

Booming but not Blooming: Unequal Gains from Bohol's Tourism Surge

Rechel A. Bubuli, DPA^{1*}, Jhea Mae M. Canete¹, Norielou M. Pinoliad, PhD¹, Mary Rose B. Lumantas², Carmel D. Aniga³, Jesszon B. Cano, DBA⁴, Precious Joy L. Patigdas⁵, Gigi L. Ancog⁶, Sheila Mae O. Zafra, MENRM⁷

¹Bohol Island State University-Main Campus, Tagbilaran City, Bohol, Philippines

²Bohol Island State University – Candijay Campus, Candijay, Bohol, Philippines (ORCID: 0009-0003-2773-5963)

³Southern Leyte State University-Main Campus, Sogod, Southern Leyte, Philippines (ORCID ID: 0009-0009-7391-2549)

⁴Bohol Island State University – Candijay Campus, Candijay, Bohol, Philippines (ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7071-033X)

⁵Bohol Island State University – Candijay Campus, Candijay, Bohol, Philippines (ORCID ID:0009-0003-3642-3312)

⁶Bohol Island State University – Clarin Campus, Clarin, Bohol, Philippines (ORCID ID: 0009-0002-3037-5121)

⁷Bohol Island State University – Clarin Campus, Bilar, Bohol, Philippines (ORCID: 0009-0008-9603-7460)

ABSTRACT: This commentary critically examines Bohol's booming tourism industry, which recorded over 1 million arrivals and ₱75.6 billion in revenues in 2023. While heralded as a post-pandemic recovery success, the rapid growth has triggered rising living costs, environmental strain, and marginalization of local communities in tourism planning. Drawing on government statistics and community reports, the paper explores how economic gains often bypass informal vendors, indigenous groups, and coastal households—highlighting the disconnect between top-down development and grassroots needs. It calls for inclusive governance, community-based tourism, and policy reforms aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure tourism becomes a tool for empowerment rather than exclusion.

KEYWORDS: community empowerment, cultural heritage, economic inequality, participatory governance, policy reform, tourism resilience, vulnerable groups

INTRODUCTION

Tourism in Bohol has experienced a dramatic recovery following the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Bohol Provincial Tourism Office (BPTO), tourist arrivals surged from just 535,803 in 2022 to 1,012,854 in 2023—nearly doubling in a single year. This rebound was primarily driven by a 313% increase in visitor volume—from 179,781 arrivals in 2021 to approximately 741,000 by October 2023—prompting local officials to label it a “revenge travel” effect. Financially, this boom translated into a staggering ₱75.6 billion in tourism receipts in 2023, surpassing the ₱900 million target by generating income nearly 84 times that amount. The province's GDP also saw significant uplift, growing at 7.1% and positioning Bohol as the third-largest economy in Central Visayas, fueled largely by tourism-driven investments totaling ₱29.3 billion in 2023.

This commentary argues that the macro-level indicators of tourism success in Bohol mask the socio-economic exclusions, rising inequalities, and governance gaps experienced by local communities. While these figures suggest a booming industry supported by improved infrastructure—such as expanded international flight routes and the UNESCO Global Geopark designation—concerns are intensifying among residents over inflated living costs, environmental degradation, and limited community involvement in tourism decision-making. This paper explores the disjunction between the glowing narrative of tourism-led development and the lived realities of Boholano communities, especially marginalized groups, whose voices are often excluded from planning processes. By analyzing government statistics, community-level reports, and development frameworks such as the SDGs, this commentary calls for a critical rethinking of tourism as a development strategy—one that prioritizes equity, sustainability, and local empowerment over profit-driven growth.

Booming for Whom? Socio-Economic Inequalities Amid Tourism Growth

Tourist arrivals in Bohol surged to 1,012,854 in 2023, generating ₱75.6 billion in revenue. While this signals economic dynamism, a deeper inspection reveals a skewed distribution of benefits. Table 1 and Figure 1 show a stark contrast between tourism income and improvements in community-level welfare indicators.

Table 1. Bohol Tourism Statistics, 2019–2023 (Department of Tourism, 2024). Steady revenue rise contrasts with stagnant local income indicators, suggesting unequal benefit distribution.

