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Reviving a river for ecotourism

By **BusinessMirror**
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What was once a silted river has been given a new lease on life and has become a showcase of how ecotourism can help revive and conserve the environment, and create livelihood opportunities to communities.

This is the story of Palina Greenbelt Ecopark, one of Roxas City's sought-after ecotourism sites, which offers a scenic river tour, fishing and onboard relaxation.

Designated by the city government as a mangrove reservation zone in its coastal zoning plan in 2002, the ecopark started in 2006 with the formation of the Palina River Development Association (Parida) composed initially of 31 members.

The involvement of fisherfolks came out of the need to rehabilitate Palina River, which traverses barangays Cagay and Talon. From 1999 to 2003, fishpens and other illegal structures proliferated. It was aggravated by siltation from upland erosion due to cutting of trees for charcoal production. This resulted in the disruption of the river's current which contributed to its pollution.

Demolition of structures started in 2003. Those displaced were given alternative livelihood in 2007.

Supervised by the city's Coastal Resource Management Office, the project received a P250,000 initial fund from the city government under Mayor Angel Alan Celino. The local government has, since then, infused additional capital upon seeing the project's progress.

The project has received support from the Department of Tourism and was given a Pearl Award by the Association of Tourism Officers in the Philippines several times.

The ecopark's first phase involved the planting of mangroves that earned the participating fisherfolk about P187,000 for the surviving 45,000 mangrove trees they planted.

The second phase consisted of the building of facilities, including two function halls, two floating cabanas, two paddle boats and a motorized boat.

Palina has also become an educational facility for community participation in rehabilitating the river and the mangrove ecosystems. Students from all over Panay have visited the area to study the river ecosystem and observe the fisherfolk's way of life and interact with them.

Visitors from various local governments have done benchmarking tours to learn from the project's best practices that could be replicated in their localities.

On a typical weekend, it hosts hundreds of guests from family and group events, doing a river-cruise picnic composed mostly of seafood in which Roxas is known for. For a complete relaxing experience, *hilot* massage is offered in the cruise.

Guests can buy live lapu-lapu from the cages, which they can cook themselves or have them cooked by the fisherfolk already trained in food preparation.

Palina River and its adjacent areas are economic zones with fish cages containing some 3,000 groupers. The sunken galleon ship and Japanese garrison near the river's mouth can be declared a historic site. There is also a good beach for bathing near the reservation zone.

The river bank, lined with mangroves, is about 1 km in length with eight species of mangroves some of which are century old. Among the identified wildlife in the area are 34 bird, 13 fish and 64 shellfish species.

The ecopark is the city's fifth eco-tourism site after the Culajao Mangrove Ecopark, Cadimahan River, Olotayan Island and the Vermi Demosite.

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