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Examining Visitor Feedback on Communication Education and Public Awareness Materials of an ASEAN Heritage Park

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Abstract

In the Philippines, ecotourism offers both opportunities and threats to natural and social environment. Sustainable and responsible ecotourism is important to minimize the threats. Mount Makiling Forest Reserve ASEAN Heritage Park (MMFR AHP) as an ecotourism destination continues to serve as a recreational area for the public being the nearest mountain to the capital city, Manila. Effectiveness of the visitor management strategies depend highly on communication. The study aimed to assess the perception of visitors on the communication education and public awareness (CEPA) materials of the MMFR AHP. Results showed that the CEPA materials in MMFR AHP, the 160 respondents identified as useful are directional signs (70%); map (67%); videos (51%); brochures (50%); and flyers (40%). The materials serve as guide, additional information, raises awareness, directions, and estimate distance to respondents. Suggested CEPA materials include trivia boards about MMFR AHP and its resources, exhibit, souvenirs, and infographic materials about flora and fauna. Respondents prefer to learn more about in MMFR AHP include history, natural resources, biodiversity, benefits, and role in influencing art, culture, and society, especially in the locality of MMFR AHP. The study confirmed the effectiveness of the materials to visitors, enhanced awareness, and that different groups of respondents needs different ways of communicating and promoting resources based on their interest. Furthermore, helped in shaping the visitor management strategies for MMFR AHP such as communicating conservation through interpretation program and development of package tour and carrying capacity standards. Development of other CEPA materials and programs to capture responsible visitors, featuring the uniqueness of different points of interests of MMFR AHP, and strengthening the educators for nature tourism for visitors to be more aware on what MMFR AHP can offer and the importance of the natural resources.

Keywords: Visitor perception, Protected area management, Park interpretation

Introduction, scope and main objectives

In the Philippine's context, tourism is double edged as it both offers opportunities and at the same time exposes the natural and social environment to threats. Sustainable and responsible tourism is important to make tourism beneficial both to nature and man. Mount Makiling Forest Reserve (MMFR) as an ecotourism destination continues to serve as a recreational area for public being the nearest mountain to Metro Manila. Solely managed by University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB), its primary function is to serve as a training laboratory for instruction, research, and extension.

MMFR was declared as an ASEAN Heritage Park (AHP) in 2013. ASEAN Heritage Parks are protected areas of high conservation importance, preserving in total a complete spectrum of representative ecosystems of the ASEAN region (Setyawati et al. 2014). Mount Makiling Forest Reserve ASEAN Heritage Park (MMFR AHP) is one of the Philippines' 18 centers of plant diversity, designated as an extremely high biodiversity conservation priority area. It is also considered as one of the country's 31 key ecotourism sites. Its vegetation, unique landscape features, boiling mud pots, hot springs, and accessibility makes among the top tourist spots in the country. Recreational activities inside the MMFR AHP include hiking, trekking, camping, mountain biking, and other related activities such as photography, painting, and bird, and butterfly watching. MMFR AHP has been maintaining the Mariang Makiling Trail (MMT), Sipit Trail, and the Makiling Botanic Gardens (MBG) providing educational services, amenities, and activities to visitors. Recent records show that on the average about 100,000 people visit the MMFR AHP each year.

Accessibility of MMFR AHP from nearby cities and provinces, management of increased number of visitors plays an important in maintaining balanced tourism. Efficiency of the visitor management greatly depends on effective communication with visitors. The Makiling Center for Mountain Ecosystems drafted a management plan for MMFR AHP and is written in the context of MMFR being an ASEAN Heritage Park. In this plan, communication education and public awareness (CEPA) is identified as one of key strategies to enhance appreciation and awareness of MMFR's importance among stakeholders and visitors. Through projects identified under the CEPA topic, venue for participation between and among various stakeholders is created.

The paper discusses the assessment on the perception of visitors on the communication education and public awareness (CEPA) materials of MMFR AHP. Specifically, the study profiles the visitors in MMFR AHP and identifies activities they engaged in as well as their visit's purpose, and other information about Mount Makiling they are interested in. The objective of the paper is in line with Article 13 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CDB) that recognizes the importance of Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CEPA) to stimulate and engage people to conserve biodiversity and to sustainably use natural resources (Hesselink et al. 2007).

Methodology/approach

The MMFR AHP lies between 121°09'59" to 121°15'21" degrees longitude and 14° 06'4" to 14°10'25" degrees latitude, about 60 kilometers southeast of Metro Manila. MMFR spans 4,244 hectares across four (4) municipalities and cities in two provinces in the southern portion of Luzon Island, Philippines. MMFR AHP straddles portions of Bay, Los Baños, and Calamba City, in Laguna; and Sto. Tomas in Batangas. A face-to face survey was conducted to assess visitors' perception of MMFR AHP's CEPA materials. A total of 160 respondents participated in the interview, all visitors of MMFR AHP. Respondents were selected through a systematic random sampling with a sampling interval (SI) of every four (4) visitors. Each selected visitor is interviewed. The respondents were asked about their demographic profile, perception of MMFR, and perception on CEPA materials being handed out in MMFR. A descriptive analysis exploring means and frequencies are conducted.

