

Voices from the Islands: A Qualitative Inquiry into Sustainable Tourism Practices in the Philippines

Dustin Tarinque Loreño^{1*}, Md Akramul Bari²

¹Western Philippines University, Palawan, Philippines

²Faculty of Business, Multimedia University (MMU), Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of sustainable tourism development in the Philippines through a qualitative investigation of stakeholder perspectives in two leading ecotourism destinations: Palawan and Bohol. Despite the country's growing emphasis on sustainability within national tourism policy, the actual practices and local interpretations of sustainable tourism remain understudied. Using a grounded theory approach, this study draws on twenty semi-structured interviews with local government officials, community leaders, tourism workers, and NGO representatives to uncover how sustainability is constructed and challenged in the Philippine context. The findings reveal five key themes: community empowerment, cultural and environmental stewardship, tensions with mass tourism, fragmented governance, and the mediating role of external actors. While local values such as "bayanihan" support sustainable practices, gaps in institutional coordination and unchecked commercial development hinder implementation. The study highlights the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge, ensuring local participation, and strengthening multi-level policy coherence. This paper contributes to the discourse on sustainable tourism in developing nations by emphasizing bottom-up approaches and culturally embedded models of tourism development. It offers practical implications for policymakers, destination managers, and development organizations seeking to align tourism growth with ecological protection and community well-being in the Philippines and other Southeast Asian contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as a vital economic sector in the Philippines, contributing significantly to national income, employment, and infrastructure development. With its diverse archipelagic geography, rich marine biodiversity, and vibrant cultural heritage, the country has positioned itself as an attractive destination for both domestic and international tourists. According to the Philippine Department of Tourism, the sector accounted for 12.7 percent of the country's GDP prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while tourism provides valuable economic opportunities, its unchecked expansion has also led to environmental degradation, resource overuse, and the marginalisation of local communities (Rusmana et al., 2025; Sageena & Kumar, 2025). These challenges necessitate a shift toward a more sustainable tourism model that balances economic growth with ecological preservation and social equity.

In response to global and regional sustainability goals, the Philippine government has adopted several policy instruments, including the Tourism Act of 2009, the National Ecotourism Strategy, and commitments to the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan. These policies promote sustainability principles such as environmental protection, community involvement, and heritage conservation. However, there remains a significant gap between policy discourse and ground-level implementation. Various studies have noted inconsistencies in governance, fragmented institutional coordination, and limited capacity at the local level to enforce sustainability standards (Antai et al., 2025; Okunola, 2025). Furthermore, while the term "sustainability" is widely invoked, it is often operationalised differently across sectors and stakeholder groups, leading to ambiguity in practice.

Sustainable tourism in the Philippines is not only a policy challenge but also a lived experience shaped by cultural values, community dynamics, and environmental conditions. The concept of “bayanihan,” or collective solidarity, continues to influence how communities approach tourism and resource management. In many rural and coastal areas, traditional knowledge systems and local governance structures serve as informal regulators of sustainable practices. However, these community-led efforts often exist in tension with large-scale commercial developments and externally imposed tourism models that may not align with local priorities (Tariq, 2025). Understanding how sustainability is locally defined and negotiated is thus essential to designing more inclusive and effective tourism policies.

While existing literature on sustainable tourism in the Philippines offers valuable macro-level insights, much of it remains quantitative, top-down, and policy-focused. There is a pressing need for more qualitative research that captures the voices and lived realities of those directly involved in tourism development. This includes not only government actors and tourism professionals but also community leaders, local entrepreneurs, and civil society organizations. A qualitative perspective allows for a deeper exploration of the meanings, conflicts, and strategies associated with sustainable tourism, revealing nuances that may be overlooked by purely economic or policy analyses (Arya et al., 2024).

