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 ATAÚRO TOURISM · FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2017

Introduction

Ataúro Island, situated 25 kilometers north of Dili, is part of the Dili municipality. The island consists of five villages (Vila Maumeta, Maquili, Macadade, Beloi and Biqueli). According to the local government figures of 2016 the total population is 10,651.

The people of Ataúro follow two religions with approximately 60% of the population being Protestant and 40% Catholic. People also believe strongly in their traditions, culture, clan and family laws.

Livelihoods: approximately 70% of the community live from fishing and agriculture and rely on rainfall and traditional fishing methods. The Public Service (Education, Military, Police, Health, Administration etc) employs approximately 2.4%. About 1.3% live by their own labour running small businesses. About 3.3% of people work in manual labour and are employed by private companies or in other temporary work. About 33% can be considered unemployed.

For transport the majority of people use boats and sometime the MAF plane that evacuate the community with emergency cases from Ataúro's clinic to Dili.

These figures demonstrate that making a living is still a challenge on Ataúro and that community members do not yet have regular and sustainable incomes. There is a need for more involvement by government and developmental organisations to transform the life of fishing communities through creating policies and actions that will help to overcome the challenges. (Mills, D., Tilley, A., Pereira, M., Hellebrandt, D., Fernandes, A., Cohen, P., 2017).

History of Tourism on Ataúro

Tourism had its beginnings on Ataúro during the Indonesian occupation and continues now when tourism has become an industry with a global market. The Visitor Satisfaction Survey conducted by Robyn Jebson and Roman Luan in 2015 – 2016 showed that the majority of

tourists coming to the island are Australian (most of them living and working in Dili), followed by Europeans and domestic tourists.

Back in 2000, Ataúro community were wary of tourists, fearing they would bring undesirable behaviours that would negatively influence the thinking of our people who have a strong belief in the Protestant and Catholic religions. But, with tourism being developed slowly and with proper consultation and education, the community is gradually accepting it.

Understanding that there are two distinct types of tourism – one mass tourism (big hotels and big development) and the other ecotourism that uses simple infrastructure and gives attention to local people, the local natural environment and culture, the community believes and accepts that slowly developing community ecotourism can flourish on Ataúro.

Tourism began with the opening of the Beloi Beach Hotel that was built by the Indonesian government around 1996 but never actually functioned as tourist accommodation. After Independence the community, through NGO Roman Luan, took the initiative and the risk to begin talking about tourism on the island. Through its *Participatory Community Development Project* Roman Luan began community consultation and education in 2001 and in the following years established an ecotourism model that was successful for more than ten years and put ecotourism on the map for Ataúro and Timor Leste. Tua Ko'in Ecolodge became the model for the country (for example NGO Haburas sent their staff to learn and then brought groups from other areas – Liquica, Oecusse, Tutuala etc - to learn about community ecotourism at Tua Ko'in).

The success of Tua Ko'in was recorded in a detailed research paper (Master 's Thesis) by Danielle Pedi (University of Qld) in 2005/6. According to Quintas that the role of NGOs is important in facilitating and promoting sustainable development on Ataúro. Examples like Tua Ko'in Ecolodge become important models for our nation Timor Leste. ROLU also led the community and local leaders to establish ecotourism regulations in order to minimize negative impacts of tourism on the community's culture and environment. (Quintas, 2016).

The Development and increasing in tourist needs attract visitor/ tourist to come to the island has now resulted in more accommodation and restaurants on Ataúro like Barry's Place, Mario's Place, Trisan House, Vila Gracia, Manukoko-Rek restaurant, Biojoia, Bonecas de Ataúro and land, sea and air transport. The Timor Leste government through the related Ministry has renovated Beloi Beach Hotel and contracted the hotel out to a private company.

Principles of Ecotourism

Ecotourism should follow the principles of:

1.Conservation of Natural Environments

Natural areas that have not been developed are suitable for ecotourism. When considering ecotourism, we should look at –

- Ecosystems like forest, waterfalls, caves, beach and sea, protected areas of sea and mountain - with their important attractions such as dolphins, whales and the biodiversity of the reef;
- There is an important cultural dimension in the protected areas if they are acknowledged as part of clan ownership.

