

## EXPLORING TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVE ON ENVIRONMENTAL FEES IN THE ISLAND GARDEN CITY OF SAMAL

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### ABSTRACT

The Island Garden City of Samal (IGACoS) has experienced significant tourism growth, driven by its natural attractions and existing infrastructure development. However, this growth poses challenges to the sustainability of its tourism industry, with environmental degradation threatening its fragile ecosystems. This study explores the tourist perspective on environmental fees in IGACoS, its objective is to understand tourist awareness, perception of fairness of the implementation, and the impact of these fees on their decision to visit the island. Qualitative interviews with tourists revealed two major themes namely; general awareness and communication gap and satisfaction with environmental management and conservation efforts. The result highlights a lack of detailed knowledge about the purpose and utilization of environmental fees, highlighting the need for transparent communication and involvement of tourists in conservation efforts. These findings emphasized the importance of public awareness and transparency in fostering compliance and support for environmental fees. Economic considerations and tourists' willingness to pay are influenced by income levels and perceived value, the need for strategic management in IGACoS.

**Keywords:** tourist's perspectives, environmental fees, Island Garden City of Samal

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Island Garden City of Samal has experienced steady tourism growth, with many visitors exploring its natural wonders of environmental resources. Development in infrastructure which includes establishments of resorts, restaurants, hotels, and recreation facilities adds up to the booming industry of the Island. Naturally, it is well known for its crystal stunning beaches making it a popular tourist destination in the region. Over the years, the Island Garden City of Samal has stimulated economic opportunities for both local and international making it a significant tourist destination (Jangao et.al, 2020).

Despite its tourism popularity, the Island Garden City of Samal also faces challenges that threaten the sustainability of its tourism industry. Environmental degradation caused by unregulated development, population, and irresponsible tourism practices is significant to the island's fragile biodiversity and ecosystem (Cozo et al., 2008). Balancing the need for tourism development with the preservation of the Island's natural resources presents a complex challenge for local authorities and stakeholders (Jangao et al., 2020) Tourism can generate and create a sustainable funding source through environmental fees and will improve the conservation and preservation of marine and coastal ecosystems. However, it is important to carefully consider the balance between the funds raised through these fees and the potential decrease in tourist numbers (Spergel et.al, 2004). The willingness to pay is essential to ensure that the goal of promoting access is not compromised when implementing a fee policy (Reynisdottir et al, 2008). Income levels and awareness of the environmental fees are some of the factors that influence the decision to consider visiting such a destination (Carson et al. 2003). Additionally, tourist satisfaction is also a factor connecting how tourists perceive a destination with their intentions to revisit or recommend it, encompassing mental and emotional reactions relative to their travel experience (Olivar et al., 2023). An effective integration and implementation of environmental fees between tourism and local economic development within protected and conserved areas is one of the key benefits of prioritizing the conservation agenda. Crucially involving tourists in conservation efforts is a must, and such integration ensures that protected areas fulfill both ecological purposes and the socioeconomic needs of local and tourist populations (Kallbekken et al. 2013). The relationship between people and nature fosters sustainable and mutual benefits (Beuermann, 2006). When tourist recognize their contribution significantly plays a direct role in conservation efforts, tourists are more likely to feel a sense of responsibility and connection to the environment Deboe and Hogg (2010), Although there is a push to encourage sustainable tourism practices in IGACOS, there is a noticeable disparity between the intentions or expectations of tourists and the actual execution or implementation of sustainable initiatives on the island. Thus, this study explores the tourist perspective on environmental fees. Assessing tourists' opinions on environmental fees can provide insights into their willingness to contribute to environmental conservation and their awareness and knowledge. Therefore, we can enhance effective communication and implementation which can build trust and foster a mutually beneficial relationship between tourists and the environment.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

This study comprehensively explored the tourist perspective on environmental fees in the Island Garden City of Samal. The research study aimed to address the following questions:

- How aware are tourists of the environmental fees imposed in IGACoS, and how well do they understand the purpose and utilization of these fees?
- What are the tourists' perceptions of the fairness and value of the environmental fees in IGACoS?
- How do environmental fees influence tourists' decisions to visit IGACoS?

Aiming to understand how tourists perceive environmental fees in the IGACoS and to gather qualitative data that can inform strategic policies, environmental initiatives, and tourism planning efforts that would benefit all of the tourists visiting the island and also the Local Government Unit in IGACoS. The ultimate goal is to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the environmental fee system in IGACoS, aligning it more closely with the evolving needs of the tourists. However, focusing on the IGACoS tourist may limit the findings' applicability to other tourist destinations. Nevertheless, the identified challenges could have wider significance and offer important insights for different tourist destinations.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The research utilized qualitative interviews through a phenomenological approach to thoroughly comprehend tourists' views on environmental fees in the Island Garden City of Samal. To obtain more profound insights into their perspective on environmental fees, an interview was conducted with five tourist participants. The qualitative data from the individual interview is transcribed verbatim and examined through thematic analysis and identifying recurring themes and patterns concerning tourists' perspectives on environmental fees in IGACoS.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part of the study presents a comprehensive analysis of the data collected from tourists in the Island Garden City of Samal. The data is organized into two primary themes: Transparency and Understanding of Environmental Fee Utilization and Satisfaction with Environmental Management and Conservation Efforts. Each main theme encompasses various sub-themes, which have emerged through thematic analysis.