Year	Tourist Arrivals	Revenue (₱ Billion)
2019	1,200,000+	10.3
2020	190,000	2.1
2021	179,781	2.4
2022	535,803	5.9
2023	1,012,854	75.6

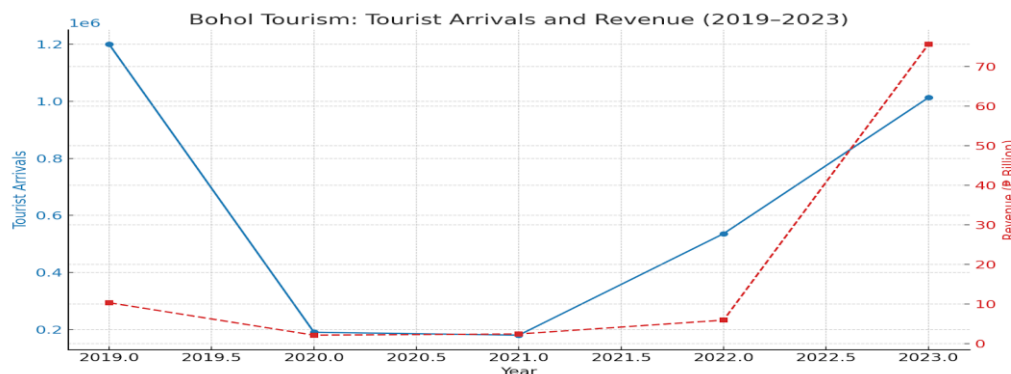


Figure 1. Bohol Tourist Arrivals and Revenue Chart, 2019–2023. Growth in tourist arrivals and receipts has not translated into proportionate socio-economic benefits for local communities.

While Bohol's GDP increased by 7.1%, field reports suggest that marginalized communities, including indigenous groups and informal workers, remain excluded from formal tourism circuits. This reflects a failure to meet SDG 8.5, which calls for "productive employment and decent work for all."

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL IMPACTS

Rapid coastal development—especially in areas like Panglao—has resulted in coral reef destruction, unregulated waste disposal, and disruption of fish sanctuaries (Llorin, 2023). Cultural rituals have been commodified and repackaged for tourist consumption, stripping them of original meaning.

These impacts undermine SDG 11.4 (safeguard cultural and natural heritage) and SDG 12.2 (sustainable management of resources). Tourism growth, if unregulated, jeopardizes the island's long-term ecological and cultural integrity.

Local Cost of Living Pressures

Tourism-induced inflation has raised the cost of living, especially for low-income families. BPTO (2024) reports a 38% increase in average rental prices over three years in tourist-heavy areas. Prices of food, utilities, and services have followed suit.

This disproportionately affects informal vendors and working-class residents, undermining SDG 10.1 (income growth for the bottom 40%) and SDG 8.6 (reduce youth unemployment).

COUNTERARGUMENTS AND LIMITATIONS

Some communities in Bohol have benefited from tourism—especially those with direct integration into tourism value chains such as eco-parks, cultural shows, and homestays. These initiatives demonstrate the potential for tourism to empower local groups.

However, participatory approaches remain poorly implemented due to limited barangay-level capacity, top-down policy design, and elite capture. In many cases, what are labeled as consultations are symbolic rather than substantive, sidelining grassroots actors.

This commentary primarily uses secondary data and localized reports, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across Bohol. Additionally, it does not delve deeply into the government's strategic trade-offs or sustainability mitigation measures already underway. Broader, field-based studies are needed to offer a more complete picture.

