Beyond Nature Walks: The Everyday Realities of Community-Based Ecotourism Workers in Davao de Oro

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of 17 community-based ecotourism (CBET) workers in Davao de Oro, Philippines. Using purposive and snowball sampling, participants were selected to participate in in-depth interviews. The gathered data were transcribed and analyzed thematically through systematic coding and categorization to identify core themes. The study pursued three main inquiries: lived experiences, coping mechanisms of community-based ecotourism workers with the challenges of everyday realities in the community, and insights shared by participants regarding the benefits and challenges experienced by communities with CBET. Based on the understanding of the lived experiences of CBET workers, seven major themes emerged: embedded local stewardship, shared operational preparedness, cultivating sustainable practices, exhausting resource constraints, encountering difficult tourists, precarious labor realities, and governance power struggle. Concerning the coping mechanisms of CBET Workers with the challenges of everyday realities in the community, three major themes emerged: composed service adaptability, collective issue resolution, and adaptive livelihood practices. Regarding the insights the participants shared about the benefits and challenges experienced by communities with CBET, five major themes emerged: empowered community engagement, shared community resilience, heritage-inspired stewardship, strategic tourism planning, and sustainable development priorities.

Keywords: Education, sociology, sustainability, Davao de Oro, phenomenology, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Community-based ecotourism is defined as tourism that is controlled and beneficial to the residents of a given community, while also preserving the environment (Pookhao, 2014). It aims to promote environmental conservation and enhance local people's livelihoods by empowering them to manage tourism ventures and their associated impacts (Fiorello & Bo, 2012). Community-based ecotourism (CBET) affects local communities in terms of sociocultural, economic, and environmental issues, which influence them both positively and negatively. This was founded on the shared conservation interests of residents. The growing business orientation, however, has created conflicts of interest among community members and undermined traditional social structures (Zuniga, 2019).

The dynamic in the community has changed with the presence of CBET; this is evident from issues regarding equal participation and mutual decision-making in Mesomagor, a village on the fringes of Kakum National Park in Ghana (Mensah, 2017). Similar problems have emerged elsewhere: at Gili Labak in Indonesia, ecotourism management has prioritized revenue over conservation and culture, with weak cultural preservation and limited community education on sustainable tourism (Fatmawati, 2019), while CBET communities in Ethiopia face poor infrastructure, competition over resources, and shortages of skilled workers that constrain equitable and sustainable ecotourism development (Teshome et al., 2020).

Further, CBET activities are being undertaken in various parts of the Philippines, including Barangay Paniman in Caramoan. It has a low level of active community involvement, meaning that community participation remains at a consultative level (Amata, 2021). In Davao del Norte, CBET is welcomed, but equitable benefits-sharing is still complex and reflects ongoing issues of governance and involvement (Hinlayagan & Ocay, 2022). Additionally, CBET promotes responsible tourism by engaging local communities in the conservation of cultural heritage and environmental sustainability (Khanal & Babar, 2007; Pookhao, 2014). In such a way, it can reinforce social coherence, give a boost to its members, and preserve their cultural identity.

On this note, a review of recent studies revealed gaps that we sought to address. Most studies available have employed cross-sectional designs, among others, to examine the long-term impacts of ecotourism on a community and ecosystem (Mason & Cheyne, 2019). Then, an impact assessment study was conducted using the variables to calculate the social, economic, and environmental impacts of community-based ecotourism (Weaver, 2019). Furthermore, Buckley (2018) has provided an overview of international ecotourism projects, highlighting the limitations of quantitative assessments of community-based ecotourism in various global ecotourism destinations worldwide.

This study aimed to provide information unique to the CBET in the province of Davao de Oro. Additionally, the sample was narrowed down to workers involved in or affected by CBET in Davao de Oro, ensuring a relevant and focused sample for the study. Furthermore, the study advocated for the proactive engagement of the community, not just as sources of data, but as partners, so that their voices and needs are at the center of the research process and findings. The findings of this study were not only beneficial to the community but also to the Provincial Local Government Unit of Davao de Oro and other interested parties involved in the community. These dimensions taught important lessons about the sustainability of CBET over the long term, ensuring that it remains applicable to CBET's workers and local communities, while also promoting responsible tourism activities. This research also aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 10 on Reduced Inequalities, and SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities. It facilitates the achievement of these objectives by encouraging inclusive economic opportunities among workers in CBET, alleviating inequalities in benefits sharing, and ensuring that local communities are sustainable and resilient.

The results will be disseminated to the local ecotourism communities and municipal constituents that are directly affected by the research. Then, this will be presented to the Provincial Local Government Unit of Davao de Oro and relevant provincial offices to support informed planning and decision-making.