### **Tourist Awareness and Accountability on Environmental Fee**

In utilizing the thematic analysis approach, table 1 highlights tourist awareness and accountability regarding environmental fees. By transcribing interview data, the researcher identified the main theme associated with the challenges of raising awareness about environmental fees among tourists. The data extracted from the interviews indicates a pattern of complexities in ensuring tourists are informed about and responsible for paying environmental fees. Through manual coding, the researcher has outlined themes and subthemes that address these issues.

### **Theme 1: Transparency and Understanding of Environmental Fee Utilization**

One of the major themes that emerged from the thematic analysis encompasses a diverse range of sub-themes. This theme captures various aspects reflecting the complexity of the environmental fee implementation. The sub-themes offer detailed and specific insights that provide a comprehensive understanding of tourist perception of environmental fees.

**General Awareness and Communication Gaps.** In an interview, participants consistently recognized the environmental fee, but there was a noticeable lack of detailed knowledge about its specific objectives and the allocation of the collected funds. The participants' responses reflect this gap. Moreover, the statements above present a shared concern regarding the lack of information about the purpose of environmental fees. This finding aligns with the research of Kallbekken et al (2013), which suggests that for environmental fees to be effectively implemented, the public must be well-informed. Without a clear understanding of how environmental fees operate and their intended ecological benefits, this could lead to public resistance and non-compliance. Statements justify the unclear and no transparent communication between the local government of Samal and its tourists. Transparent communication strategies are crucial in educating tourists about the purpose behind environmental fees and how the revenues are used to support environmental initiatives (Beuermann, 2006).

**Perceived Lack of Transparency.** One of the sub-themes that emerged is the perceived lack of transparency regarding the environmental fee. Participants consistently pointed out the absence of posters or other means to display how the environmental fee funds have been utilized. This lack of visible evidence or detailed updates about the accomplishments funded by these fees contributes to the perception of insufficient transparency. And it has become a significant point of contention among tourists in IGACoS. This concludes the study of Deboe and Hogg (2010), that when tourists

understand that their contribution directly supports environmental conservation efforts this can create public trust and promote sustainable practices.

### **Tourist Contentment and Involvement**

Tourist contentment is closely linked to their involvement and experiences at the destination in IGACoS. The various statements provide collaborative insights into how tourists perceive the current environmental initiatives. These insights reflect the relationship between tourists' satisfaction and their active engagement with the destination's ecological conservation efforts

### **Theme 2: Satisfaction with Environmental Management and Conservation Efforts**

In exploring the tourist perspective on environmental fees, the second prominent theme that also emerged is the Satisfaction of tourists that relates to environmental management and conservation efforts. Several subthemes surfaced from this theme.

**Perception of Current Efforts.** In an interview, this sub-theme also reflects participants' collective insights related to the current management efforts of environmental fees.

The statements of the participants also showed that the complexity of implementing environmental fees can result in administrative inefficiencies which were coherently discussed in the study of (Spergel et.al, 2004). Therefore, while the intention behind environmental fees is commendable, their implementation must be carefully managed to avoid negative perceptions and outcomes.

**Willingness to Pay Environmental Fee.** In this sub-theme, tourist willingness to pay is influenced by various factors, based on the participants' statements. One of the prevalent issues identified through analyzing the participant's statements is economic consideration.

The willingness to pay an environmental fee highlights that the financial situation is a key factor in tourists' spending decisions when visiting IGACoS. While some tourists operate under strict budget constraints, others prioritize getting the best value for their money, ensuring that their expenses are justified by the experiences and amenities offered by the destination. This aligns with Carson et al. (2003), which found that individuals' willingness to pay is influenced by their income levels and awareness of environmental fees.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The researcher concluded that to have an effective implementation of environmental fees in IGACoS there must be clear communication and well-defined roles of the local government unit of IGACoS and the tourists.

A significant lack of public awareness about the purpose and benefits of these fees can lead to resistance and even non-compliance. Therefore, transparent communication strategies are crucial and essential to educate and involve tourist on how their contribution directly impacts and supports the sustainability advocacy of the IGACoS thereby fostering trust and promoting sustainable tourism practices is significant.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- To enhance the effectiveness and acceptance of the environmental fee in IGACoS, it is crucial to involve and inform tourists about their contributions, specifically its function to protect and preserve natural attractions. Additionally, providing clear and transparent information on how fees are utilized by engaging local communities in promoting and managing these initiatives can further improve compliance and support. Collaborating with travel agencies and tour operators to educate tourists before their arrival and incorporating feedback mechanisms to understand tourist perceptions and improve the program.
- Creating and installing posters and information walls at every tourist location, providing detailed breakdowns of how the fees are allocated and the positive impact they have on protecting and preserving natural attractions. Develop a dedicated section on the official IGACoS tourism website and mobile app where tourists can access real-time information on fund allocation, ongoing projects, and success stories resulting from the environmental fee.
- Organize community events and workshops where tourists can participate in conservation activities and see firsthand how their contributions are making a difference. This could include guided tours of funded projects, such as wildlife marine sanctuaries and more.
- Implementing feedback systems where tourists can provide input and suggestions regarding environmental fees through surveys, suggestion boxes, and even digital platforms for tourist convenient

In adopting these measures, IGACoS can enhance transparency, build trust, and demonstrate the tangible benefits of the environmental fee, thereby increasing its acceptance and effectiveness among tourists.

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