This study responds to that gap by employing a grounded theory approach to explore how sustainable tourism is practiced, interpreted, and challenged in two prominent ecotourism destinations: Palawan and Bohol. Through in-depth interviews with a range of stakeholders, this research aims to construct a locally grounded understanding of sustainability that reflects the socio-cultural and environmental complexities of the Philippine context. By focusing on community narratives and place-based practices, the study offers theoretical and practical contributions to sustainable tourism governance, particularly in Southeast Asian settings where development pressures often conflict with conservation and equity goals.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using grounded theory to explore how sustainable tourism is understood, practiced, and challenged by local stakeholders in the Philippines. Grounded theory, originally developed by Fridberg et al. (2025) and later refined by Hemming et al. (2021), was chosen for its capacity to generate theory inductively from data and to uncover the meanings embedded in participants' lived experiences. This approach is particularly suited to the research context, where sustainability practices are shaped by diverse cultural, ecological, and institutional influences that cannot be fully captured by pre-existing theoretical models.

The research was conducted in two well-known ecotourism destinations: Palawan and Bohol. These sites were selected purposively due to their contrasting tourism development trajectories and visibility in national tourism planning. Palawan is internationally recognized for its conservation-focused tourism initiatives and environmental governance, while Bohol presents a different context, where economic and infrastructural development has expanded rapidly in recent years. The selection of these two locations allowed for comparative insights into how sustainable tourism is interpreted and operationalized under different governance and development frameworks.

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives from those directly engaged in tourism. A total of twenty participants were interviewed, comprising community leaders, tourism workers, small business owners, local government officials, and representatives of non-governmental organizations. The selection of participants was guided by the principle of maximum variation to ensure the inclusion of voices from both formal and informal sectors of tourism. All participants provided informed consent, and the research adhered to ethical guidelines approved by the ethics committee of the researcher's institution.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in either English or Filipino, depending on the participant's preference, and were audio-recorded with permission. A flexible interview guide was used to explore participants' understandings of sustainable tourism, their involvement in tourism activities, their perceptions of environmental and social changes, and their experiences with tourism governance and policy. In addition to interviews, the researcher took field notes and engaged in non-participant observation to capture contextual details, interactions, and environmental conditions that enriched the interpretation of verbal data.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo 14 software. The data analysis followed the grounded theory tradition of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, the researcher identified and labeled key concepts and actions embedded in the data. These codes were then organized into categories through axial coding, highlighting the relationships between various phenomena and contextual factors. Finally, selective coding was used to develop a central narrative that integrates the categories into a theoretical model of sustainable tourism as practiced in the local context. Throughout the analytical process, constant comparison techniques were employed to ensure theoretical saturation, and analytic memos were used to document insights, reflections, and emerging patterns.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were implemented. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where selected participants were invited to review preliminary interpretations. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data across different stakeholder groups and by incorporating field observations. Dependability and confirmability were addressed by maintaining an audit trail of methodological decisions and analytical steps, and by engaging in peer debriefing with academic supervisors and research collaborators familiar with the Philippine tourism context. These measures contributed to the overall rigor and transparency of the study, supporting its contributions to both theory and practice in sustainable tourism development.

RESULTS

In both research sites, community empowerment consistently emerged as a central dimension of sustainable tourism. Respondents emphasized that sustainability cannot be achieved without the active leadership and ownership of local communities. In Palawan, residents were involved in a range of community-initiated activities such as eco-guided mangrove tours, indigenous cultural performances, and homestays. These initiatives reflected a strong sense of agency and territorial stewardship. In Bohol, similar efforts were found particularly in inland barangays where tourism cooperatives had taken control of operations, managing tour schedules, distributing revenues for community welfare, and rotating roles among members. These practices positioned local actors not merely as beneficiaries but as decision-makers.

Sustainability was deeply embedded in cultural practices and ecological ethics. Participants in both Palawan and Bohol frequently referred to indigenous knowledge systems and customary rules that governed the use of natural resources. In Palawan, the Batak and Tagbanua communities upheld traditional laws that restricted forest and marine resource extraction based on seasonal cues. Similarly, in Bohol, local rituals, fishing taboos, and festivals reinforced collective responsibility for environmental protection. Respondents stressed that tourism development should be aligned with these values, which were perceived as informal yet effective systems of environmental governance.

