

Dani Garcia
3/11/15
ES 1080

Final Project: Palawan and the Development of Tourism

Imagine feeling the warm sand in-between your toes and the faint sound of waves crashing on the shoreline. Imagine white sandy beaches as far as the eye can see, surrounded by glistening light turquoise ocean on one side and an abundance of bright emerald vegetation on the other. You can smell the fresh ocean breeze as it tickles the stray hairs around your face as you gaze deeper into the water only to see the water teeming with wildlife. You see fish of every shape and color swimming around the vibrant coral reefs they call home. You then look into the distance and see mountains that seem to be immediately covered in lush green tropical plant. But green is not only the color you see - you see flora of all colors, and the hovering animals and insects that are searching for their next meal.

The above description could be for any dreamy island, like Hawaii, Bora Bora, or for Santorini. The island Palawan located in the Philippines has all of these luxurious traits, but what makes it any different from any other tropical island? Palawan was one of the most remote islands in the Philippines, and the natives had a generally easy way of life by living in symbiosis with the sea. With the 1990's boom of the tourism industry on this island, more and more hotels and restaurants are being made to accommodate the large influx of foreign visitors. It is crucial to take into consideration the backgrounds of people who have different views of the sea because a business executive is most likely going to view the ocean scenery as a commodity while a local islander is going to view it as a source of life and a place for work. But distinguishing the

boundaries between work and play for either sector or group of people is almost impossible to untangle because they are so largely dependant on each other.

The Philippines itself is home to more than 7,000 islands, and until very recently their most popular island vacation attraction has been the paradise that is Boracay. But the massive amounts of foreign leisure tourists that go to Boracay has left the island at over capacity, since the land itself is generally small and has a difficult time accommodating to the increased traffic. Within the last few decades, Palawan has been gaining momentum and is making its way to being the next top tropical island destination of the Philippines. This will include the creation of many up-scale hotels and accommodations, while simultaneously destroying small fishing villages that currently line the coastal region of the island. The reefs that surround Palawan supply the majority of the nation's seafood and have the potential to be destroyed due to the desire of the nation's tourism industry to exploit it. Capitalizing on the beauty of the island will hurt the way of life of the locals and in the end, lead to the demise of the islands beautiful natural biodiversity.

The new tourism industry is affecting the locals fishing practices, it is exploiting the natural environment for our leisure desires, and is also degrading local surrounding ecosystems. I discovered that my previous assumption that tourism development plans are not only focused on capital, but they also take into account the pristine environment that they are building new infrastructure on and make regulations in order to preserve it. This does not change my opinion on that fact that although developmental businesses are trying, the creation of hotels and malls and restaurants will still degrade the untouched beauty that is Palawan. I've decided to take an ethnographic approach with my research and I have learned that the tourism industry has led to a

paradox - it increases environmental degradation and habitat destruction even when there are many measures that are taken to preserve it, but at the same time the booming industry is beneficial to the advance of the economy in the region. The relationship between tourism and the local people of Palawan is important to look at because it helps show how they have affected each other and developed throughout the last few decades, which has had important implications on the island's historical relation to the ocean.



“Returning from Night Fishing”

Tom Connelly, 1980-81



“Reef Fishing Just Offshore”

Tom Connelly, 1980-81

The way of life on Palawan was influenced mostly by nature instead of infrastructure before the 1990's. I found a collection of photographs online produced by Tom Connelly, a man who briefly lived in a village with the Batak natives in Palawan during the 1980's. His purpose for sharing these photographs was to “give a sense of what the island was like and how people lived in some very remote rural areas with few roads and little in the way of a government presence” (Connelly, 2004). He lived within a largely isolated community for a while and noticed how they were truly sustainably living in symbiosis with the land. Connelly explains that his pictures are not representative of all of Palawan, but that they show a side of the island that used to be much more prevalent before tourism became one of the biggest boosts for their economy. His work shows us that the culture of the native people that lived on Palawan consisted of living

and thriving with the ocean and as a part of it. He includes a few photographs of common fishing methods employed by the locals, as well as common house structures that were created specifically to adapt to their surroundings. During the 1980's and before, the ocean was a source for both mostly work, because locals used the ocean to feed their families daily. But in the coming decade, things begin to change the the oceanic waters surrounding the tropical island become a target for play and leisure, for foreigners at the expense of the locals.

