

# Perception on Sustainable Tourism in Paoay, Atok, Benguet, Philippines

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## **Abstract:**

The climate, terrain and geography of Paoay, Atok offers a potential promotion for sustainable tourism in the community. The place is quite well known due to the frost, or "angdap" in local dialect, which is seldom encountered in other regions of the Philippines. Paoy, Atok is renowned for its variety of tourist activities, including trekking, while providing a lovely view of the hanging gardens filled with vegetables and various cut flowers. With the promising sustainable tourism in the place of Atok, Benguet, the local government started implementing sustainable tourism practices. Hence this study determined the perceptions of stakeholders on sustainable tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Product, Attributes of sustainable tourism, Responsible tourism.

## **Introduction**

With the passage of Tourism Act of 2009 (RA 9593), The Philippine government recognized the importance of tourism as an "indispensable element of the national economy and an industry of national interest and importance, which must be harnessed as an engine of socio-economic growth and cultural affirmation to generate investment, foreign exchange, and employment, and to continue to mold an enhanced sense of national pride for all Filipinos (Congress of the Philippines, 2009, p. 2). The act serves as the national blueprint for developing "...an integrated ST management plan for the country and to develop the country as a prime tourist hub in Asia, as well as a center of world congresses and conventions, by promoting ST based on the country's history, culture, and natural endowments, and ensuring the protection, preservation, and promotion of these resources" (p. 3).

Tourism is now seen as a rising star that will contribute to the economic development of the Philippines in the long-term. The influx of tourists has brought in revenue and created a more ecologically sustainable environment. Tourist activities in rural areas are a very promising direction, where tourism has a very large impact on regional development, which contributes to the preservation of tradition, culture, and economic gain (Karampela et al., 2021).

Hence, integrating sustainability into tourism development will testify a long-term survival of the tourism industry, destination, and anticipation of needs of guests and hosts, while retaining the sociocultural and environmental resources for the future generation and long-term usage. With the many tourist destinations in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), there is a huge potential for promoting sustainable tourism in all its provinces. One of the most promising provinces is the province of Benguet.

## Literature Review

Benguet Province is located at the north of Luzon. Local and foreign tourists visiting the place share a common goal, that is, to unwind in the beautiful terrain of CAR. One of the most visited municipalities in the province is Atok (Facts & Figures: Province of Benguet, 2014). Based on the data that the tourism office of Atok had recorded, there were 721 tourist arrivals for the month of October, 2018. The figure shows that there are a significant number of tourists arriving in the municipality.

Atok is considered a fourth-class municipality of Benguet. Nevertheless, it boasts picturesque and breathtaking mountainous landscapes with is truly a sight to behold. It is home to numerous ethnic people comprising of the Kankanaey and Ibaloi tribes (LGU of Atok, 2009). It is the gateway to the different scenic tourist destinations in Benguet and central Cordillera that is why the tourist destinations must be convincing to entice visitors to continue travelling to the different parts of the region. Aside from its scenic flower and vegetable gardens, the municipality also boasts of its very cool weather that is a natural pill for visitors to enjoy the chilly mornings and witness the presence of frost when the temperature drops during the months of November to March.

Subsequently, the municipal government is gearing up for the revitalization of the town's tourism industry as one of the major economic drivers in the municipality while sustaining efforts to preserve and protect the environment that is the source of the unique sceneries being frequented by visitors. Mayor Smith (2022) stated in an interview that there is still a long way to go in the development of the town's tourism industry but the local government, in partnership with concerned government agencies and tourism industry stakeholders, are taking the necessary steps one at a time so as not to burden the involved parties. He pointed out that one of the major thrusts of the present administration is to require the regulation and accreditation of new tourist destinations to ensure their compliance to the minimum requirements on the operation of tourist spots (Tiamzon, 2022).

Long and Lane (2000) disclosed that tourism cannot be ignored by rural or urban community due to wealth transfer and employment, along with its multidisciplinary nature, complex sector integration, and income redistribution and multiplication effect. On the one hand, Najdeska and Rakicevik (2012) argued that sustainable tourism works successfully only when its constituent elements, which cover the economic, sociocultural and environmental components, are deemed equally important and are interconnected without any single element dominating.

Janusz and Bajdor (2013) claimed that the issue involves environmental protection, the living conditions and in the closest location, and the social and economic dimensions of the tourism area. These discussions have contributed to the need for the balance between economic and environmental concerns in tourism, leading to good practices in terms of energy savings, recycling; reduce waste and emissions and improvements to the livelihood of local population.

