



**Good Practice Story Title:** Illegal Fishers Turned Sea Guardians: A Ground-up Eco-Tourism Initiative to Sustain Sagay’s Protected Seascape

**Destination:** Sagay City

**Country:** Philippines

**Submitting Organization:** Local Government of Sagay

**Category:**

- Destination Management
- Nature & Scenery

**X Environment & Climate**

- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

**Destination description:**

Sagay Marine Reserve has proven to be one of the most important marine conservation programs in the Philippines spanning the protection of a 32,000 hectares protected seascape. It straddles a good portion of Northernmost tip of the island of Negros. It covers the island of Molocaboc and surrounding reefs of Carbin, Macahulum and Panal. It has 500 hectares of mangroves, with more than 100 hectares reforested, 33 species of mangroves, 13 species of seagrasses, 78 benthic algae and 60 genera of hard, black and soft corals. It also has giant clams, marine turtles, commercially important invertebrates, giant fruit bats, seacow among others. Its pristine beaches, reefs and mangrove forest are haven for nature lovers.



### Summary of Good Practice Story:

Sagay Marine Reserve (SMR), a 32,000-hectare protected seascape, is located in Western Visayas, Philippines. The Visayan Sea was once called as the "Alaska of the Philippines" for its abundant marine life. However, in the 1970s, rampant abuse and disregard of the fragile ecosystem led to the destruction of coral reefs.

The Mayor Mayor and late Negros Occidental Governor Alfredo G. Marañon, Jr. sought to change the mindset of the poverty-stricken fisherfolks, convincing them to abandon illegal fishing methods. He brought these fishers to another island with a strong conservation program to demonstrate the benefits of environmental protection. Through a series of capacity-building and livelihood programs, the fisherfolk transformed into sea guardians.

Two critical national laws, along with one specific to SMR, were enacted to bolster protection efforts. These interventions laid the foundation for strong sustainable tourism development programs in Sagay City. Five decades after, all destinations within the marine reserve are community-based, giving inclusive, bio-diversity livelihood through to eco-tourism to local residents also serving as guardians of the ecosystems.

Currently, 35 sea guardians are deputized by the Sagay Marine Reserve, with nearly 150 ecotourism stakeholders directly involved in sustainable livelihood and co-managing the destinations. Additionally, 53 fisherfolk associations are organized and are local champions for conservation.

SMR partnered with Silliman University Marine Laboratory and other environmental groups to achieve conservation goals including reef rehabilitation and recovery.

In biodiversity conservation, the simplest strategy albeit difficult to do, is the most effective - "protect the environment, it will return to you in abundance."



### **Issues faced:**

- Rampant illegal fishing practices led to the widespread destruction of corals, vital habitats for marine biodiversity, hence depleted marine resources .
- Lack of alternative livelihood for fisherfolks
- Displacement of fisherfolks due to stricter protection
- Low income

### **Solution:**

- Declaration through President Proclamation 592 the identified territorial waters as protected seascape under National Integrated Protected Areas System.
- Enacted into law Republic Act No. 9106 “An Act for the Establishment and Management of Sagay Marine Reserve.” This two national laws have provided stricter protection and more stringent regulations reducing illegal fishing methods
- The law created the Protected Area Management and Sagay Marine Reserve Office
- Prioritization of the fisherfolks and locals in the various eco-tourism enterprises within the marine reserve in the Integrated Protected Area Management Plan. The plan also mandates all eco-tourism sites within Sagay Marine Reserve shall be community-based.
- Capacity building(deputation) of locals as sea guardians and eco-tourism frontliners with nearly 500 locals.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

- Protection spans from 200 hectares to 32,000 hectares of seascape
- Seascapes declaration under the National Protected Area System
- Enactment of Sagay Marine Reserve Law through Republic Act
- The formation of Protected Area Management Board as Policy making Body of the entire reserve
- Formulation of the Protected Area Management Plan
- Formulation of Sustainable Tourism Masterplan
- Implementation of Destination Management including the institutionalization of carrying capacity
- Community-based stock and re seeding enhancement program



### **Achievements and Results:**

- From Illegal fishers they have now become sea guardians with nearly 500 locals
- Illegal fishing has been minimized
- Reduction of illegal fishing activity through the passage of policies and national laws resulting to
  - \* increase in average fish catch of sustainable fishers from 3.9 kilos in 1998 to 5.3 kilos in 2022
  - \* Live coral cover is at poor condition before the implementation of the conservation program of SMR in 1970s. Current status is at “fair” condition.
  - \* Mangrove - A dramatic increase of 17 has of Mangrove cover from 2015 (312has.) and 2019 (329has)
  - \* Seagrasses - 1,818. has
  - \* Flying foxes from 1,900 to 14,400
- Management Effectiveness Assessment Tool Score : 90% (DENR MPAN project)
- Marine Protected Areas. A clearly defined space, recognized and dedicated and management through legal means to achieve long-term conservation goals
- Ecosystem-based Management . A management framework that integrates biological, social and economic factors into a comprehensive strategy aimed at protecting and enhancing of ecosystem structure, functioning and key processes.
- Deputization of Local Champions of marine conservation and eco-tourism
- Implementation of Sustainable Tourism Masterplan

### **Lessons Learned and Advice:**

- Renactment of the national laws are necessary to protect marine biodiversity
- Political will is important. Its okay to offend the violators and should hold one’s ground for the health of marine biodiversity.
- To become effective sea guardians, our locals shall have access to alternative livelihood particularly eco-tourism providing them extra income.
- Capacitate the poor. Provide the dignity of land the honor to be part of the greater good - protection. Eco-tourism provided income for the locals. However, there has still the need to review the poverty incidents within the reserve and continue to strategize other ways to reduce the gap.





- Destination management is non-negotiable in the fragile environment especially in implementing limitation of carrying capacity and responsible behaviour of tourists.
- Climate crisis is one of the prevalent threats in marine biodiversity. Frequent typhoons and calamities aggravate the situation in the community. Mangroves played a vital role in protecting our islandfolks.

### Recognitions

2007 2<sup>nd</sup> Place “Outstanding Marine Protected Area”  
Among the 170 entries in the Philippines  
Marine Support Network (MSN)

2006 Best Eco-tourism Product in Western Visayas  
Department of Tourism Region VI

1997 Top Ten Innovative Programs on Marine Conservation Project  
Gawad Galing Pool Awards, *AiM and Ford Foundation*

### References

20-minute Documentary of Sagay Marine Reserve

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