The recent development of beachfront hotels and restaurants are benefiting the business elite at the expense of local fishing families. These families are forced to relocate, which deeply affects their way of life, since most have lived in the same areas for decades and have become accustomed to the ocean topography and the species of fish that can be found in those certain areas. According the study "Fishing families and cosmopolitans in conflict over land on a Philippine island" by Magne Knudsen and published in the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, "Rich newcomers gain the support of municipal and provincial elites while local fisherfolk become increasingly marginalised and vulnerable to displacement pressure" (Knudsen, 2012). This demonstrates the difficult situations these locals are thrown into, and for the most part have very little say when it comes to arguing for their rights. I think it is ethically wrong to force relocation of fishing villagers that only know a way of life that involves the ocean, while giving them virtually no better options. Many of the fishing villages that are located on the coastal regions of the island of Palawan have lived in symbiosis with the sea for generations, and because of the growth of the tourism industry are now being forced out in order to make room for luxury hotels for foreign travelers.

In a way, the fishing villages and tourism industry are fighting for control over the coastal regions of Palawan in a similar fashion to the competition from both sectors in Monterey, California that was thoroughly discussed in Connie Chiang's "Shaping the Shoreline: Fisheries and Tourism on the Monterey Coast". While there has been a decline and relocation of native fishing villages, the islands fishing industry has been picking up and gaining momentum. I believe that all three sectors of the Palawan society are now fighting against each other for total control, and all three have different motives. But just because they view the sea and coastal regions as places that would be beneficial to their way of life or their industry, they are all interconnected. Tourism harvests the beauty of the oceanic views, the fishing industry relies on the beauty and aquatic abundance of wildlife in the sea, and the fishing villages rely on the ocean for the continuation of their daily way of life. Chiang explains how tourism and fishing produce human interactions with the ocean, whether they be acts of admiration or degradation. Her analysis of the relationship between the two shows how the ocean can be a source of both work and play, and distinguishing between the two would be destructive to our understanding of their connection.

In Palawan today, you can explore the sinkholes, lagoons, cliffs, and coral reefs in the Bacuit archipelago, you can rock climb the enormous land formations that jut straight out of the water, you can observe the jungle that is overflowing with exotic wildlife, or you can scuba dive in Coron Bay, where the floor is littered with shipwreck remnants. Many people are attracted to these natural attractions that can't be found in many areas of the world, as am I. I cannot resist my desire to travel to exotic new places, and islands that are not completely exploited by the tourism industry fascinates me. But then I would be adding to the problem, which is why I

decided to explore the relationship between the environment, the local people, and the tourism industry. Nevertheless, the possibilities for adventure in Palawan are endless, which is possibly why the island was named the “Destination of the Year” from the Kalakbay Awards back in 1995.

But that was just the beginning of the world’s knowledge of this island treasure. Since then, Palawan has been named the “best island destination in Southeast Asia” by National Geographic in 2007, and was claimed to be the Philippines “last ecological frontier” according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. In 2014 it was considered the “Best Island in the World” by Conde Nast Traveler Reader’s Choice Awards, now the islands five mile long underground river Puerto Princesa is considered one of the new 7 wonders of nature. In class we discussed the article “There Will Be Birds: Images of Oil Disasters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries” by Kathryn Morse, where we came to the conclusion that media plays a large role in creating the public's view on a certain place or subject. In Palawan, the fact that the media through numerous news sites and articles has promoted the beauty of the island has on its own led to the creation of the boom of the tourism industry. I found out about the island of Palawan through a variety of online articles and personal accounts. Without these news articles, myself and the public from all over the world would not know about the islands beauty and thus, would have no desire to visit it. Palawan has been the least populated island in the Philippines, but that has been continually changing with the increased momentum of the tourism industry and the increased amount of media advertising to see all the natural beauties that lie within the tropical paradise.

But as I mentioned earlier, there have been efforts to push for ecotourism, where the industry is focused on the conservation and protection of natural environments and its native wildlife. The Palawan government proudly explains on their official website the importance they put on providing tourist activities while simultaneously protecting the nearby land and animals. On June 19th, 1992, the Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) for Palawan, Republic Act NO. 7611 was adopted. This act was created for the protection of the Palawan natural environment, and for the conservation of its natural resources. It was made to “...assist and support the implementation of plans, programs, and projects formulated to preserve and enhance the environment, and at the same time pursue the socioeconomic development goals of the country” (FAOLEX, 1992). So although there have been recent pushes for the growth of the tourism industry in Palawan, there are numerous laws and acts that are in place to ensure that it will not be completely destroyed or put over capacity like the fate of the island of Boracay.