Environmental sustainability is the protection of the life-support functions, for instance biodiversity; the prevention of destabilization to the life-support functions, the preservation of landscapes for amenity services. Thus, strong environmental sustainability is the only degree of environmental sustainability that protects people from the impacts of environmental degradation (Ekins et al., 2003). Strong environmental sustainability is mandatory for long-term human survival and well-being. The modern business practice should be based on social economic grounds, ensuring real and lasting economic processes enabling to benefit society by all actors involved, including stable employment and the preservation of the culture and attractions for long lasting utilization (Howard & Grant, 2013). The tourism industry can have adverse

environmental, economic effects. These impacts are mostly linked with the construction of management of tourism infrastructure.

Sigala (2008) suggested that sustainable tourism is a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary for the economic, social and environmental impacts concept. Tourism's economic contributions have been treated as providing an important benefit to the industry, offering another means through which the community can positively respond to the development of the tourism industry through the incentives of basic tourism infrastructure, tourism supply industries' job creation and business opportunities.

However, Greiner (2010) noted that although tourism development in the remotes areas confers economic benefits, including increased business activity and employment, social and environmental costs are also involved. Therefore, the tourism industry must create explicit links between sustainable socio-environmental attributes and economic performance based on processes of co agreement to achieve sustainable tourism performance (fantindou and Matarazzo, 2017).

Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process and it requires constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive or corrective measures whenever necessary. Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist's satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them (World tourism organization, 2004).

Moreover, sustainable tourism should not only involve the business owners but other stakeholders as well. A review of relevant tourism literature reveals the importance given to understanding stakeholder perceptions for achieving sustainable tourism in any destination or community. The four major groups in the process of sustainable development include tourists, Residents, Entrepreneurs and Government officials (Xu & Fox, 2014; Deutsch et al, 2013). While all stakeholders need not be equally involved in the decision-making process, all their interests should be identified and understood (Donaldson & Preston, 1995) especially since failure to identify the interest of even a single primary stakeholder group may cause the process to fail (Clarkson, 1995).

Tourism literature abounds with research work done on stakeholder groups and the significance of their interests (Davis & Morais, 2004). This is because one of the main causes of conflict between stakeholder groups is the difference in perceptions and interests that exist between them in terms of tourism development (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004). However, as agreement across stakeholder groups increases, so does the likelihood of collaboration and compromise (Sautter & Leisen, 1999). A necessary precursor to plan and sustainable tourism for a destination or a community therefore, is a thorough understanding of the attitudes, perceptions and interests of the stakeholders of that community (Byrd et al., 2009) particularly because it is people's perceptions which influence the pathways considered appropriate for achieving sustainable outcomes (Kuruksheeta, 2016).

Based on the literature that were discussed and mentioned regarding sustainable tourism, knowing the perception of each stakeholder involved in the development of tourism sustainability is very vital since they are the key players in the development of a specific tourism destination and not just contributors but also the beneficiaries when the goal of sustainable tourism is achieved.

This study adapted the conceptual framework of sustainable tourism development of Alampay, et al., (2005) which portrays the interactions and interrelation of major stakeholder in the pursuit of tourism sustainable development- the national government agencies (NGAs), the local units (LGUs), the local

destinations and local communities, and the tourism industry which is comprised of the private sector and other vital key players. Altogether, these major stakeholders endeavor to create, develop and sustain a viable tourism industry. The key players also include the academic and tourism-related training institutions whose graduates are hired by the industry. The framework can be expanded to include the business sector which primarily operates in a parallel vision of attaining tourism sustainability. Meanwhile, trade and business organizations can contribute to sustainable tourism by bringing and spearheading their environmental protection advocacy, tourism promotions and self-regulations supportive of responsible tourism practices (Alampay et al., 2005).

Operating independently but with strong linkages and coordination, the stakeholder groups determine the extent of sustainable development. From the conceptual framework, stakeholders in the local destinations are classified to three key component groups: 1) the NGAs and the LGUs; 2) the local destinations and the local communities; and 3) the key tourism industry player largely formed by the private sector. These groups then pursue their respective objectives focusing on the fundamental values of sustainable tourism development. In the essence, one stakeholder may delve into poverty reduction through employment generation through employment generation while pursuing economic sustainability. Others may implement programs on ecological, environmental sustainability and equipment of tourism development. Incorporating the concept of sustainability to any tourism development endeavor, these three component groups have to be in place in local destinations where their interplay in the tourism system itself is suitability integrated (Alampay et al., 2005).

