

# Fishy Tourism

**Coastal communities cannot transition from fishing to tourism when land tenure rights are weak. An example**

In the Philippines, the growth of tourism has coincided with widespread declines in the fishing industry, causing a host of challenges as coastal communities negotiate this change. At the heart of this transition is land tenure; it determines the outcome of this transition.

The recent increase in coastal tourism has been greeted with general support from various bodies and organizations. The government considers the industry an important aspect of economic growth, while

2000s. By 2018, the number of annual arrivals had grown from well under 10,000 in the 2000s to nearly 200,000.

This has transformed the livelihoods of the locals. Boats that were previously used for fishing have either been sold or converted into tourist boats, while many fishers have now moved to the more profitable and less physically taxing jobs in the tourism industry.

While the benefits of tourism as a sustainable and lucrative form of income have been noted, there are concerns that the locals do not receive many of the profits from the industry. A key factor is land tenure.

The Philippines land tenure laws are complex and often contradictory, meaning that their interpretation is variable. In Esperanza, a wealthy family based in Coron is trying to claim ownership of the coastal land; it is trying to evict the residents from the area in order to construct tourism development projects. While the legal battle is ongoing, it has caused several complications for residents. There has been a ban on developing new cement structures, preventing locals from building tourist accommodation, or even their own housing. Some even claim that they were unable to access housing materials provided as aid for Typhoon Haiyan. These prohibitions will continue to exist while the legal battle is ongoing.

## Considerable anxiety

The constant threat of relocation has also caused considerable anxiety, particularly among those who fear that they will lose their livelihood. A fearful resident explained: "We have done our best here, but if we are moved, I don't know what will happen. Sometimes I lie in bed thinking about all the bad things that could happen. So we just pray to God."

**...widespread overfishing and environmental degradation has led to a decline in profitability for fisheries**

conservationist groups have welcomed what is considered to be a sustainable alternative to fishing for coastal communities. Meanwhile, widespread overfishing and environmental degradation has led to a decline in profitability for fisheries. Restrictive government regulations have been introduced to combat these issues, which have caused further barriers for fisherfolk. As a result, many coastal residents who previously relied on fishing have now moved to tourism.

A key example can be seen in Esperanza, a small village in the municipality of Coron, Palawan province. Fishing has historically been one of the area's major economic activities, partly due to the fertile marine grounds surrounding Coron. However, a push from government bodies and a series of national media campaigns resulted in a rapid expansion of tourism from the late

*This article by Michael Fabinyi (Michael.Fabinyi@uts.edu.au) and Hannah Taylor of the University of Technology Sydney, is based on Fabinyi, M. 2019. 'The role of land tenure in livelihood transitions from fishing to tourism'. Maritime Studies early online view, available open-access at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40152-019-00145-2>*



Residents show their eviction notices. The weak legal basis for the eviction notices, coupled with the comments of officials, suggest that this was an attempt to 'clean up' the area in preparation for tourism

This has not been the only instance of tensions surrounding coastal land tenure. In 2018, President Duterte's closure of Boracay caused increased attention to other tourism hotspots, including Coron. In May, 75 businesses and households in Coron received a 'Notice to Vacate' from the Department of Environmental and Natural Resources (DENR). The legal reasons for these evictions were that the structures were located in a 'timberland' area, which is outlawed by the Revised Forestry Code of the Philippines (1975). This was strange, as there was little evidence that the location had been treated as a 'timberland' zone in recent times. Indeed, the DENR itself had previously approved Environmental Compliance Certificates in the area. Meanwhile, officials suggested that the human waste and rubbish produced by residents was a risk to Coron and that the area needed to be cleaned for tourism purposes.

The weak legal basis for the eviction notices, coupled with the comments of officials, suggest that this was an attempt to 'clean up' the area in preparation for tourism. However, the notices led to anxiety for the residents, particularly for fishers who feared losing their livelihood as a result. This highlights how the rapid growth of the tourism industry can come at the expense of local residents, assisted by weak land rights.

While the residents of both Esperanza and Coron have not yet been evicted, both cases show how conflicting laws and policies can end up with negative impacts for fishers. The rise in tourism has increased pressure on coastal land tenure, leaving the locals to face various barriers preventing them from taking advantage of the resulting profits. The consequences resulting from the fishing-tourism transition would be greatly improved by stronger land rights for coastal residents. ↴

#### For more



**Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, The Philippines**  
<https://www.bfar.da.gov.ph/>

**The role of land tenure in livelihood transitions from fishing to tourism**  
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40152-019-00145-2>

**The Intensification of Fishing and the Rise of Tourism: Competing Coastal Livelihoods in the Calamianes Islands, The Philippines**  
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10745-010-9329-z>