Protection and conservation of the natural beauty, ecosystems, and wildlife of Palawan shows that the environment, oceanic and terrestrial, are both important to the way of life of the local people as well as the industries that are making large sums of money off of it. Since the majority of tourists visit Palawan just to see the natural beauty and the abundance of aquatic wildlife, it is the tourism industry’s job as well as the government’s to maintain the ecosystems and allow them to thrive to ensure that they will still be around for years to come. In Callum Roberts book “The Ocean of Life”, he dedicates the entire second half of his book to the changes that have to be made in order to stop habitat destruction. He includes a chapter titled the “New Deal For the Oceans”, which explains the creation of placing areas that are off limits to the general public and are protected. Palawan was declared a biosphere reserve by the United

National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1990, and its coastal waters are main source of fish for the Philippines in general. There are also many other protected areas of the island, including the Coron Island Protected Area, the Tubbataha Reef National Marine Park, The Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, The Malampaya Sound Land and Seascape Protected Area, and many more. This shows that it is in the best interest of all people, the government, the locals, and the foreign tourists, to keep the natural environment at its best and promote behaviors that will not degrade it.

I decided to take a look at how tourists view the island of Palawan in the 21st century. Wells Tower was a man that traveled to Palawan in 2013, and wrote an article in The Wall Street Journal named “Stranger Than Paradise”. He explains for most of the article the differences between Boracay and Palawan, and how much more natural environment is accessible in Palawan and not overrun by tourist attractions. He describes the natural beauty Palawan has that Boracay might have had at a time in the past, but is just no longer the case. The island has been overrun by the tourism industry and is losing its exotic luster that initially attracted foreigners there. And at the rate of growth of the tourism industry in Palawan, I am scared that it will soon be meeting a similar fate.

After everything I have learned from conducting this research on this island and the effects of tourism, my initial belief stands true - I still think that although a growth in the tourism industry helps the economy, I don't think that it should be at the expense of the local citizens, the natural environment, and the surrounding wildlife. The effects of the increased industrialization of the island due to globalization and the role of the media have been mostly negative, and the only real beneficiaries are the businesses like hotels, restaurants and malls and the government.

The local people are granted very little say in what they want, and are barely given the chance to voice their opinions. The environment and wildlife also don't have a say in whether they want to be exploited due to the desire of tourists, which I believe should mean that they shouldn't have to be subjected to the detrimental effects that the industry imposes. The ocean is a place for both work and play, and as long as multiple sectors of society wish to exploit it and view it as a commodity, there will always be an interconnectedness between the different parts of society. I will always have a desire to travel to new places, especially tropical islands, but my research on Palawan has made me determined to be aware of the implications my travels might have on local citizens of the area, and has made me even more determined to push for the protection and conservation of marine wildlife and natural environments around the world.

Works Cited

- Roberts, Callum. *The Ocean of Life: The Fate of Man and the Sea*. New York: Penguin, 2012. Print.
- Chiang, Connie Y. *Shaping the Shoreline: Fisheries and Tourism on the Monterey Coast*. Seattle and London: University of Washington, 2008. Print.
- Conelly, Tom. *Reef fishing just off shore; Returning from night fishing*. Digital images. *Palawan Island, Philippines: The World As it Was*. PBase, 17 Oct. 2004. Web. 11 Feb 2014. <http://www.pbase.com/tconelly/rural_philippines>.
- Knudsen, M. (2012) Fishing families and cosmopolitans in conflict over land on a Philippine island. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 43, 478–499.
- Morse, Kathryn. "There Will Be Birds: Images of Oil Disasters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *Journal of American History* (2012): n. pag. *Oxford Journals*. Web. 17 Mar. 2015.
- “Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) for Palawan Act (No. 7611).” *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*. Official Gazette No. 31 of 3 August, 1992, pp. 5051-5059. Legal Office FAOLEX. 19 Jun. 1992. <<http://faolex.fao.org/docs/html/phi19797.htm>>
- Tower, Wells. “Stranger Than paradise”. *The Wall Street Journal*. N.o., 14 Mar. 2013. Web. 17 Mar. 2015. <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324678604578340371259215406>>.