Despite local efforts, both Palawan and Bohol faced increasing challenges from large-scale tourism developments. Participants expressed concerns over the environmental degradation caused by rapid infrastructure expansion, the marginalization of local enterprises, and the lack of regulatory enforcement. In Bohol, large resorts were reported to have bypassed local ordinances, while in Palawan, overcrowding and resource depletion in ecotourism hotspots raised questions about the limits of carrying capacity. Respondents observed that sustainability principles were inconsistently applied, often favouring powerful investors while burdening small community operators.

Participants across both provinces highlighted a disconnect between national tourism policies and their implementation at the local level. Respondents reported overlapping mandates among government agencies, conflicting directives, and a lack of technical capacity among local government units. In several cases, community-based proposals were stalled or rejected due to bureaucratic hurdles, while large commercial projects proceeded with minimal scrutiny. The absence of effective monitoring and evaluation systems further contributed to governance ambiguities and reduced public trust in institutions responsible for enforcing sustainability standards.

External factors such as NGOs, international donors, and academic institutions played a visible role in shaping sustainable tourism initiatives. While many partnerships were described as beneficial particularly in terms of funding and capacity-building, respondents also raised concerns about dependency, limited local ownership, and the imposition of external agendas. Several participants recounted experiences where decision-making remained centralized in Manila or donor offices, while community members were relegated to implementer roles. However, examples of successful partnerships grounded in co-design and mutual respect also emerged, demonstrating the potential for external engagement to support rather than overshadow community agency.

DISCUSSION

Reclaiming Sustainability Through Community Empowerment

In both Palawan and Bohol, community empowerment emerged as a foundational dimension of sustainable tourism. Participants consistently emphasized that tourism development could not be sustainable without the meaningful inclusion and leadership of local communities. Rather than being passive recipients of tourism projects, residents in these areas demonstrated agency in shaping how tourism unfolds in their environment. Through locally initiated activities such as eco-guided mangrove tours, seaweed farming demonstrations, homestays, and indigenous cultural performances, communities reclaimed sustainability as both a livelihood strategy and a form of territorial stewardship. These practices reflect what [Scheyvens \(1999\)](#) refers to as “empowerment tourism,” where participation is not only economic but also socio-political.

In Palawan, where environmental consciousness is deeply rooted in both education and tradition, respondents described how youth organizations, women’s cooperatives, and barangay councils actively participate in tourism-related decision-making. One community guide shared, “We lead the tours, we plant the mangroves, and we teach the tourists why this land matters. This is our way to protect what is ours.” Such expressions of local pride highlight how sustainability, in this context, is intimately tied to identity and place attachment. Unlike externally imposed conservation models, these community-driven efforts integrate tourism into everyday life, aligning economic goals with social cohesion and environmental care.

In Bohol, the dynamic was somewhat more fragmented due to greater commercialization and outside investment in tourism infrastructure. Nonetheless, pockets of strong community engagement were evident, especially in rural inland barangays where tourism cooperatives had taken control of tour operations. In these areas, residents managed booking systems, rotated guiding responsibilities, and used tourism revenues to fund local needs such as school repairs and health clinics. These initiatives suggest that sustainable tourism functions most effectively when local actors retain control over planning, implementation, and benefit distribution. The findings resonate with the work of [Sapkota \(2024\)](#) and [Tabatabaei et al. \(2025\)](#), who argue that community control not merely participation is a prerequisite for genuine sustainability in tourism contexts.

Participants also noted that empowerment requires more than opportunity; it requires capacity-building, legal recognition, and trust from external partners. Several respondents described frustration with tokenistic consultations by government agencies or private developers who sought endorsement without sharing decision-making power. One barangay official recounted, “They came here saying they wanted to help the community, but all the decisions were already made. That is not empowerment.” This critique underscores the need to distinguish between surface-level engagement and authentic empowerment. As [Eckardt et al. \(2024\)](#) suggest, participatory sustainability in tourism must be grounded in power-sharing mechanisms and long-term institutional support.

