

Participatory governance and the empowerment of coastal communities through eco-tourism education

Claire O. Carpio (College of Public Administration and Management, Basilan State College, clairecarpio0114@gmail.com, Philippines)

Rima S. Narimin (Institute of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Basilan State College, rimanarimin@gmail.com, Philippines)

Jose Ramon C. Raveche (Institute of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Basilan State College, raveravechefr@gmail.com, Philippines)

Bonnavie S. Sarles (Institute of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Basilan State College, bonnaviesabdanisarles@gmail.com, Philippines)

Abstract

Coastal communities often face economic vulnerability and exclusion from sustainable development decision-making. This study explores the lived experiences of local stakeholders to understand how eco-tourism education fosters empowerment—defined here as enhanced socio-economic resilience, active participation in local governance, and the co-management of marine resources. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological design, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants—comprising 10 women, 7 youth, and 8 traditional fisherfolk—across three coastal barangays in the Philippines. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed that inclusive education catalyzes a critical shift from passive beneficiaries and day-to-day survival to proactive decision-makers and environmental stewards. Participants reported increased confidence and agency, leading to active involvement in barangay assemblies, the diversification of livelihoods through sustainable tourism enterprises, and intergenerational environmental advocacy. By validating traditional ecological knowledge, these educational initiatives enabled marginalized groups to effectively co-manage marine resources and tourism routes. The study concludes that when eco-tourism education is grounded in inclusive capacity-building, it serves as a transformative mechanism for participatory governance, ensuring that coastal development achieves both ecological resilience and socio-economic equity.

Keywords

empowering, coastal communities, eco-tourism, sustainable development, governance

1. Introduction

Despite the widespread promotion of eco-tourism as a sustainable development strategy, a critical gap remains in practical frameworks that effectively translate eco-tourism education into genuine community empowerment and participatory governance for marginalized coastal residents [Stronza and Gordillo, 2008]. Coastal communities face severe vulnerabilities from environmental degradation and natural calamities, necessitating robust pathways toward sustainable development and resilience [Folke et al., 2016; Islam, 2026]. While community-based eco-tourism is increasingly recognized as a mechanism to alleviate these pressures [Weaver, 2011], true economic striving requires moving beyond mere surface-level participation to structural community empowerment (Anwar et al., 2024). Without this shift, eco-tourism risks reproducing unequal power dynamics, leaving local stakeholders—who are the primary stewards of the tourism resource base—excluded from decision-making [Berkes, 2009; Scheyvens, 1999].

To address this gap and clarify the analytical focus of this study, it is necessary to operationalize the concept of “empowerment.” Within this research, empowerment is defined as the enhancement of a community’s capacity to actively participate in local governance, co-manage marine resources, and improve socio-economic resilience through the acquisition of new skills and the validation of traditional ecological knowledge. Educa-

tional interventions, such as alternative livelihood training and environmental literacy, have proven highly effective in reducing extractive pressures and building coastal resilience among fisherfolk [Gonzales-Plasus et al., 2025; Rahmat et al., 2026]. Grounded in transformative learning [Mezirow, 1997], equipping stakeholders with these tools allows them to transition from passive beneficiaries to proactive managers of the “blue economy,” a shift critical for the long-term viability of marine tourism [Kyvelou et al., 2023].

Furthermore, the integration of local voices into the sociogovernance of marine protected areas ensures that tourism development respects both ecological limits and local realities [Buitendijk et al., 2026]. This is particularly relevant when weaving traditional ecological knowledge with modern conservation science, a hybrid approach that enriches both the sustainability of the ocean and the authenticity of the tourist experience [Caldeira et al., 2025]. Engaging younger generations is also vital, as youth increasingly prioritize and drive community-based tourism that authentically preserves cultural heritage [Khuc et al., 2025].

This study explores the lived experiences of local stakeholders—specifically women, youth, and traditional fisherfolk—across coastal barangays in the Philippines to understand this transformative process. By examining how participatory education influences the community’s sense of empowerment and commitment to sustainable development, this research aims to provide actionable insights for designing inclusive policies that achieve both ecological resilience and socio-economic equity in the tourism sector.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This study uses a phenomenological approach to deeply understand how participants perceive and experience eco-tourism education, with a focus on empowerment and sustainable development. The exploratory nature allows for emergent insights from first-hand narratives.

