



Ecotourism-related Strategies toward Increasing Tourism Destination Competitiveness: The Case of Biliran Island Province

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Abstract Tourism has scaled into one of the biggest and fastest economic drivers in the world today. With the increasing number of new attractions, the imperative of assessing the competitiveness of tourism destinations is seen to be beneficial in improving its capability to create competitive advantages while ensuring adherence to sustainable development goals. Dubbed as “the best kept secret haven of Eastern Visayas”, Biliran Island Province as a tourism destination was assessed and analyzed using Porter’s Diamond Model of national competitiveness to propose useful strategies headed towards increasing its potentials and tourism competency. A total of 33 tourism stakeholder-respondents have undergone one-on-one interview survey in the said province to describe their perspectives on the importance and performance of various factors and conditions towards increasing its tourism competitiveness. Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) revealed that the tourism competitiveness of the province is directed to its eminent natural resources, safe and secured environment, and provisions of basic facilities. However, performance improvement of other factors especially marketing and advertising must be addressed promptly. Various concerns and challenges that the province facing include lack of government support in terms of product development and promotion, high taxes and cost of other basic utilities, and environmental challenges as a result of climate change. To address these adversities of, ecotourism-related strategies were recommended in line with the positioning of the province as an “Agri-Garden and Premier Ecotourism destination in Eastern Visayas Region”. These must involve responsible marketing and advertising, human resource development and environmental-friendly infrastructures, and emphasis on intensifying safety and disaster risk reduction and preparedness management.

Keywords ecotourism-related strategies, tourism, destination competitiveness, Porter’s Diamond Model, Importance-Performance Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been eyed as one of the biggest and fastest economic drivers in the world. With the increasing number of new destinations along with the increasing investments and financing poured to tourism worldwide, the industry transformed itself into a key driver in socio-economic progress (UNWTO, 2016). Due to its potentials for growth and contributions derived from the industry, tourism is seen to be taking an important role in implementing strategies for local and regional development, especially for developing countries like the Philippines.

The tourism industry portfolio of the Philippines constitutes mostly of various tourism and native products. Among the highest ranked tourism products in the country in terms of priority are nature-based, sun and beach, and diving/marine sports tourism (DOT, 2016). This denotes that the tourism industry in the Philippines has been greatly dependent on the natural resources for its continued growth and existence. To ensure that these resources are responsibly used, destinations can adopt the concept of ecotourism which offers conservation-oriented and sustainable form of tourism.

Increasing the tourism competitiveness of a destination means enticing potential tourists and offering and serving them with products and services better than other destinations (Mazurek,

2014). In order to ensure strong and sustainable development, analysis of competitiveness should be taken to form a sound basis for strategy formulation and policy implementation (Melisidou, et al., n.d.). Tourism competitiveness studies revolved around the identification of factors that affect the destinations ability to attract tourists and development of possible management strategies (Crouch, 2010; Goffi, 2013; Bobircă and Cristureanu, 2006). Porter's Diamond Model is also widely used in studies on competitiveness (Wahogo, 2006; Bobircă and Cristureanu, 2006)

Biliran is the best kept secret haven in Eastern Visayas. With its charming community, rich and wonderful coastlines and island attractions, majestic mountains, jaw-dropping waterfalls, and high concentration of hot springs surrounded with rich flora and fauna, the province has the potential to become a sought-after destination for local and foreign tourists as it envisioned to become a premier ecotourism destination.

Ironically, with all the beauty and vibrancy of the tourism endowments, for the past years, Biliran Island Province occupied the last place in terms of its share in tourism arrival in Eastern Visayas Region (Table 1), and 31st among the 72 provinces in the country according to the National Competitiveness Council in 2017. Analyzing the competitiveness of the tourism sector of Biliran Island Province is seen to be a must. This identifies the competitive strengths of the province as well as the barriers that impede the development of the tourism sector (Navickas and Malakauskaite, 2009), more so, a fundamental concern for successful tourism management and planning.