The study also adapted the Sustainable tourism concept that incorporates sustainable development within the tourism context (Dimitrios & Ladkin, 1999) which has been affirmed as the new direction for tourism. This concept draws attention to the need for balance between commercial and environmental (and later social) interests in tourism. Among the first attempts to define sustainable tourism was made by Butler (1991), who defined it as the long-term viability of a tourism entity (products, services) in an area. In other word sustainability is tied solely to the survival of tourism players. Butler's definition of sustainable tourism substantiates with that of Reinhardt (1998) who links sustainability to the fundamental preoccupation of tourism business managers—productivity, investment and profit.

The study is significant to the Municipality of Atok, Benguet specifically to the tourism industry by providing hypothetical insights and empirical findings. In identifying and structuring set of attributes, this study will also help hierarchical model for decision makers and will also extend the framework of sustainable tourism and presents a comprehensive structure that can help firm achieve higher levels of competitiveness in the Municipality of Atok, Benguet.

Since there was no conducted researches in Atok, Benguet regarding tourism sustainability and the knowledge of the people in the place concerning sustainable tourism the researcher came up with the idea of conducting the research to help the community in Atok, Benguet and injecting among them the importance of sustainable tourism because the place has the potential for tourism sustainability. Furthermore, identifying the stakeholders and their role to be played is also essential in sustaining the tourism attractions and achieving logistical and strategic objectives.

This study aimed to assess the sustainability of tourism in Atok, Benguet. Specifically, the following objectives of the study are: a). to determine the attributes of sustainable tourism according to the stakeholders and the factors that serve as challenges in the development of sustainable tourism in Paoay, Atok, Benguet, Philippines.

## Methodology

This study made use of qualitative research design. Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that in a qualitative research design, it studies things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). It made use of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions because the purpose of the researcher is to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of individuals on specific matter and it is simple and convenient way to collect data from several people simultaneously. In-depth interviews are by speaking with participants in a one-on-one setting. Sometimes a researcher approaches the interview with a predetermined list of questions or topics for discussion but allows the conversation to evolve based on how the participant responds. In a focus group, a researcher engages a small group of participants in a conversation designed to generate data relevant to the research question. Focus groups can contain anywhere from 5 to 15 participants. Social scientists often use them in studies that examine an event or trend that occurs within a specific community (Crossman, 2019).

The study involved twenty (20) participants in which composed of tourists (n=5), residents (n=5), Entrepreneurs (n=5) and Government officials (n=5) and these represent the stakeholders in the community. They were chosen to be the respondents because they play an important role in the sustainability of tourism in Atok, Benguet, each stakeholder has an important task in the success of tourism sustainability.

Interview guide was used to elicit responses from the participants. According to boyce and Neale (2006) “interview” can be defined as a qualitative research technique which involves conducting individual intensive interview with small number of respondents to explore their perspective on a particular idea, program or situation. The coding system of Glaser, Barney and Straus (1976) in Grounded Theory was used in transcribing the responses of participants. Using the open coding system, the responses were listed down and analyzed according to the pre-determined themes, then significant responses were filtered to suit each time.

The data obtained from the interview were organized and segmented including the identification of themes. Through a joint and thorough analysis, the researcher was able to reflect on what participants’ wanted to express during the interviews. The responses were coded and analyzed via thematic analysis because of the small number of respondents. The results of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed manually, where the author aims to detect common words, phrases, and group or “cloud” these together, in order to be able to determine trends and tendencies in the answers of the respondents (Walters, 2017).

## Findings

About eight (8) stakeholders of Atok, Benguet were interviewed on the attributes that they observed about sustainable tourism in their place. The attributes that emerged were categorized into three: environmental sustainability, socio-cultural sustainability and economic sustainability.

Environmental Sustainability. The residents and some local tourist mentioned about the preservation of tourist spots in Atok, particularly on the preservation and maintenance of the natural resources and view decks of Atok, leadin to clean environment. To quote this statement a 47-year old concerned citizen said “*May mayat nu maaywananya ma protektarandan tourist spot ya destination ta mausar pay c mabaybayagyadadinaapo*” [The tourist spot and destination should be protected and preserved for long term usage and for the future generations to benefit from it].