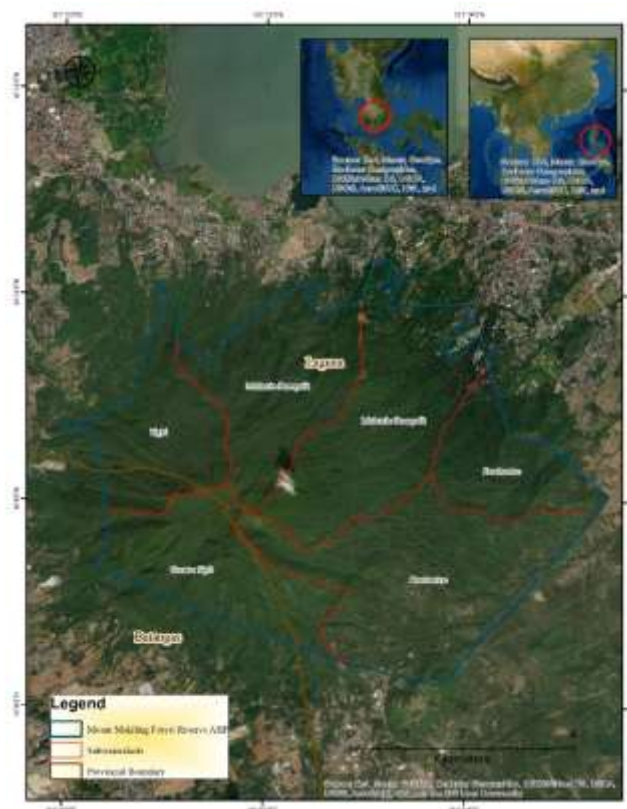


Fig. 1: Location map of the Mount Makiling Forest Reserve ASEAN Heritage Park in the Philippines

Results

1. Profile of Visitors of the Mount Makiling Forest Reserve ASEAN Heritage Park

The results showed that 34% of the respondents are from the municipality of Los Baños in Laguna and 66% are from other locales including Metro Manila and provinces of Cavite, Batangas, Rizal, Quezon, Bulacan, and Marinduque. Respondent age ranges from 14 to 75 years old. The greatest number of respondents are aged between 14 and 25 years old and represents 59% of the respondents. This is followed by the 26 to 35 and 46 to 55 years old range, 29% and 9% of the respondents, respectively. 56% of the respondents is male while the remaining 44% is female. About 89% of the respondents is single while the other 11% is married. Visitors can be grouped into students and regular types. The former includes undergraduate as well as graduate students while the latter includes professionals, researchers, senior citizens, and all other non-student categories. 57% of the respondents are regular visitors while 43% are students. Majority of the respondents have obtained tertiary education.

2. Purpose of Visit to Mount Makiling Forest Reserve ASEAN Heritage Park

Based on the survey, the respondents' purpose of visit to MMFR AHP as shown in Table 1, include leisure (50%), education (48%), and hiking (46%). Also, respondents revealed that other purpose of visit in MMFR AHP include bird watching (15%), biking (11%), and photography (27%).

Table 1: The purpose of the respondents in visiting the MMFR AHP.

Type of Visitor	Purpose of Visit					
	Educational	Leisure	Hiking	Photography	Bird Watching	Biking
Businessman	0	0	1	0	0	1
Forester	8	11	11	5	3	0
Government Employee	5	8	8	5	5	0
Horticulturist	2	2	2	0	0	0
Photographer	0	1	0	0	0	0
Professionals	9	25	22	15	6	4
Researcher	8	8	6	5	3	5
Retired	0	1	1	0	0	0
Self-employed	0	1	0	0	0	0
Student	43	17	19	9	4	7
Teacher	1	6	3	4	3	0
Total	76	80	73	43	24	17
Percent (%)	48%	50%	46%	27%	15%	11%

3. Perception on the Communication, Education, and Public Awareness (CEPA) materials of MMFR AHP

Based on the respondents, the identified useful materials as shown in Table 2 were directional signs (70%), maps (67%), videos (51%), brochures (50%), and flyers (40%). The information materials produced as shown in Table 3 serve as guide, additional information, and knowledge about the attractions along the trail of MMT and MMFR AHP, raise awareness about MMFR, directions, map, and fan, locating stations, and estimate distance. The other information materials or programs suggested by the respondents that might be useful for them were trivia boards about MMFR and its resources, exhibit, festival, flyers and souvenirs, social media and infographic materials about flora and fauna, and interactive CEPA materials. As shown in Table 4, the respondents would like to learn more about the history, natural resources, biodiversity of MMFR, benefits and role in influencing art, culture, and society especially in the locality of MMFR AHP.

Table 2: The useful CEPA materials according to the respondents in visiting the MMFR AHP.

