

It can be done: Sustainable tourism, farming on Boracay

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Closing Boracay to tourism for six months has provided authorities with valuable time to assess the level of environmental damage from years of unregulated tourism.

The government now has the opportunity to start work on much-needed interventions and regulations to ensure the industry's future development is executed in an ecologically sustainable way.

The revival of agriculture, including via land reform, has a part to play in the journey toward Boracay's sustainable development.

The challenge right now with using Boracay land for farming is the island no longer has the natural advantage for the purpose because of overdevelopment (i.e. copra, fishing). Moving forward, it would be good to ensure that tourism is made ecologically sustainable, while removing the obstacles to farming. This would enable agriculture to play a far bigger role in the island's economy.

Following the decision to shut down the island, the next task is to reverse the effects of extensive environmental damage from over two decades of unbridled tourism.

Billions-peso rehab

A top priority is to expand and upgrade the island's sanitation infrastructure. Experience from comparable situations in Bali, Goa and Phuket provides valuable lessons for deciding on the measures needed for a rehabilitation conservatively estimated to cost P1.36 billion.

Beyond the six-month shutdown, the focus will be on the operation and maintenance of Boracay's long-term, sustainable rehabilitation.

A cost-benefit analysis of the 1,028-hectare island's carrying capacity is needed. As the Inquirer reported earlier this month, only 2.3 percent of establishments inspected by an inter-agency task force complied with permits and requirements. Lacking environmental compliance certificates were 20 percent, with about the same percentage not having building permits.

Even if these facilities do comply with existing building codes and environmental regulations, the scale of tourism is likely to be too large to ensure ecological sustainability for such a small island.

Going for high-end tourism, similar to what the Maldives has done, is one way. However, that would be hard to engineer in a free market like the Philippines.

The administration's vision for Boracay requires wide participation, not just from the wealthy few resort-owners, developers, and well-heeled tourists. Undoubtedly, stronger environmental regulations to safeguard the island's fragile resources must be enacted.

Tourism revenue

The challenge for Boracay, which hit a record two million visitors in 2017, and for other small, ecologically sensitive areas that are popular tourist draws is how to reduce pollution and waste. Resources clearly need to be found to strengthen the resilience of local infrastructure against these pressures.

A similar scenario to Boracay's is being played out in Australia's Great Barrier Reef. There, 85 percent of its 1.8 million visitors are concentrated in just two small areas.

Tourism-agriculture synergy

The Australian government responded to this challenge by using legislation and new implementation processes for clean air, as well as the protection of land, water, the ecology and heritage of the Great Barrier Reef, and similar areas. This response has provided a set of benchmarks that Philippine authorities can learn from.

The Seychelles, Maldives and the United States have recently taken up measures to enforce regulations for coastlines experiencing heavy tourism; something the Philippines will need to do, too.

Tourism in Boracay, if made ecologically sustainable, would be value-adding, particularly for livelihoods. Note that tourism revenues in the Philippines reached around \$6.3 billion in 2016 (or 8.6 percent of exports), with Boracay contributing 20 percent.

Complementing sustainable tourism with sustainable agriculture could have a transformational impact on Boracay's fragile ecosystem.

The island is classified as 40 percent forestland and 60 percent agricultural land. Before it became a tourist destination, Boracay was primarily a farming community living off copra and fishing.

But the island's fishing industry collapsed from overharvesting and damage to coral reefs, while copra never recovered from a price slump.

The Department of Agrarian Reform considers the land reform program to be applicable to nearly 40 percent of the island or 410 hectares. Whether this is realized or not will depend on the viability of sustainable farming and how much land will actually be given over to land reform.

There is room for cash crops to make a modest comeback on the island if the obstacles to using land for farming, which were imposed to allow tourism to develop, are lifted.

The two can go hand in hand. Farmers can combine agriculture with tourism as an additional source of income, as they have in Bali's Ubud uplands. The paddy areas of Ubud have proven to be a popular itinerary for tourists.

But first things first. Reviving Boracay agriculture will require extensive forest rehabilitation, replanting, and putting in place mechanisms to ensure these areas are sustainably developed and protected.

Agriculture cannot replace tourism for employment and livelihoods in Boracay. Done properly, however, sustainable farming could be a valuable complement for introducing desperately needed interventions, ensuring a sound ecological future for Boracay. The author is a Visiting Professor at the Asian Institute of Management and is the author of *Climate Change and Natural Disasters*, 2017 (Routledge). Under his guidance, AIM will roll out courses in disaster risk and crisis management, with certificate courses to commence in 2018, and a master's degree program in 2019. E-mail VThomas.MT@AIM.edu or more information or visit www.AIM.edu.