Preservation of tourist spots in Atok, Benguet has something to do with the proper protection of residents and local tourists as well as foreign tourists. When tourism practices are environmental and nature friendly, preservation of nature will be observed and useful. This is not only for the tourist but it is a long-term plan for the residents and for the future generation as opined by one of the residents who was interviewed. Moreover, the residents are worried because if the place will become a tourist spot and it will be open to business establishments which are detrimental to the health of the community. Program for the sustainable tourism is very important in order that the community will not be lambasted. Hence, responsibility of everyone in maintaining the sustainable tourism in the community is at pledge.

Tolentino (Manila Bulletin, Oct. 29, 2017) said that a responsible tourism development program that keeps environmental preservation a priority is the key to sustainable tourism, which in turn is the key to the inclusive growth that is envisioned. Community support and participation remains crucial in putting “hands and feet” to government initiatives that promote, protect, and preserve the natural environment. Only through partnership can ensure that future generations of Filipinos will enjoy the blessing of nature as much as what is done now. For the preservation and maintenance of the natural resources and view decks of Atok, the residents aim to protect the municipality in its original natural resources. One resident said that when tourism practices are environmental and natural friendly, natural resources of Atok, Benguet will be preserved for future generation. Moreover, residents of Atok as well as local tourists said that the leaders of the municipality on tourism should have proper information on tourist spots. Responsibilities of stakeholders as mentioned by the stakeholders are required like presence of integrity of the working force, presence of well-established rules or ordinance regarding responsibilities of tourist and locals alike and LGU.

Clean environment was also mentioned by the residents. It means that in their area they have a clean environment because the place is still new for a tourist spot. One said that the place must be preserved for health benefits of the residents today and for the future. Thus, it is the duty of every citizen to promote and protect the environment. As stated in section 2 of the RA 8749, the State shall promote and protect the global environment to attain sustainable development while recognizing the primary responsibility of local government units to deal with environmental problem.

Socio-cultural Sustainability. This attribute focuses on positive impacts of sustainability of tourism in Atok. In this pillar, in which discussions with the stakeholders about non-manipulated culture and tourist spots which means that the wealth and belongings of Atok will be preserved and it shall not be influenced by other groups or individuals which manifest healthy sign in a community. And to quote this statement an interviewee said that “*dagejay kultura tayu kuma ket ma mentenar ta esu diyay ti pride tayu [Our culture should be preserved since that is our pride]*” and another interviewee said also that “*hantayu kuma lip lipatan jay kultura tayu, hantayu kuma ibain nu diket maging proud tau ta esupay dyay nga attraction tayu*” [We should not forget or be ashamed of our culture, rather we should be proud of it]. One negative effect mentioned by one resident is exploitation of private properties and even public properties or the environment itself. To quote these two interviewees, they said, “*Maysa pay nga problema ket dagejay basura ken dagejay krimen ta nu umadon to ti bisita*” [Problems that arise are on improper disposal of garbage and increasing number of crimes]. Hence, these may happen when there are no clear rules and regulations on tourism.

Economic Sustainability. In this attribute for sustainable tourism, majority of the stakeholders have shared their interest on economic sustainability. Income is the common statement of both the residents and the tourists. All the stakeholders who were interviewed mentioned more income and more jobs and to quote

this one barangay official, said that “*Mayat a nu sumikat ti turismo dtuy Atok tanu umado turista umado met ti trabaho [ It is good if the tourist spots are promoted because it can generate more jobs].*” One resident said as a follow-up statement, “*Aw adi mayat nu way turismo ta ma e promote mi abe danan local products tako Kaman danan tapey ya mabalin kmi abe ay man amag c souvenirs para sin turista [Yes, tourist spots should be promoted so that our local products will be showcased like our rice wine and other souvenir items]”*. Tourism serves as income generating service because it will open doors for the community, showcasing other possible products on services that they can offer. Noting one positive effect as opined by one resident, tourism if done properly will give protection to the community. Local products will be patronized by both residents and tourists. A long term and continuous income will benefit the livelihood in the area; thus, it will be a great help to the community and other business entities. Economic sustainability involves creating economic value out of whatever project or decision you are undertaking. Economic sustainability means that decisions are made in the most equitable and fiscally sound way possible while considering the other aspects of sustainability. In most cases, projects and decisions must be made with the long-term benefits in mind (rather than just the short-term benefits). Endowed with rich natural resources, the Philippines can promote more nature-based tourism. Tourism brings in tremendous benefits in terms of economic stability, especially for small islands and provinces (Parafox, 2018). Tourism development has often been regarded as an effective strategy for poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods. However, tourism often triggers transformations of traditional livelihoods and complete dependence on tourism-based income. If tourism declines, local people will be left with no options to sustain their livelihood (Lasso & Dahles, 2018). In sum, sustainable tourism development means the optimal use of social, natural, cultural and financial resources for national development on an equitable and self-sustaining basis to provide a unique visitor experience and an improved quality of life through partnerships among local government, private sector and communities (Rukuižienė, n.d).