Type of Visitor	CEPA materials in MMFR AHP					
	Infoboards	Flyers	Maps	Brochures	Videos	Directional Signs
Businessman	0	1	0	1	1	0
Forester	10	11	10	10	10	10
Government Employee	5	5	10	5	8	9
Horticulturist	2	2	0	2	2	2
Photographer	0	0	0	0	0	1
Professionals	24	9	29	21	20	30
Researcher	11	6	9	7	4	10
Retired	0	0	0	0	0	2
Self-employed	0	0	1	0	1	1
Student	38	24	43	28	30	42
Teacher	6	6	5	6	6	5
Total	96	64	107	80	82	112
Percentage (%)	60%	40%	67%	50%	51%	70%

Table 3: The perception of the respondents on the CEPA materials of MMFR AHP.

Type of Visitor	Usefulness of the CEPA Materials in MMFR AHP						Grand Total
	Direction	Guide	Locate Distance	Additional information about MMFR AHP	Raises awareness	Serves as an attraction or view to visitors	
Businessman	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Forester	0	3	0	6	2	0	11
Government Employee	0	2	0	7	2	0	11
Horticulturist	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
Photographer	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Professionals	3	17	2	15	4	2	43
Researcher	2	1	0	8	1	0	12
Retired	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Self-employed	0	1	0	1	0	0	2
Student	4	24	3	32	2	3	68
Teacher	0	1	0	3	2	0	6
Total	10	51	5	75	13	6	160
Percent (%)	6%	32%	3%	47%	8%	4%	

Table 4: The respondents' most interested information about MMFR AHP.

Type of Visitor	Information about MMFR HP					
	History	Function/Role	Coverage	Flora/Fauna	Point of interest	Social Aspect
Businessman	1	0	0	1	0	0
Forester	8	10	6	10	6	6
Government Employee	4	3	1	11	0	5
Horticulturist	2	2	2	2	0	2
Photographer	0	0	1	0	1	0
Professionals	20	15	19	29	9	12
Researcher	7	5	6	9	5	8
Retired	0	1	1	1	0	0
Self-employed	0	0	1	1	0	0
Student	43	22	22	37	23	13
Teacher	5	4	4	5	4	5
Total	90	62	63	106	48	51
Percentage (%)	56%	39%	39%	66%	30%	32%

Discussion

In any ecotourism destination like the MMFR AHP it captures different age group and type of visitors. It showed that different type of visitors also has different preference on the activities, information needed and interested in an ecotourism site. Hence, it is very important to capture their preferences through the CEPA materials to get their interest in visiting MMFR AHP. Also serve as guide and awareness in communicating the programs of the MMFR AHP on sustainable ecotourism and biodiversity conservation.

MMFR as an ASEAN Heritage Park also same with other protected areas that surrounded by different communities and stakeholders. According to Goldstein (2003), protected area management is largely about people management and capacity, not technical issues and depends therefore on effective communication and education. Different groups need different ways of communicating with them based on their interests and include a range from decision makers to local communities.

For successful participatory planning in the establishment of ecotourism projects, empowerment of community as a primary objective of ecotourism, awareness of the community on the link of economic benefits to conservation, and participation of community are necessary to be successful. In designing sustainable building in an ecotourism site, educational materials to visitors should be provided to enhance their understanding and appreciation of the environment and threats and in visitor management park information is needed to reduce impact and providing visitors a satisfying visit. (PCAARRD-DOST 2010).

At Ramsar Bureau, they established communication, education, and public awareness (CEPA) to increase the general awareness of the importance and values of wetlands to motivate people to take an interest in the protection and conservation of wetlands, and to build support for wetland conservation among citizenry, decision makers, bureaucrats, and politicians (Luck 2008). Through CEPA in Costa Rica, there's a significant progress toward biodiversity conservation to the variety of audiences, contents, scale, vision, and purposes (Jimenez-Aceituno et al. 2017).

In the Philippines, CEPA was used in Las Pinas Paranaque Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area (LPPCHEA) in Manila Bay wherein the benefits of LPPCHEA in cultural, environmental, and economic sense was highlighted, the importance of stakeholders' awareness and participation was emphasized, and approach of living in harmony with nature was promoted (Fernandez-Wulff and Roppongi 2014). Formulation of CEPA plan was also used to address lack of sustainability and effectiveness of the existing information and education efforts to promote the Olango Wildlife Sanctuary in Lapu-Lapu City (Miasco 2017).

Conclusions

The study in MMFR AHP affirms the effectiveness of CEPA materials to enhance visitor awareness. Further, different groups of respondents may need different ways of communication and promotion based on their specific interest. Development of CEPA materials helped shape and improve visitor management strategies for MMFR AHP such as communicating conservation through interpretation programs and development of package tours while maintaining the site's carrying capacity. Creation of updated and more responsive CEPA materials and programs for promoting MMFR AHP's various points of interest as well as strengthening the Educators for Nature Tourism Program is seen as the future of enhancing visitors' perception and awareness of the ecosystem's importance as well as the importance of protecting its natural resources.

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