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Present Opportunities and Future Crises: Managing Tourism Development at the Chocolate Hills, Bohol, the Philippines

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Introduction

One thousand two hundred sixty eight hills — near perfect upturned bowls just 30 to 60 meters in height, covered in grass that turn a deep brown in the light of a summer’s sunset — these are the Chocolate Hills, evoking images of Hershey’s kisses spread out as far as the eye can see, spanning six towns on the island province of Bohol in the Philippines (Figures 1 and 2).

A deck in the town of Carmen provides the best view of the landscape. In 2006, over three hundred thousand people climbed up to the deck, marveled at the landscape, and took pictures. It was projected that there would be more than half a million people trekking up to that view deck by decade’s end, yet one town councilor said that those projections are already outdated. “We had two million people last year,” he claimed. Aside from the view deck in Carmen (and a less prominent one at Sagbayan), the rest of the area remains separate from, and perhaps even indifferent to, tourism. But with an international airport being constructed a mere two hours away, the sheer economic potential of millions of tourists coming to the Chocolate Hills is likely to radically transform this landscape. This probable transformation may cause social and environmental crises. However, it also presents an opportunity to plan and define sustainable development today in a manner that is relevant to the people of Bohol.

To explore how a sustainable development strategy can be planned for the people and the landscape, I conducted a number of semi-structured interviews with national and local government officials, farmers and tourists, as well as representatives from religious, tourism, environment, and agriculture organizations. I also analyzed existing management policies and human ecology studies of the area. I seek here to make brief policy recommendations that can be explored in greater depth in a subsequent paper.
Background

The Chocolate Hills is a karst landscape—a terrain dominated by soluble bedrock (Van Beynen and Townsend, 2005)—where limestone forms both the bedrock and the hills, and rich soil fills the valleys. This landscape holds a large amount of water directly recharged from rainfall and surrounding upland forest watersheds within the limestone (Uhlig, 2004), allowing intensive wet rice cultivation (Figure 3). Relatively drier parts of the area are planted to corn, taro, bananas, coconuts, sweet potato, mangoes, coffee, and cacao (Urich, 1993).

The Chocolate Hills cannot be readily classified as a pristine environment. The landscape consists of a patchwork of hills, farms, and lowland forests. It had been settled and altered by humans for at least five hundred years, if not for millennia (Urich, 1993). In the last few decades, the adoption of new agricultural technologies, systems of land ownership, and agrarian reform has profoundly changed the relationship of communities with the landscape, generating pressures on both. A long-running insurgency and counter-insurgency campaign on the island has affected how government perceives the communities that lived in the hinterlands, at the peripheries of political and social structures (Urich et al., 2001). The recent push for development in fact was partly fueled by the desire to address the roots of the rebellion. Yet amid these changes, rich endemic biodiversity exists in this landscape.

Recent research is finally bringing more light to Bohol’s biodiversity. There are at least 1,312 flora and fauna species on the island, but in a recent survey of 500 shrub samples from a protected watershed, 187 of these were unknown (PPDO, 2004). New tree (Fernando et al., 2009), fern (Barcelona et al., 2006), and bat (PPDO, 2004) species have recently been identified, and there may be 18 new bird species (PPDO, 2004). The tarsier (Tarisus syrichta), one of the world’s smallest primates, has long been the icon for Bohol (Figure 4). More extensive research into its ecology is now being pursued (Neri–Arboleda et al., 2002). Amid the richness of the landscape and the social transformations happening within it, however, the prospect of tourism development adds a new dimension to the relationship between the people and the land.

Bohol is already one of the most important tourism destinations in the Philippines because of its blend of both natural and cultural attractions (PIDS, 2004, PPDO, 2004). Despite a national tourism governance structure divided between competing offices, and an unclear devolution of powers to local government, Bohol has benefited from broad-based public and private sector support for tourism. Bohol’s development strategy has caused a decline in poverty incidence and, in just five years, what was once the one of the poorest provinces is now of median income (NSCB, 2005). However, much of the economic activity occurs around the capital city and beach areas. The attention of local and national governments, organizations, and aid agencies is focused on resort development and waste management, and on balancing dive tourism with subsistence fishing. Inland communities at and around the Chocolate Hills remain poorer than those at the coast (NSCB, 2005), surviving on small landholdings for rice and corn farming. Despite having acquired
land through agrarian reform, farmers are burdened with the weight of increasing costs of farm inputs, sending children to school, recovering from sickness, and burying the dead. In the absence of new economic opportunities, what little land they have will be lost. It is because of this poverty that governments see tourism as a chance to push economic growth in the island’s interior, but given a lack of resources, they have yet to focus on and formulate an approach to manage development.