Policy Shifts for Inclusive Tourism

Unchecked tourism expansion risks deepening inequality and eroding environmental and cultural integrity. To pivot toward equity and sustainability, the following shifts are essential:

1. From Tokenism to Participation

Mandate structured, inclusive local consultations through local ordinances that institutionalize community involvement in tourism planning and evaluation. Ensure participation of underrepresented groups—including Indigenous communities (e.g., Eskaya), women, youth, fisherfolk, and vendors—moving beyond perfunctory dialogues to co-decision-making at all stages of tourism development. (Aligned with SDG 16.7 – Inclusive and participatory decision-making)

2. From Trickle-Down to Targeted Redistribution

Establish a Barangay Tourism Equity Fund by allocating a fixed percentage of tourism tax revenues to community projects, infrastructure, and social services. This fund should prioritize barangays directly affected by tourism pressures to help close the benefit gap and uplift low-income households. (Aligned with SDG 10.1 – Income growth for the bottom 40%)

3. From Elite-Driven to Community-Based Enterprises

Scale up community-based tourism (CBT) by offering capacity-building, seed funding, and market linkages for locally owned homestays, eco-parks, and cultural experiences. Prioritize tourism products that preserve local heritage and provide dignified, sustainable work. (Aligned with SDG 8.5 – Productive employment and decent work for all)

4. From Price Volatility to Cost-of-Living Protections

Implement municipal-level price stabilization measures to counter tourism-driven inflation in rent, food, and transport. Explore social protection schemes such as housing subsidies or livelihood grants for displaced workers and vulnerable residents. (Aligned with SDG 1.3 – Social protection systems for all)

5. From Overdevelopment to Environmental Governance

Enforce environmental zoning and carrying capacity limits in tourism hotspots, particularly in fragile ecosystems like Panglao. Require impact assessments, eco-certification, and regular audits for tourism operators. (Aligned with SDG 11.6 – Reduce environmental impact of cities and tourism zones)

6. From Fragmented Oversight to Coordinated Action

Institutionalize inter-agency collaboration by formalizing data-sharing protocols between the Department of Tourism (DOT), Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), and LGUs. Publicly disclose tourism revenues, environmental indicators, and community impact data to build transparency and accountability. (Aligned with SDG 17.14 – Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development)

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING THE “BOOM”

Bohol's surging tourism numbers reflect post-pandemic resilience and economic revival. But beneath this narrative lies a more complex reality: rising inequality, marginalization of vulnerable groups, and ecological degradation.

If left unchecked, Bohol's current tourism model will deepen exclusion and damage the very foundations of its appeal. Strategic policy shifts must replace business-as-usual approaches, aligning tourism growth with the principles of equity, participation, and sustainability.

Tourism's true success lies not in arrivals counted but in lives improved. It is time for Bohol to center its people—not just its attractions—at the heart of its tourism strategy.

Looking ahead, several research gaps must be addressed to inform more equitable and sustainable tourism development in Bohol and similar island economies. There is a pressing need for disaggregated data on how tourism revenues are distributed across socio-economic groups, especially among Indigenous peoples, informal workers, and coastal households. Future studies should explore the impacts of tourism on local prices by tracking cost-of-living trends—such as rental rates, food, and transportation—in high-tourism versus low-tourism barangays. Scientific assessments are also necessary to determine the ecological carrying capacity of tourism hotspots like Panglao, including the effects on marine biodiversity, waste generation, and land use. Additionally, there is limited empirical evaluation of the effectiveness and scalability of community-based tourism (CBT) models in the province. Research should also examine how well national tourism and environmental laws are implemented at the local level, and whether participatory mechanisms—particularly those involving Indigenous groups and youth—are truly inclusive and deliberative. Finally, given Bohol's exposure to climate-related risks, further investigation is needed into how tourism intersects with local climate adaptation strategies and disaster resilience. Addressing these gaps will help ensure that tourism development becomes not just economically successful but socially just and environmentally sound.

REFERENCES

- 1) Bohol Provincial Tourism Office. (2024). Annual Tourism Statistics 2023. Tagbilaran City: BPTO.
- 2) Central Visayas State University. (2022). Community Participation in Tourism Planning. Dumaguete: CVSU Press.
- 3) Department of Tourism. (2024). Tourism Annual Report 2023. Manila: DOT.
- 4) DENR. (2024). Carrying Capacity Guidelines for Coastal Tourism Areas. Manila: DENR.
- 5) Llorin, R. (2023). Tourism and Displacement: The Case of Eskaya Communities in Bohol. *Journal of Filipino Cultural Studies*, 15(2), 103–119.
- 6) Mearns, K. (2021). Community-Based Tourism and Local Empowerment in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(7), 985–1001.