Overall, the data reveal that community empowerment in sustainable tourism is not a static outcome but a negotiated and ongoing process. It evolves through everyday practices, contestations, and collaborations among stakeholders with unequal power. In both Palawan and Bohol, local communities are actively redefining what sustainability means in their contexts moving beyond policy prescriptions to articulate culturally grounded and territorially rooted forms of environmental and economic stewardship. These findings affirm the central role of community agency in sustainable tourism and call for policy frameworks that prioritize local autonomy, equitable resource access, and long-term capacity development.

Cultural and Ecological Values in Practice

Cultural identity and ecological ethics play a central role in shaping how sustainability is perceived and enacted by local communities in both Palawan and Bohol. Participants frequently linked sustainable tourism to longstanding cultural practices and spiritual worldviews that emphasize balance, respect for nature, and collective responsibility. These cultural values are not peripheral to tourism but rather provide the moral and epistemological foundations for what communities consider to be sustainable behaviour. In this sense, sustainability is not an imported concept but one that is deeply embedded in local ontologies and everyday practices.

In both research sites, respondents referenced indigenous and folk beliefs that guided how natural resources should be used and protected. In Palawan, several participants described how the Batak and Tagbanua peoples

observe customary laws that restrict access to sacred forests and coral reefs during certain seasons. These practices, grounded in indigenous cosmologies, function as de facto conservation systems long before state-protected area regimes were introduced. One elder explained, “The forest tells us when to stop and when to harvest. That is how we keep it alive. Tourism must learn from that.” Such narratives highlight the need for tourism models that respect and integrate indigenous ecological knowledge systems.

In Bohol, similar expressions of cultural ecology were evident in coastal barangays where traditional fishing taboos and community rituals marked ecological thresholds. Local festivals, such as the *Sandugo* celebration, also reinforce historical narratives of inter-communal cooperation and environmental guardianship. These traditions, while often seen as cultural artifacts, continue to influence contemporary decision-making about tourism, such as determining tourist access to marine sanctuaries or setting limits on daily visitor numbers. The integration of cultural heritage with environmental values aligns with the conceptual framework of biocultural conservation [Araneda et al. \(2025\)](#), which posits that cultural diversity and biodiversity are interdependent and must be preserved together.

Importantly, participants also articulated how cultural practices are being adapted to meet the demands of tourism without losing their original meanings. In Palawan, storytelling practices that once took place within community rituals are now used in guided tours, allowing visitors to understand the landscape through local cosmologies. Rather than commodifying their culture, residents emphasized that this was a form of education and advocacy. As one youth guide stated, “We are not performers. We are teachers. We want the tourists to see what we see, not just take pictures.” This conscious framing challenges dominant tourism paradigms that often exoticize local traditions for consumer entertainment, instead positioning culture as a dialogical and pedagogical force within sustainable tourism.

However, there are tensions between preserving cultural authenticity and adapting to tourism economies. In Bohol, some participants expressed concern that overexposure to tourist markets had led to a dilution of meaning in certain rituals and a shift toward spectacle rather than substance. As tourism becomes more commercialized, the risk of cultural erosion increases, especially when external actors dictate how culture is packaged and sold. This concern reflects broader debates in tourism studies regarding the commodification of culture and the authenticity-performance nexus ([Cohen, 1988](#); [MacCannell, 1973](#)).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that sustainable tourism in the Philippines cannot be divorced from the cultural and ecological worldviews of its people. These values serve as informal yet powerful governance systems that regulate behavior, guide decision-making, and mediate the relationship between communities and their environment. The data support the argument that sustainability must be place-based and culturally situated, rather than defined solely by international metrics or technocratic standards. Recognizing and empowering these cultural logics offers a pathway toward more resilient and socially just tourism development in the Philippine context.

Frictions with Mass Tourism and Commercial Development

While community-driven initiatives and cultural values provide strong foundations for sustainable tourism, both Palawan and Bohol face increasing pressure from commercial tourism developments that often conflict with local sustainability efforts. Participants across both sites voiced concern over the growing dominance of mass tourism models characterized by high visitor volume, rapid infrastructure expansion, and profit-driven investment that have begun to erode ecological stability and community agency. These frictions illustrate the tensions between top-down tourism growth strategies and bottom-up sustainability practices.