Table 1 Provinces in Region 8 and their major characteristics

Provinces	Population in thousands (2015)	Land area (sq. km)	Tourism performance*	
			Arrivals	Rank
Biliran	172	536	31,219	6
Eastern Samar	467	4,660.5	72,060	5
Leyte	1,967	6,515.1	722,010	1
Northern Samar	632	3,692.9	240,972	4
Samar	780	6,048	480,275	2
Southern Leyte	422	1,798.6	391,108	3

Sources of data: DOT, PSA *Based on the cumulative tourism arrivals (2011-2015)

OBJECTIVE

This research study which assessed the tourism competitiveness of Biliran Island Province used the Porter's Diamond Model of Competitiveness that generated proposed strategies to aid in the policy and management planning of the Provincial Tourism Office and stakeholders towards enhancing its tourism competitiveness. Specifically, the study aimed to: (1) analyze the tourism competitiveness of Biliran Island Province using the Importance-Performance Analysis; (2) ascertain the challenges faced by the tourism sector in the study area that impedes its competitiveness; and (3) proposed strategies to enhance the tourism competitiveness of Biliran Island Province.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach: As a descriptive research, this assessment study employed quantitative research approach which involved the collection of data in order to quantify them and subject the information gathered to statistical treatment to predict, explain, and confirm knowledge claims. The personally collected numerical data were analyzed to address the research objective(s) defined for a particular study (Williams, 2007). Like most of the assessment studies on competitiveness done by Wahogo, (2006), Goffi (2013), and Dwyner (2010), the survey method was used as data collection method.

Research area: It located on the western side of the Eastern Visaya region, also Biliran is bounded by the province of Leyte on the south, Western and Northern Samar on the east, and Masbate on the

northwest. The province is considered to be the smallest island province in the region and one of the smallest in the entire Philippines (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Location map of Biliran Island Province
Retrieved from en.wikipedia.org

Research respondent: A total of 33 tourism stakeholder-respondents were surveyed, of whom, 27 were owners/managers of tourism enterprises and six were staff and tourism officer of the Provincial Tourism Office of Biliran. Respondents were chosen based on their availability and convenience.

Data collection: The two-part survey questionnaire was used in gathering the needed data to address the research objectives. The first part identified the profile of the respondent’s business/company while part two determined the level of importance and performance of the various factors and conditions towards competitiveness that Biliran Island Province had as a tourist destination. Micheal Porter’s Theory of Competitiveness (Porter, 1998) as illustrated by the Diamond Model of Competitiveness is contextualized and applied to the tourism industry. The questionnaire contained 29 items grouped in accordance to the four factors in the diamond model-factor conditions, demand conditions, related and supporting industries, and context for firm strategy and rivalry. The data were gathered between May to July 2018.

Data analysis: The responses of the respondents were coded using a five-point Likert scale, encoded in Microsoft Excel, and descriptive statistical analysis were sorted and summarized.

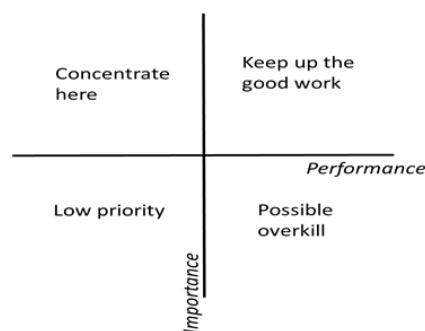


Fig. 2 The IPA grid
Adopted from Dwyner, L., 2010

Furthermore, the computed mean scores of the variables were analyzed and plotted in the Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) grid which aided the development of management strategies. The median of the variables’ mean values, on the other hand, served as the central values of the grid, forming four quadrants. For this study, the computed central values were 4.3 (importance) and 3.42 (performance). IPA combines measures of attribute importance and

performance into a two-dimensional grid to easily interpret the data and derive practical suggestions (Fig. 2).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tourism Competitiveness of Biliran Island Province

Increasing the competitiveness of Biliran Island Province requires efforts to improve the performance of various factors that have significant effect on its ability to attract and entice tourists. Showing the result of the analysis in Table 2, the tourism competitiveness of the province relies on its outstanding natural resources, safe and secured environment, and provision of some basic facilities.