2.2 Population and sampling

The research focused on coastal community members who have participated in or are currently engaged with eco-tourism education initiatives. The target population included adult residents (aged 18 and above) from selected coastal barangays who are directly or indirectly involved in activities such as environmental conservation, community-based tourism, and sustainability programs.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 25 participants who met the criteria of having relevant experience in eco-tourism education. This method ensures that insights are drawn from individuals with lived experiences closely aligned with the study's objectives. The sample size is sufficient for a qualitative exploratory study, allowing for rich, in-depth data collection through individual interviews.

To provide demographic transparency and ensure the findings' interpretability, the sample was systematically profiled. The 25 participants consisted of 10 women, 7 youth, and 8 traditional fisherfolk. Ages ranged from 19 to 62 years old, reflecting a multi-generational perspective. Participants also represented varying levels of involvement in the eco-tourism programs, categorized as High (e.g., active tour guides, committee leaders), Moderate (e.g., vendors adopting sustainable practices, regular workshop attendees), and Low (e.g., peripheral participants, occasional attendees). A structured overview of these participant attributes is presented in Table 1.

2.3 Instrument

The primary research instrument for this study is a semi-structured interview guide developed in alignment with the research objectives (Table 2). It is designed to explore participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding their involvement in eco-tourism education and its influence on community empowerment and sustainable development. The guide includes open-ended questions that allow participants to share detailed narratives while providing flexibility for the researcher to probe deeper based on responses. The instrument was constructed to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

| Participant | Age | Gender | Primary Occupation/Role | Level of Involvement |
|-------------|-----|--------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| P1 | 34 | F | Food Vendor | Moderate |
| P2 | 21 | M | Student/Youth Leader | High |
| P3 | 55 | M | Traditional Fisherman | High |
| P4 | 42 | F | Handicraft Artisan | Moderate |
| P5 | 19 | F | Student/Junior Guide | High |
| P6 | 60 | M | Traditional Fisherman | Moderate |
| P7 | 28 | F | Homemaker/Weaver | Low |
| P8 | 45 | M | Traditional Fisherman | High |
| P9 | 23 | M | Tour Coordinator | High |
| P10 | 38 | F | Food Vendor | Moderate |
| P11 | 50 | M | Traditional Fisherman | Low |
| P12 | 20 | F | Student | Moderate |
| P13 | 47 | F | Souvenir Seller | Moderate |
| P14 | 62 | M | Traditional Fisherman/Elder | High |
| P15 | 31 | F | Homemaker | Low |
| P16 | 22 | M | Boat Assistant | Moderate |
| P17 | 53 | M | Traditional Fisherman | Moderate |
| P18 | 36 | F | Weaver | High |
| P19 | 24 | F | Social Media Advocate | High |
| P20 | 40 | M | Traditional Fisherman | High |
| P21 | 29 | F | Food Vendor | Low |
| P22 | 58 | M | Traditional Fisherman | Moderate |
| P23 | 33 | F | Handicraft Artisan | Moderate |
| P24 | 19 | M | Student | Low |
| P25 | 48 | F | Mangrove Tour Guide | High |

Table 2: Interview guide questions

| Objectives | Interview question |
|--|---|
| To explore the lived experiences and perceptions of coastal community members regarding their involvement in eco-tourism education initiatives | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you describe your personal experience participating in eco-tourism education programs in your community? 2. What are your thoughts or feelings about the role of eco-tourism education in your daily life and livelihood? 3. How has your understanding of eco-tourism changed since becoming involved in these educational initiatives? |
| To examine how participatory eco-tourism education influences the community's sense of empowerment and commitment to sustainable development | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In what ways has your involvement in eco-tourism education affected your confidence in contributing to community development? 2. Do you feel more empowered to take part in decisions about environmental conservation or tourism activities in your area? Why or why not? 3. How has eco-tourism education influenced your commitment to protecting natural resources and promoting sustainability in your community? |

appropriateness, and it was validated through expert review before deployment in the field.

2.4 Data gathering procedure

The data gathering process began with securing ethical clearance and necessary permissions from local authorities and community leaders. Once approval was granted, participants were identified through purposive sampling and approached for informed consent. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were then conducted at a time and location convenient to the participants, ensuring privacy and comfort. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded, with permission, to ensure accuracy. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and stored securely for subsequent analysis.