In Bohol, where the rise of beach resorts and large-scale tour operations has accelerated in the past decade, several community members observed that tourism has become “too fast and too big” for the environment to absorb. Multiple respondents cited the proliferation of cement structures near protected areas and inadequate enforcement of environmental regulations. One small resort owner lamented, “We follow the rules and try to minimize our waste. But then a big hotel gets built without proper permits. Where is the fairness in that?” Such observations point to a growing perception that sustainability guidelines are inconsistently applied and that larger players are often exempted from the environmental scrutiny imposed on smaller community businesses.

In Palawan, which has historically promoted its image as an ecotourism sanctuary, residents expressed concern that the increasing volume of tourists especially in hotspots such as El Nido and Coron was beginning to

undermine the very resources that attracted visitors in the first place. Participants noted issues such as overcrowding, coral reef damage from boat anchors, and the depletion of freshwater sources in tourism-heavy barangays. These impacts were often attributed to the lack of effective carrying capacity limits and the prioritization of economic returns over ecological thresholds. As one NGO staff member stated, “Tourism here is called ‘eco,’ but when you see hundreds of boats and thousands of people daily, you wonder what that word really means anymore.”

These findings align with broader critiques in tourism literature concerning the contradictions of “green-washed” tourism, where sustainability is used as a branding strategy rather than a substantive commitment (Elshaer et al., 2024). Participants noted that while the language of sustainability appears in marketing materials and development plans, actual practices often fall short due to weak monitoring mechanisms, limited inter-agency coordination, and the prioritization of investor interests. Moreover, when mass tourism projects are introduced without meaningful consultation, local communities lose the ability to influence decisions that directly affect their lands, livelihoods, and cultural landscapes.

A key concern raised by several respondents is the lack of inclusive tourism planning. In both Palawan and Bohol, residents described how decisions about large tourism projects were made by national or provincial authorities without involving barangay councils or civil society groups. This top-down approach not only alienates community members but also leads to land use conflicts, displacement, and rising inequality in the distribution of tourism benefits. The result, as one community leader noted, is “sustainable tourism for outsiders, not for us.” This disconnect illustrates the structural limitations of current governance models that treat sustainability as a technical objective rather than a socially negotiated process.

Overall, this section reveals that the expansion of commercial tourism poses significant risks to the long-term viability of community-based and environmentally conscious tourism practices. The friction between localized, small-scale sustainability efforts and large-scale mass tourism reflects a broader struggle over the meaning and ownership of sustainability. Unless these contradictions are addressed through participatory planning, clear enforcement of environmental standards, and equitable regulation of tourism actors, the sustainability discourse risks becoming a symbolic label masking unsustainable realities on the ground.

Institutional Fragmentation and Policy Disjuncture

Despite the presence of national frameworks promoting sustainable tourism in the Philippines, such as the Tourism Act of 2009 and the National Ecotourism Strategy, participants across both Palawan and Bohol emphasized a persistent disconnect between policy formulation at higher levels and its implementation on the ground. This disconnects manifests through institutional fragmentation, limited capacity among local government units (LGUs), and an overall lack of coherence in governance structures tasked with managing tourism development sustainably. These concerns suggest that sustainability in tourism is not only a matter of practice but also a matter of institutional alignment and coordination.

Respondents commonly described policy implementation as inconsistent, reactive, and sometimes contradictory. In Palawan, for instance, several community leaders shared their frustration with overlapping mandates between the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the Department of Tourism (DOT), and local environmental offices. These overlapping jurisdictions often lead to conflicting decisions regarding tourism permits, conservation regulations, and enforcement responsibilities. One municipal officer remarked, “Sometimes we are told to protect the watershed, and other times to promote more hotels. We do not know which direction to follow.” This institutional ambiguity results in confusion at the local level and creates loopholes that can be exploited by powerful actors.