Table 2 Factors of competitiveness (Direct IPA)

Factors	Mean Values		Quadrant
	Importance (y)	Performance (x)	
Safety and security	4.79	3.88	Keep up the good work
Electricity	4.73	3.52	Keep up the good work
Awareness/Recognition of Hazards	4.64	3.67	Keep up the good work
Scenery	4.48	3.85	Keep up the good work
Roads	4.49	3.67	Keep up the good work
Demand by foreign customers	4.39	3.64	Keep up the good work
Landscapes and seascapes	4.36	3.67	Keep up the good work
Demand by local customers	4.36	3.72	Keep up the good work
Quality/ Skills of employees	4.33	3.45	Keep up the good work
Water system	4.64	3.24	Concentrate here
Communication network	4.52	3.3	Concentrate here
Legal, regulatory, and administrative framework	4.36	3.18	Concentrate here
Development of strategy	4.3	3.42	Concentrate here
Marketing and advertising	4.3	3.09	Concentrate here
Airports and seaports	4.3	2.76	Concentrate here
Product pricing	4.24	3.48	Concentrate here
Cost of personnel	4.24	3.42	Low priority
Availability and access to locally based suppliers	4.18	3.33	Low priority
Flora and Fauna	4.12	3.21	Low priority
Climate	4.09	3.33	Low priority
Cost of capital expansion	4.09	3.42	Low priority
Joint Promotion of exhibitions, and trade fares	4.03	2.42	Low priority
Membership in organizations	4	2.67	Low priority
Quantity of employees	3.88	3.24	Low priority
Science and technology	3.82	2.18	Low priority
Availability of capital	4.15	3.55	Possible overkill
Level of rivalry	3.78	3.52	Possible overkill

Source: Survey data

However, efforts should be made in order to improve the performance of the factors positioned on the “Concentrate Here” quadrant. Marketing and advertising and product pricing are significant factors affecting tourists’ decision-making in exploring and visiting the area (Batra, 2016). Weak tourism promotion and advertisement manifested by the absence of a website and social media presence, brochures and other promotional collaterals and materials impede the competitiveness of tourism in the province. Supporting facilities like strong and integrated communication network, assistance for its marketing efforts, and improved transportation facilities

are likewise necessary to increase the flow of tourists. Sound regulation and strategy to serve as the overall umbrella need to be in place to ensure sustainable development of resources, and a competitive tourism destination.

Challenges and Proposed Strategies toward Increasing Tourism Competitiveness

Table 3 shows the challenges and strategies that Biliran Island Province can adapt as it positioned itself as an agri-garden and premiere ecotourism destination in Region VIII. A competitive ecotourism destination would require the presence of standard-compliant tourism facilities, high quality of service and skilled workers, accessible sites and destinations, distinctive souvenirs and local products, and a peaceful and secured environment. Moreover, the provision of infrastructure and other support facilities towards competitiveness implies that transportation, electricity and water are readily available for domestic and commercial consumption, and reliable internet and functional network coverage. As an island destination located at a hazard-prone area, the imperative of developing sustainable tourism products, coupled with disaster-prepared community is of paramount concern in increasing the competitiveness of Biliran Island Province. On the other hand, Biliran's competitiveness could be enhanced with certain environmental marketing activities and initiatives (Mihalic, 2000) which convey messages related to environmental awareness and protection (Batra, 2006).

Table 3 Summary of Challenges and Strategies for Biliran Island Province

Challenges	% response	Strategies	% response
High cost and inconsistent supply of basic facilities	84.84	Developing environment-friendly infrastructure	60.60
Underdeveloped ports	45.45		
Lack of support from the government	30.30	Establishing a Destination Management Office	45.45
Climate change	60.60	Sustainable development of natural resources	81.81
		Developing responsible marketing and advertising program	51.51
		Intensifying safety and disaster preparedness initiatives	75.75
		Enhancing human resource capacity	36.36

Source: Survey data

CONCLUSION

The competitiveness of Biliran Island Province rests on the outstanding state of its natural resources, safe and secured environment, and availability of basic utilities. Thus, in order to realize its vision as a premier ecotourism destination in Region VIII, and at the same time, increasing its ability to attract tourists, management strategies and policies anchored on the principles of ecotourism should be considered and enacted.

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