2.5 Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke [2006]. This method involves a six-phase process: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Transcribed interview data were coded manually or using qualitative analysis software such as NVivo to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and relationships relevant to the research objectives. The analysis remained flexible and iterative, allowing emerging themes to be refined through constant comparison. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the process to acknowledge and manage potential biases and to ensure the integrity and trustworthiness of the findings.

3. Results

Research Objectives 1. To explore the lived experiences and perceptions of coastal community members regarding their involvement in eco-tourism education initiatives.

3.1 Expanding livelihood opportunities and socio-economic resilience

Initially viewing tourism as an industry exclusively for outsiders and corporate resorts, participants experienced a paradigm shift through eco-tourism education. Women and traditional fisherfolk learned to diversify their income streams via sustainable entrepreneurship, such as utilizing eco-friendly food packaging and organizing reef-safe boat tours. This education catalyzed a critical move from passive day-to-day survival to proactive economic striving, altering their perception of their own value within the community.

“I used to think tourism was only for big resorts... When I joined the eco-tourism training, I learned how we, women, could contribute through handicrafts and local cuisine. The program didn't just teach me about nature; it helped me discover my voice and value in our community.”

“Eco-tourism education opened my eyes to the long-term effects of overfishing. We used to catch whatever we could, just to survive... letting the small fish grow and protecting spawning areas actually helps us earn more in the future. I now see my work not just as a way to earn, but as part of a more sustainable tourism experience.”

3.2 Revaluing cultural heritage and traditional identity

Eco-tourism education helped participants realize that their everyday realities—fishing traditions, local cuisine, crafts, and folklore—hold intrinsic value. Rather than commodifying their culture for mere entertainment, artisans and performers learned to use their crafts and dances as educational tools. This shift in perception fostered a profound sense of pride, transforming them from mere service providers into cultural ambassadors.

“Before joining the eco-tourism education program, I thought our dances and songs were just entertainment for tourists... Now, when we perform, we explain the meaning

behind the songs and rituals. Tourists appreciate it more, and we feel proud knowing we are passing on knowledge, not just putting on a show.”

“I always thought of my crafts as just souvenirs for quick income. But after joining eco-tourism workshops, I realized they can be tools for education. I’m not just making things—I’m helping tell our community’s story in a sustainable way.”

3.3 Catalyzing environmental awareness and youth advocacy

Educational initiatives successfully dismantled the prevailing belief that environmental protection is solely the responsibility of government officials or NGOs. Youth participants, in particular, recognized their capacity to act as environmental advocates. By gaining practical skills like resource mapping and nature guiding, they shifted from seeking futures outside the municipality to actively protecting their home ecosystems.

“Before the eco-tourism education sessions, I didn’t know much about marine protected areas. I thought only scientists or government people handled those. Every time I guide a tour, I feel like I’m doing something real to protect our reefs and educate others at the same time.”

“Growing up, most of my friends planned to work in the city because there were no jobs here... I realized we don’t have to leave home to have a future, we just need to understand the value of what we already have and protect it. Eco-tourism isn’t just about attracting tourists—it’s about creating a movement that starts at home.”

Research Objectives 2. To examine how participatory eco-tourism education influences the community’s sense of empowerment and commitment to sustainable development.

3.4 Shifting power dynamics: Inclusion in local governance

Aligning directly with this study’s operational definition of empowerment, eco-tourism education dismantled historical barriers to local governance. Women and youth, who previously felt excluded from municipal decision-making, reported a surge in confidence and political agency. They transitioned from passive observers to vocal participants in barangay assemblies, successfully advocating for community infrastructure and waste management policies.

“Before the trainings, I didn’t think women like me—just selling snacks near the beach—had anything to say in big decisions. Now, I attend barangay assemblies and speak up. I even proposed putting up a shared waste bin for vendors. I feel more involved, and I see that small ideas can lead to real changes.”

“I never saw myself as a leader before. I thought only adults could make decisions... But after joining the eco-tourism

youth training, I gained the confidence to speak up. It made me realize that the youth have fresh ideas, and when we’re given a voice, we can really help shape the future of our coastal areas.”

3.5 Validating traditional ecological knowledge for resource co-management

Empowerment was further realized through the institutional validation of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Elder fisherfolk historically viewed their maritime skills solely in the context of extraction. Education repositioned this knowledge as an indispensable asset for conservation. Consequently, these individuals are now actively consulted in the co-management of marine areas and tourism routes, cementing their roles as environmental guardians.