In Bohol, participants highlighted how local ordinances supporting community-based tourism are frequently overridden or ignored when large-scale investors negotiate directly with provincial or national agencies. This pattern reinforces a top-down system in which local governance structures particularly barangay councils lack the authority or resources to challenge decisions that compromise sustainability. Several community tourism operators reported that their proposals for small-scale ecotourism facilities were delayed or denied due to bureaucratic hurdles, while commercial resorts received fast-track approval. These experiences point to an uneven playing field shaped by political patronage, administrative inefficiencies, and a lack of procedural transparency.

Moreover, many respondents identified the absence of effective monitoring and evaluation systems as a core weakness in the policy framework. Although environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are legally required, participants questioned their rigor and independence, citing cases where assessments were rushed, outdated, or conducted by consultants affiliated with developers. As one NGO representative in Palawan noted, “The EIA has become a box to tick, not a real safeguard.” This situation undermines the credibility of environmental regulation and erodes public trust in institutions tasked with safeguarding sustainability goals.

The lack of inter-agency coordination and limited local capacity also hinder adaptive management. In both research sites, respondents noted that LGUs are often overwhelmed by the technical demands of tourism planning, especially in areas experiencing rapid visitor growth. Funding constraints, limited personnel, and insufficient technical training make it difficult for local offices to conduct regular environmental monitoring, manage waste disposal, or enforce visitor limits. While the Department of Tourism has launched capacity-building programs, their reach remains uneven, and their effectiveness is curtailed by the political dynamics of local governance.

These findings resonate with existing scholarship on tourism governance in developing contexts, where decentralization without adequate institutional support often leads to fragmentation rather than empowerment (Charles et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2025). In the Philippine case, although LGUs are mandated to play a leading role in tourism development, their authority is frequently undermined by vertical power structures and uneven resource allocation. The result is a form of governance that appears participatory in design but remains centralized and opaque in practice.

In sum, institutional fragmentation and policy disjuncture constitute significant structural barriers to sustainable tourism in the Philippines. While the normative commitment to sustainability is evident in official discourse, its realization depends on the alignment of institutions, the clarification of mandates, and the empowerment of local governance actors. Without such reforms, sustainable tourism risks remaining a rhetorical goal rather than a lived reality in communities directly affected by tourism development.

The Role of External Actors and Uneven Partnerships

Across both research sites, external actors particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international donors, academic institutions, and private foundations played a significant role in shaping the landscape of sustainable tourism. These actors contributed by providing technical expertise, training, seed funding, and policy guidance to local stakeholders. However, while many of these partnerships were described as beneficial, participants also raised concerns about dependency, power asymmetries, and the inconsistent alignment of external agendas with local priorities. This duality reveals the complex dynamics of partnership in tourism governance, where the presence of external support can simultaneously enable and constrain community autonomy.

In Palawan, several community initiatives such as coastal resource management programs and indigenous ecotourism cooperatives were launched with the support of international conservation organizations. Respondents acknowledged that these partnerships provided critical resources and helped local groups gain legitimacy in policy circles. For example, one indigenous leader explained, “Without the NGO, our voice would not have reached the tourism council. They helped us speak in a language the government understands.” Such forms of translation and advocacy highlight the intermediary role that NGOs often play between communities and bureaucracies, reinforcing arguments in the literature about the bridging function of civil society in development settings (Milhem et al., 2025; Stevenson, 2024).

However, concerns emerged regarding the sustainability and ownership of externally driven projects. Some participants described how donor-funded initiatives were launched with enthusiasm but faded once funding cycles ended. Others noted that decision-making processes were often led by external consultants, with limited space for community input beyond formal consultation. In Bohol, one village tourism officer noted, “The program looked good on paper, but the real decisions were made in Manila and in foreign offices. We were just asked to implement.” These reflections echo critiques of top-down development assistance, where local actors become implementers rather than co-creators, raising questions about whose vision of sustainability is being promoted (Lomas et al., 2025; Sihvonen et al., 2024).

The role of academic institutions was similarly mixed. While local universities provided important support in areas such as impact assessments, policy formulation, and skills training, some respondents felt that research projects were extractive. Several community members described experiences where they participated in surveys or focus groups but never received feedback or saw tangible outcomes. This lack of reciprocity was interpreted as a form of academic tourism, where knowledge is harvested from communities without building long-term relationships or contributing to local capacity.