2. Sustainability

Ecotourism should minimise damage to both environmental and cultural systems. Through ecotourism we should –

- Maintain or improve the environment;
- Assess and monitor regularly to ensure the implementation and operation of the program is just and transparent;
- Give consideration to our natural resources for eg water, fisheries, rubbish disposal - and forbid methods that will harm natural ecosystems. It may be necessary in the future to limit the number of visitors so that local people still have access to natural resources and they are not depleted by tourism. It has to be remembered that the community will need the island's limited natural resources far into the future.

3. Education - for both local people and for tourists.

In this process people learn from each other to appreciate natural attractions as well as different cultures.

When we value our natural environment our natural environment can become a saleable product for us. How can we do this?

Through –

- Formal education courses and informal learning from visitors' comments, learned/knowledgeable people presenting interpretations and evaluations, and through guide books
- Creating viable information for the market that will enable deeper understanding and deeper emotional connection between tourists, hosts and destinations

4. Giving benefits to local people –

It is important to look at the social and economic benefits ecotourism contributes to local people

- Give opportunity and empower the private sector . . . through promotion, funding support or loans, and endorsement by law and appropriate policy to support local entrepreneurs to run businesses.
- Respect the integrity of the community as hosts and respect their beliefs, lifestyle and interests.
- Provide employment and explore ways to contribute to the development of income for the local community (eg supplying fish and vegetables, using local transport, sale of local crafts)

(Prebble, 2017)

What do Ataúro people know about ecotourism and what do they want from it?

Ataúro people know about tourism and are aware of tourism issues. Co-operation between leaders, tourism agents including civil society (NGOs) has enabled us to reach a general consensus that Ataúro should continue to be a unique model of ecotourism for Timor Leste: ecotourism began on this island and then spread to the mainland. The Ataúro community have learned about tourism through education and consultation, through the successful community management of Tua Ko'in for eleven years, as well as visits from dive companies since 2002, and visits from ecotourism students from Charles Sturt University every year.

On Ataúro the principles of ecotourism have never died but have continued to develop slowly and have resulted in the creation of a local organization to safeguard these fundamental principles. AKTOMA (Ataúro Koleku Mahanak Tourism Association) formed originally in 2005, was registered as an association in 2016. The name AKTOMA was inspired from the story of three brothers - Komateu, Lekitoko, and Kutukai (shortened to KOLEKU) - who, our legend says, were instrumental in expanding the island from its central mountain to the north, south, east and west – making it the island it is today. This name signifies that our ancestors still motivate us as we hold firm to the principles of sustainability that are the guiding principles of ecotourism. ATKOMA is currently implementing activities that will accomplish the objectives outlined in its statute.

Conclusion

We hope that this paper will influence and guide the government in its decision about tourism on Ataúro.

Competent leaders, international agencies, the private sector, civil society (NGOs and churches), and the community, must work together, think together, and be realistic and practical in planning how we can develop tourism on our island. The decisions we make will determine the future of the next generations of Ataúro Islanders. We have the advantage of learning from the experience of other countries where tourism has sometimes advantaged local communities but where more often it has brought risks and damage to local communities. It is important to us that we protect our environment so that the spirits of our ancestors continue to be with our next generations.

In 2015 and 2016, according to the survey by Jebson and Fernandes, “ the reason visitors choose Ataúro as a holiday destination is because: - it is calm and peaceful (24%), it is a beautiful natural place (17%), it is untouched, with low level of development, it retains its simplicity, is unique, authentic and remote (14%), it was recommended by friends (9%), came as a participant in the Blue Ventures program (9%), it’s an ecotourism destination (7%) “. (Fernandes, 2016)

From the results of visitor surveys and the comments of tourists who stayed at Tua Ko’in from 2002 to 2012, we conclude that “they (tourists) like Ataúro because it is restful, serene and peaceful, it is not over-run with tourists, local people and workers are friendly; stay in a beautiful natural environment you can swim in the pristine sea, and experience a wonderful atmosphere. Ataúro already fulfils the requirements for ecotourism”.

Finally, we hope that the current government’s commitment to ecotourism will be the same as Dr Rui Maria, our previous Prime Minister’s was in 2017, “The philosophy behind the policy is that the development of the tourism sector should be small, gradual and sustainable to “maximize the positive impacts and mitigate potential negative influences of tourism” with success, meaning that by 2030 “Timor-Leste will experience a significant increase in tourist visits and revenues that will have a multiplier effect across the economy, resulting in substantial income and opportunity for the nation and local communities.” (Government approves National Tourism Policy, 2017). We hope that this policy will be implemented and Ataúro will become a tourist destination with sustainable development goals that support local culture, environment and economic benefits.

References

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