“For most of my life, I thought only people with degrees or officials had a say in managing our marine areas. It makes me proud that our lived experience is finally being included. I feel respected, and I now see myself as both a fisherman and a knowledge holder.”

“Fishing has been my life since I was young. I never imagined I’d be teaching others about conservation. Now, we share traditional knowledge, like reading tides and knowing which fish to leave alone during breeding season. Eco-tourism didn’t just bring tourists—it brought us a new purpose.”

3.6 Cultivating intergenerational stewardship and everyday sustainability

The ultimate manifestation of community empowerment is the sustained, self-directed commitment to environmental stewardship. Participants described profound behavioral shifts in their daily lives, from voluntarily eliminating single-use plastics to independently establishing seasonal “no-fishing” zones. Importantly, this conservation ethos is being actively transferred to younger generations, ensuring long-term ecological resilience independent of external intervention.

“I used to walk past the mangroves every day without thinking much of them... Now I help monitor reforestation sites and guide student groups who visit. We even made signs to remind visitors not to litter. It’s not just about protecting trees—it’s about protecting our home.”

“The eco-tourism education helped me realize that if we don’t protect our waters now, our children won’t have fish to catch in the future. We started talking to younger fishers about seasonal rest periods. It’s not just about changing how we fish—it’s about passing on the mindset of protection to the next generation.”

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that participatory

eco-tourism education serves as a critical mechanism for structural community empowerment, moving marginalized groups beyond surface-level participation [Anwar et al., 2024]. By systematically analyzing the lived experiences of the participants, this research confirms that empowerment in coastal tourism is realized through three interconnected pathways: socio-economic resilience, participatory governance, and the co-management of marine resources.

First, consistent with recent literature on coastal resilience [Gonzales-Plasus et al., 2025], women and fisherfolk in this study achieved greater socio-economic stability by diversifying their livelihoods. Eco-tourism education catalyzed a shift from passive, day-to-day survival to proactive economic striving. Whether through adopting sustainable packaging or creating eco-centric boat tours, participants recognized their intrinsic value to the tourism economy. This capacity building is foundational to ensuring that coastal communities do not remain economically marginalized as the local tourism industry grows [Weaver, 2011].

Second, the educational initiatives effectively dismantled historical barriers to local governance. Women and youth, who previously felt excluded from municipal decision-making, reported a surge in political agency. Their active participation in barangay assemblies—advocating for waste management and tourism infrastructure—aligns with the assertion that integrating local voices into the sociogovernance of tourism areas ensures development respects local realities [Buitendijk et al., 2026]. By shifting these power dynamics, eco-tourism education prevented the reproduction of external corporate control, positioning the community as active decision-makers rather than mere beneficiaries [Scheyvens, 1999].

Third, the institutional validation of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) emerged as a transformative aspect of empowerment. Elder fisherfolk successfully repositioned their maritime skills from purely extractive practices to essential conservation assets. Their active consultation in the design of tourism routes and marine protected areas confirms that weaving TEK with modern conservation frameworks enriches both ecological sustainability and the authenticity of the tourism experience [Caldeira et al., 2025]. This inclusive co-management approach is vital for the long-term viability of the local “blue economy” [Kyvelou et al., 2023].

Finally, the tangible behavioral shifts observed—such as youth organizing environmental advocacy campaigns and older fishers independently establishing no-catch zones—validate the application of transformative learning theory [Mezirow, 1997] in eco-tourism contexts. The intergenerational transfer of this conservation ethos, particularly driven by youth who increasingly prioritize cultural and environmental preservation [Khuc et al., 2025], ensures that the community’s capacity to manage its resources and withstand natural vulnerabilities is sustained over time [Islam, 2026].

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that participatory eco-tourism education is a highly effective mechanism for empowering marginalized coastal communities. Addressing previous ambiguities regarding the evidential basis of such claims, the qualitative data clearly substantiate that empowerment—defined here as enhanced socio-economic resilience, active participation in local governance, and the co-management of marine resources—was tangibly achieved through specific educational interventions. Empirically, this empowerment was evidenced by women and fisherfolk diversifying their livelihoods to reduce extractive dependencies, youth and women leveraging newfound political agency to advocate for infrastructure in barangay assemblies, and elder fisherfolk utilizing traditional ecological knowledge to co-manage marine protected areas.