Private sector involvement also raised questions about partnership dynamics. While some resort operators and tour companies supported environmental campaigns or sponsored local festivals, these efforts were often perceived as corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives driven by branding rather than substantive engagement. One tourism cooperative member remarked, “They give donations during holidays, but they do not invite us to planning meetings. That is not real partnership.” The critique reflects a broader scepticism toward tokenistic involvement by the private sector, particularly when economic power is not accompanied by shared governance or benefit distribution.

Despite these concerns, several respondents expressed a desire for more constructive partnerships particularly those grounded in mutual accountability, long-term commitment, and respect for local knowledge systems. Successful collaborations were characterized by ongoing dialogue, co-designed projects, and flexible adaptation to local needs. In both sites, participants highlighted the importance of building “relational capital” over time, suggesting that trust and cultural sensitivity are as important as financial investment or technical assistance.

In summary, while external actors play an important role in advancing sustainable tourism, their effectiveness depends on the nature of their engagement. Partnerships that reinforce local leadership, ensure meaningful participation, and align with community-defined priorities tend to foster more resilient and equitable tourism models. Conversely, when power remains concentrated in external institutions, sustainability risks becoming another imposed framework that overlooks the lived realities of those most affected. These findings affirm the importance of rethinking partnership models in tourism governance, moving from transactional arrangements toward more transformative and justice-oriented collaborations.

Toward a Grounded Model of Sustainable Tourism in the Philippines

The empirical insights from Palawan and Bohol point toward the emergence of a grounded, culturally embedded, and politically situated model of sustainable tourism. This model departs from technocratic and metrics-driven approaches often found in global sustainability discourse, instead highlighting the everyday negotiations, values, and power relations that shape how tourism is made sustainable or unsustainable at the local level. The data suggest that sustainable tourism in the Philippine context cannot be reduced to environmental indicators or policy compliance alone; rather, it is a relational process grounded in community agency, cultural meaning, and institutional alignment.

First, the findings confirm that community empowerment is a foundational principle. Locally initiated practices, such as cooperative-led tours and indigenous conservation systems, show that sustainability gains legitimacy when it emerges from within the community, rather than being externally imposed. Empowerment in this context includes not only economic participation but also control over planning, representation in governance forums, and the ability to articulate culturally rooted visions of sustainability. The community is not merely a stakeholder but a primary architect of sustainable tourism.

Second, the model emphasizes the role of cultural and ecological values as guiding norms. Local worldviews shaped by concepts such as bayanihan (collective solidarity), ancestral domain stewardship, and seasonal ecological knowledge serve as informal regulatory systems that govern how tourism interacts with nature. These values are not fixed or nostalgic but adaptive and negotiated. Communities selectively translate cultural practices into tourism settings, using them as tools for advocacy, education, and territorial protection. Sustainability, therefore, is not just a technical goal but a cultural process.

Third, the model must account for structural frictions caused by the dominance of mass tourism and market-driven development. As shown in both research sites, unregulated tourism expansion often undermines local initiatives, erodes environmental safeguards, and reproduces inequalities in access to resources and decision-making. Sustainable tourism cannot be realized under conditions where commercial interests routinely override

community rights and environmental thresholds. As such, the grounded model calls for clear regulation, the enforcement of carrying capacities, and mechanisms for equitable benefit distribution.

Fourth, institutional coherence is critical to sustaining any local sustainability effort. The interviews reveal that while national policies espouse sustainability, their translation into action is often hampered by institutional fragmentation, limited local capacity, and inconsistent enforcement. A grounded model of sustainable tourism thus requires the integration of national frameworks with bottom-up planning, the clarification of agency roles, and the provision of technical and financial support for local government units. Multi-level governance must be restructured to allow meaningful community participation and accountability at all stages of tourism development.

Finally, the model acknowledges the ambiguous but potentially transformative role of external actors. NGOs, academic institutions, and donor agencies can facilitate capacity-building, visibility, and innovation. However, these partnerships must be reimagined to avoid dependency and tokenism. A grounded model requires partnerships that are built on shared values, mutual accountability, and long-term commitment. Local voices must guide the terms of engagement, ensuring that sustainability efforts reflect lived realities rather than donor agendas.

