering trees stretching towards the sky, the branches were intertwining to form a dense canopy of trees that filters sunlight which also caused consistent cold breeze especially in the months of November to February.

Ancestral Lands. Based from the findings, ICCs/IPs strongly forest resources the respondents were able to consume and utilize the fruits of the trees of different kinds whether they reserve them for food consumption or sell the same to their neighboring towns. Apparently, their means and methods of utilizing their natural resources present on their ancestral lands provided wider opportunities for them to elevate their way of living in the form of establishment of small-scale business that sell harvested fruits and vegetables as well as generate income from tourism aspect since their lands held scenic views that mainly attracted tourists.

Table 2. Indigenous Tourism

Aspect	Mean Score	Verbal Interpretation
Cultural Preservation	4.42	Strongly Agree
Environmental Conservation	4.47	Strongly Agree
Economic Stability.	4.44	Strongly Agree
Grand Mean	4.44	Strongly Agree

Cultural Preservation. Based from the findings, ICCs/IPs strongly agreed that their customs and practices remained culturally intact in which they highly value their skills and potentials while significantly use their natural environment as one of the key resources for survival. These findings are supported in the study of Marshall (2021) which revealed that unique knowledge and skills of indigenous peoples enabled them to effectively maximize environmental resources which were greatly available within their ancestral lands/domains.

Environmental Conservation. Based from the findings, ICCs/IPs strongly agreed that they exerted continued efforts which included the protection of forest trees, plants and other wildlife found in their ancestral domains/lands which also being the seat of indigenous tourism in the province. Apparently, they also strongly agreed that there were stringent imposition of rules and regulations among tourist which

helped protect and conserve the natural habitat of all natural wonders present in indigenous tourism sites.

Community Involvement.

Economic Stability. Based from the findings, ICCs/IPs strongly agreed that they were highly dependent on agricultural activities aside from assisting tourists to their ecotourism sites. In fact, their simple living standards is one of their notable impressions by tourists because with their simplicity of living, they manifest proper form of behavior and highly respectful treatment to tourists that congruently elevated latter's positive impressions and extreme satisfaction in visiting such ecotourism sites. This caused tourists' interest in regularly visiting these ecotourism sites because of respondents' simplicity, honesty and positive behavior.

Table 3 Challenges of Indigenous Tourism

Aspect	Mean Score	Verbal Interpretation
Cultural Sensitivity	3.63	Agree
Economic Stability	3.86	Agree
Environmental Preservation	4.10	Agree
Grand Mean	3.86	Agree

Cultural Sensitivity. Based from the findings, ICCs/IPs agreed that presence of their established unique form of cultural institution provided that they freely exercised their beliefs, rites and rituals was most of the time misunderstood by the tourist that resulted to failure to appreciate their presence in spite their extreme efforts to conserve and protect indigenous tourism sites. This claim is supported in the study of Trawick (2019) in which revealed that village principles as commonly shown by indigenous peoples significantly created their unique and distinct social characteristics because they were too devoted and strongly in touch with the rites and rituals they shared among their tribe's members.

Economic Stability. Based from the findings, ICCs/IPs agreed that they encountered certain challenges in terms of economic stability, their strong dependence to agricultural activities precisely helped them to supplement

their daily subsistence. However, during dry and non-cropping season, they mostly experienced difficulty to meet their daily needs.

Environmental Preservation. Based from the findings, ICCs/IPs agreed that they commonly encountered challenges as to environmental preservation because most tourist who visited indigenous tourism sites, they usually left large volumes of trashes that potentially harm the environment specially rivers and falls. Apparently, they also agreed that in spite of stricter implementation of local environmental rules and regulations.

Conclusions

Indigenous tourism played an essential role to help build local and national economy. It served as the spine of every municipality which hold attracting tourism sites. Hence, indigenous tourism as emerging tourism attraction also held a frontier of economic power that

help boost local economy. It was concluded that ICCs/IPs encountered certain challenges as to cultural sensitivity, economic stability and environmental preservation which hampered the continued development of indigenous tourism. Meanwhile, the results also showed that in spite of these challenges, opportunities were also seen in which, indigenous tourism provided wider avenues for the development of ICCs/IPs way of living through creation of more employment and business opportunities which helped them generate more income to meet their needs. Conclusively, indigenous tourism in the province empowered ICCs/IPs cultural, environmental and economic opportunities.

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