By equipping local stakeholders with both practical skills and a validated sense of cultural identity, eco-tourism education dismantled historical barriers to decision-making. Ultimately, for community-based eco-tourism to transcend surface-level economic participation and achieve genuine sustainability, policies must prioritize inclusive, continuous educational frameworks. These frameworks must position local residents not as passive beneficiaries of the tourism industry, but as proactive architects of their environmental and socio-economic futures.

Acknowledgements

The author affirms that this study was independently carried out and reflects personal academic effort and critical analysis. All concepts, interpretations, and discussions presented in this paper were carefully developed by the author throughout the research process. Any use of artificial intelligence tools was strictly limited to minor language refinement, such as improving grammar and clarity of expression. These tools were not involved in developing the research ideas, conducting the analysis, interpreting the findings, or composing the substantive sections of the manuscript. The author fully assumes responsibility for the authenticity, accuracy, and originality of the entire work, including its analyses, interpretations, and conclusions.

References


- Anwar, R. K., Saepudin, E., and Rukmana, E. N. (2024). Eco-tourism and economic striving of the locals: From participation to empowerment. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 3038.
- Berkes, F. (2009). Evolution of co-management: Role of knowledge generation, bridging organizations and social learning. *Journal of Environmental Management*, Vol. 90, No. 5, pp. 1692-1702.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 77-101.
- Buitendijk, T., Adjei, M., Raatikainen, K. J., Cárdenas, E. C. C., Varjopuro, R., and Schuitema, G. (2026). A goal-based

typology of sociogovernance processes in the management of marine protected areas. *Ocean & Coastal Management*, Vol. 271, p. 107948.

- Caldeira, M., Sekinairai, A. T., and Vierros, M. (2025). Weaving science and traditional knowledge: Toward sustainable solutions for ocean management. *Marine Policy*, Vol. 174, p. 106591.
- Folke, C., Biggs, R., Norström, A. V., Reyers, B., and Rockström, J. (2016). Social-ecological resilience and biosphere-based sustainability science. *Ecology and Society*, Vol. 21, No. 3.
- Gonzales-Plasus, M. M., Pentang, J., Plasus, L., Abatay, E., Rosero, M. C., Gacer, V., and Nicolas, M. D. (2025). Sustainable livelihoods and coastal resilience: Lessons from fisherfolk communities in Dumaran and Araceli. *Journal of Integrated Coastal Zone Management*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 57-69.
- Islam, S. M. (2026). Retrieving coastal communities of Bangladesh from natural calamities in a changing climate: Pathways toward the sustainable development goals. *Emergency Management Science and Technology*, Vol. 6, No. 1.
- Khuc, V. Q., Doan, D. N., Nguyen, A. T., Hoang, K. L., Le, K. C., Tran, T. T., and Doan, P. T. (2025). Exploring youth tourists' perceptions and willingness to pay for improving community-based tourism associated with cultural preservation in Vietnam. *Tourism and Hospitality*, Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 219.
- Kyvelou, S. S., Ierapetritis, D. G., and Chiotinis, M. (2023). The future of fisheries co-management in the context of the sustainable blue economy and the green deal: There is no green without blue. *Sustainability*, Vol. 15, No. 10, p. 7784.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Vol. 1997, No. 74, pp. 5-12.
- Rahmat, H. K., Syah, N., Barlian, E., Hafidzah, N. H., Umar, I., and Veronika, N. (2026). Environmental literacy and coastal education as pathways to marine ecosystem conservation: A systematic literature review. *Egyptian Journal of Aquatic Biology and Fisheries*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 1933-1946.
- Scheyvens, R. (1999). Ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities. *Tourism Management*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 245-249.
- Stronza, A. and Gordillo, J. (2008). Community views of ecotourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 448-468.
- Weaver, D. B. (2011). Celestial ecotourism: New horizons in nature-based tourism. *Journal of Ecotourism*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 38-45.



This article is licensed under a Creative Commons [Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International] license.

 https://doi.org/10.37020/jgtr.11.1_97

Received: April 10, 2026

Revised: April 30, 2026

Accepted: May 11, 2026

Published: May 31, 2026

Copyright © 2026 International Society for Tourism Research