

# Unregulated ecotourism can destroy caves, archaeological sites—experts

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*In Photo: Graffiti on the walls of the Bakwitan Cave*

GIGANTES ISLANDS—While ecotourism is one of the country’s economic growth drivers, experts warned that once unregulated, it can adversely impact the environment, disturb or destroy ecosystems and lead to biodiversity loss, experts said.



*The entrance to the Bakwitan Cave*

This is the concern raised in the case of Gigantes, a group of islands and islets near Panay Island in the municipality of Carles, Iloilo, which is experiencing a tourism boom with still no ecotourism plan in place.

Community stakeholders on Gigantes, particularly Gigantes Norte and Gigantes Sur, are overwhelmed by the influx of tourists, after the beauty of the islands were “discovered” after Supertyphoon Yolanda (international code name Haiyan) struck in 2013.

Lack of appreciation of Gigantes’s unique ecosystems is a major issue. Jorge Ebay, program manager of the Building Resilient and Sustainable Small Island Communities on Gigantes Islands, a partnership between the Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE) and the University of the Philippines-Visayas Foundation Inc., said the booming ecotourism on the islands is a serious threat to their fragile ecosystems.

“Appreciation of the environment and the ecosystems, its marine and coastal resources, and caves is lacking even among locals,” Ebay said.



*Stone masks and burial markers are on display at the path leading to the Bakwitan Cave.*

FPE Executive Director Oliver Agoncillo said there should be a distinction between tourism and ecotourism, noting that ecotourism should always give premium to environmental protection and conservation than profit or revenue. “Tourism can both be a threat and solution,” he said, explaining that the FPE’s capacity-building initiatives, in partnership with UP Visayas and community stakeholders in Gigantes, hope to address the problem posed by ecotourism.

The government is currently eyeing at least P414.14 billion in private-sector investment to develop the country’s tourism potential, with the hope of increasing tourist arrivals to accommodate 12 million visitors by 2022.

According to the National Tourism Development Plan (NTDP) of 2016-2022, private-sector investments would “cover the needs of travelers, such as accommodation, transport units [and] aircraft acquisition.”

COO Guiller B. Asido of the Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority (Tieza) reported that there is an estimated shortfall in the number of hotel rooms at 120,000.

Under the NTDP, the Duterte administration is hoping to attract 89.2 million domestic tourists and generate revenue of some P4 trillion from domestic and foreign travelers by 2022.

Target employment is 6.5 million people, which will raise the share of tourism jobs to 14.4 percent of total employment, and reach 702,000 poor beneficiaries.

Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez is also eyeing ecotourism as a strategy in ensuring environmental protection, and natural resources and biodiversity conservation through partnership with communities in the implementation of the P8-billion Enhanced-National Greening Program.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is the lead implementing agency in the ambitious program, which lumps food security and self-sufficiency, and antipoverty employment as part of a massive reforestation program.

Meanwhile, informal tour packages on Gigantes include cave visits. There are more than 50 caves all over the islands. Most of the caves are specialized ecosystems, because they are karst caves under limestone karst forest.

Aris Neil T. Cristales of the Western Visayas Caving Association said the caves on Gigantes need to be properly classified before they are opened to tourism activities. Cristales said that, without proper training, entering caves could be perilous for tourists, especially because the danger that lurks inside them remains unknown.

“There may be dangerous gases that can kill you,” he said.

According to Cristales, about 20 of the Gigantes’s caves have been explored so far, and they offer great potential, not only for tourism, but also for cave-resources protection and conservation, as the ecosystem in some of the caves remains intact.

Besides being home to endemic species of geckos and frogs, some of the caves are sacred burial grounds of the islands’ first settlers.

Little is known about Gigantes’s history, and artifacts in these caves need to be protected, said Larry Joey Alag, a dive instructor who is involved in training tourists guides on the islands. The local government unit of Carles has yet to finalize its Tourism Plan, and is still in the process of building its tourism data base.

“We were overtaken by the tourist arrivals. Right now, we are finalizing the tourism plan. Regulating the tourism industry became a problem, after visitors started to pour in after Yolanda,” said So-San B. Marcelo, Carles tourism officer. She said the sustainable tourism plan would consider putting in place a guideline for the tourism industry.

In an interview with the BusinessMirror, Larry Joey Alag, secretary-general of the Philippine Life Savers who also train tour guides, said some caves on Gigantes have been explored by treasure hunters long ago. Some of the caves, he said, could still be saved, with the help of the National Museum.

Some of the caves frequented by tourists were already desecrated, foremost of which is the Bacwitan Cave, which, according to Alag, used to be a relocation site for communities seeking shelter during the wrath of strong typhoons.

Historically, the cave was also used as hiding place by the people to escape from Japanese forces during World War II.

It was learned that locals themselves unwittingly helped treasure-hunters excavate and smuggle out important artifacts.

“One time, I was offered to buy an old clay jar. Knowing it was dug from the caves, I, instead, gave the local a reward and kept it,” Alag told the BusinessMirror in Filipino. Alag added he intends to convince the residents to have the artifacts examined by experts.

“Much can be learned from these artifacts. I am no expert in this but, from what I’ve learned through my own research, these should help the people discover the culture of their ancestors,” he said.

Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim of the DENR’s Biodiversity Management Bureau said not all caves should be open to tourism.

“That is why we are conducting cave classification to determine how to manage these caves,” she said. Some caves, Lim said, should be protected to protect the species that depend on the cave ecosystem.

Bats are among cave-dwelling wildlife considered to be keystone species that needs to be protected against ecotourism. When disturbed, bats tend to relocate. Guano, the minerals deposited by bats in caves, help other species survive, thus, allowing the cycle of life to continue even without the aid of sunlight.

The discovery of the artifacts in the caves on Gigantes, she said, should be an added reason to study the links between ecosystem, historical and cultural links in those areas, she added.

Marcelo said around 27,000 foreign and local visitors were registered in Carles.

The actual number of visitors, she said, could be a lot higher because they have no control over the number of people coming from other areas who do not register in the Tourism Office.

The unbridled development, particularly the construction of rooms in resorts to accommodate tourists on Gigantes, is a challenge, noting its potential environmental impact.

*Image Credits: Jonathan L. Mayuga*