The Chocolate Hills had long been recognized as one of nation’s picturesque landscapes. It was only in 1997, however, in the wake of controversy quarrying at one of the hills, that President Fidel Ramos brought the area under National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS, Republic Act No. 7586) through Presidential Proclamation No. 1037. The protected area covered the entire landscape of hills and valleys, spanning parts of six municipalities, for a total area of 14,145 hectares. The responsibility of managing the area was given to the national Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and local Protected Areas Management Boards (PAMB), which had representatives from local governments, indigenous communities, non-government organizations, and local communities from within the protected area.

The law requires extensive consultations in the declaration and management of a protected area. However, placing the landscape under NIPAS met considerable opposition. While NIPAS in fact allows for different kinds of zones and uses within a protected area, it was perceived by residents as an attempt to take away their rights to the land (Urich et al., 2001). President Gloria Arroyo issued another proclamation in 2003 that removed the flat land between hills from NIPAS coverage, while retaining a 20-meter buffer zone at the base of each hill (Presidential Proclamation No. 333-2003). Today, only the hills and their buffer zones are under the DENR. The municipalities, with their broad powers under a Local Government Code, have jurisdiction over valleys, subject to a considerable degree of supervision from the provincial government.

Findings and Discussion

It is difficult to find a central theme that can unite most stakeholders behind one development strategy. The DENR sees its mandate in terms of preventing illegal logging in buffer zones and in the remaining forest patches around the hills. On the other hand, some in the tourism sector complain that DENR does its job too well as some of the trees have reached a height that now obstructs the view of the landscape. The provincial and municipal governments dispute the management and development of, and revenue sharing from, the view deck at Carmen. Some of those interviewed believe that seasonal, managed grass fires were essential to the local ecology and the maintenance of the appearance of the hills. Others dispute this claim. Many in the private sector are critical of the recent yet unappealing renovation of the hotel on the view deck, and how expansion plans of the view deck complex will be implemented in relation to a broader strategy for the Chocolate Hills.

Generating consensus appears difficult, but creating a strategy for the area begins from recognizing that the Chocolate Hills comprises the entire landscape. Its ecology embraces not only the hills, or the patches of forest and agricultural land between the hills, but also the diversity of human activity within it. Many of those interviewed recognize this in various degrees. When asked what kind of development they would like to see in the area, most preferred some economic activity that somehow integrated tourism yet nevertheless remains...
rooted in agriculture. Almost all reject a landscape that becomes dominated by structures of concrete and steel.

Policymakers thus tend to reject particular definitions of “modernity” in favor of something guided by a sense of “sustainability”, but it is difficult to assess how widely the community shares this view. Despite the richness of traditional architecture — particularly highlighted in a recent photographic survey (Luspo and Manalo, 2008) — residents with new affluence are likely to trade their wooden ancestral homes for concrete structures. Fortunately, with the help of a leading corporate foundation, some families outside the Chocolate Hills area have chosen to preserve their colonial period homes and convert these to cafes or hostels for tourists. Similarly, many farmers hope that their children would get jobs in the city or abroad as sailors, domestics and nurses rather than inherit and develop the family landholdings. Recent initiatives however from both organizations and government in organic agriculture have captured farmers’ interest with their lower costs and comparable yields. But the crucial link of producing crops for the tourist trade has yet to be explored.

Navigating through the quagmire of different stakeholders stymies the development of a comprehensive strategy, yet this same complexity encourages dynamic governance. The first proclamation designating the Chocolate Hills Protected Area was, despite an intent to create a comprehensive strategy, was flawed for three reasons. First, it countered a movement toward decentralization by placing core responsibility with the DENR, while relegating local stakeholders to ineffective support roles in the PAMBS. Second, it did not include national and local tourism–oriented stakeholders despite the importance of the landscape for tourism. Third, it did not engage the predominantly agriculture–oriented community in defining environmental management goals. On the other hand, the second proclamation reduced the coverage of the first to protect the most important feature of the landscape, while creating opportunities for local governments and other stakeholders to define management that is relevant to the community.

The opportunity for consensus thus exists in the crucial middle where the grand idea of sustainable development meets the gritty realities of the community. An understanding of the Chocolate Hills as a landscape, and an idea of development that appreciates this, can be the foundation for tourism planning. More importantly, from this consensus, leadership is necessary to turn plans into reality.