Factors that serve as challenges in the development of sustainable tourism. The following identified themes are the factors that serve as challenges in the development of sustainable tourism. The factors were categorized into lack of cooperation, unmatched seminars and trainings, rules and regulations and economics. Lack of cooperation or unity of people in the community was mentioned by the stakeholders. To quote this statement A barangay officer said, “*busy gamen daden eepugaw sin garden da esunga maga pakialam da sin tourism industry sina [They are preoccupied in their farms so they do not care the importance of tourism industry]*” and another follow up from another interviewee also said “*maga met di bag bagan dadin oopisyal esan tourism esunga magay amumi [The local officials do not inform us regarding that tourism so we do not anything about it].*” According to one of the responders, this is one of the reasons for bad leadership among the tourism office's executives and officers. One barangay officer made the following claim, which I will paraphrase: "There is no proper dissemination, cooperation among the stakeholders, and they don't focus on the tourism industry." He claimed that there had been ordinances created, but the local government units had stopped working on them after formulating them. According to Pjerotic (2017) stakeholder cooperation in developing a tourism policy for destination contributes to the promotion of innovative processes through knowledge exchange among stakeholders, whereas documents for determining a joint development policy create the sense of “shared ownership” over the results of development policy, which is successful, are an additional motive for continual cooperation. Residents stressed on the mismatch of seminar and training of the community residents regarding sustainable tourism. Some tourists are complaining about their tour guides because they don't know the process in tour guiding that they are incompetent. This is because the residents of Atok, Benguet were not

given seminars on tour guiding and tourism sustainability, so far, LGU conducts seminars on livelihood. Residents are requesting dissemination of rules and regulations as well as ordinances related to tourism through campaign and trainings and seminars. The mismatch of seminars and trainings conducted for tourism sustainability results to misinformation on sustainable tourism that was identified during the interview. Some tourists are also complaining about their tour guides because they don't know the process in tour guiding. Lack of ordinance/rules and regulations set by the Local Government Unit in the implementation of sustainable tourism results to unprecedented issues or problems. Even some officials who are assigned under tourism office said, "*Awan met paylan inar aramed da nga ordinance sunga nag ungetak eman di nag bisita ak [There was no implementing rules and guidelines on tourism in their place so I reprimanded them]*". To follow up this statement, another barangay officer also said, "*awan met bag baga da gamen edjay munisipyo sunga han me met amu nu kas anu ekasta ta dapat ket esu da amen o mangle direct kadakami nga barangay officials [There was no notice or guidelines coming from the municipal office so we do not have an idea on how to manage tourism in our place].*" Unawareness of the residents were brought out because many of them were saying that there was no ordinance that is crafted which means there is nothing to be implemented. The business endeavor of the people focused on putting interest on fast income rather than long term plans and actions that will ensure stable and long income generating tourism. To quote this one interviewee said "*din gagaet met yan sari sarili amuda di layden day yan dn pan kakitaan da ay dagus adi dan nem nemen abe di gagaet da [Some of our friends wanted immediate profit rather than thinking of long term profit which might include other stakeholders]*" and to support this another interviewee said "*sari sarili gamen met basta nakapilak day an maga et bibyangan da [They prefer individual business and profit].*" The clamor of the residents, business favors only few of selected stakeholders of the community in which they are the only ones benefitting while others are also busy with farming because this is the major generating income of residents of Atok, Benguet.

## Conclusion

Based on the assessment of stakeholders as they shared their experiences on developing sustainable tourism in Paoay, Atok, Benguet, Philippines, they stressed that the endowed beauty of their place should be preserved for long term purposes and not to be exploited for the sake of tourism. They emphasized that socio-cultural aspect of tourism should be revitalized and preserved while economic sustainability should focus on long term plans. Preservation of tourist spots and natural resources of Paoay, Atok should be encouraged for long term purposes along with revitalization of culture and traditions. This is due to the fact that tourism can promote the preservation and transmission of cultural and historical traditions. Since tourism industry is one of the main economic engines that generates income and creates job opportunities, this are seen by the participants as an aid to unemployment and alternative source of income. Lastly, Tourism industry creates diverse business, like accommodation, food and beverages, transportation and the like.

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