Taken together, these five dimensions form the contours of a grounded model of sustainable tourism specific to the Philippine context one that is culturally situated, politically aware, and ecologically attuned. This model does not seek to replace universal sustainability frameworks but rather to complement and challenge them by foregrounding the situated experiences and aspirations of communities that live with the consequences of tourism. For policymakers, the findings call for a shift from prescriptive, top-down models toward participatory planning processes that value local knowledge and institutional plurality. For researchers, the study contributes a place-based theoretical lens that may be relevant for other archipelagic and postcolonial tourism contexts in Southeast Asia and beyond.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how sustainable tourism is interpreted, practiced, and challenged by local stakeholders in two of the Philippines' most prominent ecotourism destinations: Palawan and Bohol. Employing a grounded theory approach, the research foregrounded the voices and experiences of community members, tourism practitioners, government officials, and civil society actors who operate at the heart of sustainability implementation. The findings underscore that sustainable tourism in the Philippine context is not merely a policy framework or developmental goal but a complex, negotiated process shaped by cultural meaning, ecological stewardship, institutional dynamics, and power relations.

Community empowerment emerged as a foundational pillar of sustainability. In both sites, local actors actively engaged in shaping tourism through cooperative models, cultural storytelling, indigenous environmental ethics, and grassroots regulation of resource use. These efforts reflect a form of sustainability rooted not in external certification schemes but in locally embedded systems of care, solidarity, and knowledge. However, such efforts are frequently constrained by the expansion of mass tourism projects that privilege commercial growth over ecological and social resilience. The resulting tensions reveal the fragility of sustainability claims when not matched by consistent regulation and inclusive governance.

The study also highlighted the critical role of cultural and ecological values in informing tourism practice. Traditions such as bayanihan and indigenous conservation norms are not vestiges of the past but living systems that guide sustainable behaviour. These values offer alternative pathways to sustainability, ones that challenge Western technocratic models and emphasize relational ethics, reciprocity, and respect for the natural world. Yet these cultural systems require protection from commodification and co-optation, particularly as tourism markets increasingly demand curated cultural experiences for consumption.

Institutional fragmentation and governance disjuncture pose further challenges to sustainable tourism implementation. Despite the presence of well-intentioned national policies, the absence of clear mandates, limited local capacity, and politicized decision-making processes have undermined policy coherence and accountability. The study reveals that local government units often lack the resources or authority to regulate tourism in line with sustainability principles, leaving communities vulnerable to unchecked development. Similarly, while external factors such as NGOs and academic institutions offer valuable support, their engagement

must be reconfigured to ensure that partnerships are equitable, participatory, and responsive to community-defined priorities.

In sum, the study advances a grounded model of sustainable tourism that canters on community agency, cultural integrity, institutional synergy, and ecological ethics. It calls for a rethinking of sustainability from the ground up one that honours local contexts, confronts structural inequalities, and reclaims tourism as a tool for inclusive and transformative development. For policymakers, this means adopting governance frameworks that are participatory and adaptable; for practitioners, it requires ongoing dialogue with communities and an ethical commitment to long-term stewardship; and for researchers, it demands deeper engagement with the lived realities of tourism destinations, especially in the Global South.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on critical and decolonial perspectives in sustainable tourism by offering empirical and theoretical insights grounded in the Philippine context. While the findings are specific to Palawan and Bohol, the implications extend to other tourism-dependent regions facing similar tensions between development, conservation, and local empowerment. Future research may build on this foundation by exploring longitudinal changes in community-based tourism, assessing the impact of emerging tourism technologies, and examining post-pandemic recovery strategies through a sustainability lens. Ultimately, the path to sustainable tourism lies not only in plans and policies but in the everyday decisions, struggles, and aspirations of those who inhabit and care for the places tourists seek to experience.

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Data Availability

The qualitative data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the confidential nature of the interview materials and to protect the anonymity of participants. Data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the paper.

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