Recommendations

Managing the landscape begins with managing the land. The six municipalities, through NIPAS, are already part of a governance system that protects the hills themselves. However, under the Local Government Code, they and the provincial government must also coordinate their land use priorities for the valleys in a manner that preserves the landscape. Municipalities have broad powers of land use planning, zoning, and enforcement, and provinces have the duty to coordinate these. Both have shared or complementary powers on the environment, agro–industrial development, and on tourism planning, development, promotion and regulation. The provinces have a responsibility to enrich culture and the arts. At the intersection of these powers and duties, it appears well within the provincial council’s powers to create a coordinative body for the Chocolate Hills area for municipal governments and other stakeholders to gather, build consensus, and collectively plan and manage the area.

Based on my understanding of the consensus that exists, I now propose a framework for the land’s management. Ultimately, tourism provides a lens by which the inherent virtues of the landscape and the
people who shape and belong to it can come into focus. Keeping this in mind, my framework consists of three points:

First, local agriculture must shift from primary food production to high value products linked to tourism. This will allow people to benefit from the opportunities generated by the industry. For example, families that produce rice might be encouraged to make rice cakes and pastries; a coordinated shift to sustainable agro–forestry can likewise be pursued to focus on high–value crops. In both cases, government agencies and organizations can support cooperatives with the development, standards enforcement, and marketing of sustainable and organic products. As these farms and cooperatives develop, the farming and production processes themselves can be integrated into part of the tourism experience. Finally, agencies and organizations must encourage stores, hotels and restaurants to buy from these cooperatives and thus support the local community.

Second, the national environmental and agricultural departments and various organizations must collaborate to develop sustainable agro–forestry. This collaboration is necessary to preserve and expand forest cover. Drawing artificial boundaries between farms and forests is inappropriate when people have settled, used and shaped both for hundreds of years. The PAMB and local governments can encourage collaboration between the national environmental and agricultural departments, and bring organizations to help manage buffer zones and slopes as sustainable agro–forestry zones. This will generate the economic incentive for farmers to protect and increase the forest cover of the landscape.

Third, preserving the landscape entails zoning and building regulations that protect and encourage a traditional, and often a more sustainable, built environment. The rejection of a landscape dominated by steel and concrete points to an instinctive awareness that traditional structures are as much a part of the landscape as the people themselves. With the recent completion of a survey of traditional Bohol architecture, local governments should require that structures follow this template. It will be essential, however, that zoning ordinances allow for intermediate uses between various land classifications. In areas designated as agricultural or agro–forestry zones, people and cooperatives should be allowed to have commercial and processing activities at a scale greater than the restrictive definitions of “backyard” or “cottage” industry if these activities are integrated into the provincial tourism effort and the environmental impact is properly managed. A coffee farm, for example, may be allowed to have lodging, restaurant and processing facilities, particularly if cultivation is done organically and waste is processed into methane for fuel and compost for fertilizer. Lastly, more than simply regulating kinds of use, emphasis should be placed on how structures blend into the overall landscape. Regulations should focus on the height of structures, the footprint they have on the land, and the materials used for their construction.

The combination of these three points, implemented through a mixture of policy tools, can contribute to maintaining the character of the landscape, while integrating the community into a tourism strategy that builds on the positive qualities of that landscape.

Conclusion

Unplanned development often results in a plague of social and environmental problems even amidst a seeming economic boom. In the context of tourism, communities can become alienated and dispossessed as non-residents buy up land and develop an industry for which residents do not have the requisite skills to be employed, often with the locals turning instead to crime and prostitution. Also, the industry that develops often copies ideas from somewhere else, echoing a different environmental context. This can lead to practices that exceed the local ecology's carrying capacity and destroy the uniqueness of the landscape.

The Chocolate Hills presents the opportunity to build on its immense tourism potential and allow the community to benefit while averting a social and environmental crisis. It is essential that the entire area, despite overlapping jurisdictions and mandates, be treated as one landscape where all stakeholders are engaged in planning, implementation, and enforcement. I believe that there is a sense of awareness of the area as a landscape, and that this can be a foundation for new policies.

A set of policies that encourages a shift to higher value agricultural activities can allow the community to remain true to its relationship to the land and preserve the landscape, while allowing the people to benefit from tourism. Through this approach, the people of the Chocolate Hills can avert future crises by seizing the opportunities offered by the present.
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**References**