At the macro level, findings will be disseminated through regional, national and international conference and meeting presentations before submission to peer-reviewed journals and publication.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of community-based ecotourism (CBET) workers?

2. How do community-based ecotourism (CBET) workers cope with the challenges of everyday realities in the community?

3. What insights can the community-based ecotourism (CBET) workers share with the community?

Theoretical Lens

This study is viewed from the perspective of Symbolic Interactionism, as presented by Herbert Blumer (1969). Symbolic Interactionism is a sociological theory that focuses on how individuals create and establish meaning in their social interactions. It is based on subjective experiences of people and how they construct their realities through common symbols, language, and interactions (Blumer, 1969).

Moreover, this theory can be ascribed to three key principles: meaning is a creation of social interaction, people act in ways that correspond to the meaning they ascribe to objects, events, and people, and interpretive processes constantly transform meanings. Additionally, Symbolic Interactionism may be particularly useful in

understanding how people define their social worlds, make sense of their roles, and construct their identities within specific contexts. It provides an entry point into examining individuals lived experiences and the meanings they assign to their interactions and environments.

This study used the theory as a guide to study the lived experiences of community-based ecotourism workers in Davao de Oro. This theory helped the authors understand how workers perceived their roles, relationships, and the general effects of CBET on their lives through the meanings they assigned to their involvement in CBET. It shed light on how workers perceived their relationships with tourists, governmental institutions, and other community members, and how these relationships shaped their identity and sense of belonging.

The theory was also applied to derive symbolic meanings attributed to the CBET, such as how workers have come to value it as a source of empowerment, economic opportunity, or community development. It is through these meanings and interactions that the study was to provide a more accurate understanding of the impact of CBET on the social fabric and well-being of the communities involved.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study focused on the lived experiences of Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) workers in the Province of Davao de Oro, Philippines. The study was limited to individuals with multiple job roles who are actively involved or directly influenced by CBET, thus providing a focused and pertinent sample.

The research has emphasized the social, cultural, and environmental effects of CBET, but its economic aspects have received less attention, as they have been extensively researched in previous studies. Additionally, the research was limited to qualitative data gathered using phenomenological techniques, with an emphasis on in-depth knowledge rather than generalizability.

In addition, this research was able to capture the depth and meaning of the participants' lived experiences, rather than generating findings that are generalizable to the broader population. Because the study relied heavily on personal reflections, the data may contain certain levels of bias or variation due to the way participants perceived and communicated their experiences. Additionally, the study was limited to a single area and a small group of participants in Davao de Oro, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other regions and settings. Lastly, there were also practical limitations, including time and resources, which may have impacted the scope and breadth of data collection and, consequently, the depth of the study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

We employed a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological orientation. A qualitative research method involves gathering data within a natural environment to understand the lived experiences of participants. It is concerned with discovering the meanings, experiences, and views of participants, rather than defining or preconceiving them. We engaged participants in their natural setting, thereby seeking to capture the essence of their lived experiences. Moreover, the current research employed a phenomenological approach within the framework of qualitative research. Phenomenology is concerned with the experiences that people share regarding a phenomenon and examines the perceptions and interpretations of these lived experiences by the participants (Creswell, 2013). It was applied to understand the lived experiences of community-based ecotourism (CBET) workers in Davao de Oro in the context of CBET.

This approach is well-suited for exploring the lived experiences of individuals or groups, aligning perfectly with the study's aim and prioritizing firsthand accounts, truthful reporting, and incorporating actual quotes from conversations to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013).

Research Participants

The study involved community-based ecotourism workers from several CBET sites in Davao de Oro. These workers performed multiple job functions and were directly involved in the day-to-day operations of their

respective destinations. CBET sites in the province are supported by local government units and recognized in the Provincial Tourism Development and Marketing Plan 2023–2027 and by the Department of Tourism.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those included had substantial knowledge and experience in CBET activities. The inclusion criteria required that participants: (a) were at least 18 years old; (b) resided in Davao de Oro; (c) had worked in CBET for more than three years; and (d) performed multiple roles rather than holding purely managerial or single-function positions. Tourists, external stakeholders, and residents without direct involvement in CBET were excluded. To broaden the range of perspectives, we also used snowball sampling, asking initial participants to recommend other CBET workers with similar experience who might be willing to participate (Mesa et al., 2016).

A total of 17 CBET workers took part in in-depth interviews, which falls within the recommended range of 5–25 participants for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013).

Data Sources

The primary data source consisted of in-depth interviews with 17 CBET workers. These interviews formed the core of the study and were conducted using a semi-structured guide to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences, roles, and challenges. To strengthen triangulation, the interviews were complemented by field notes, which captured observations during site visits, such as physical conditions of CBET sites, interactions among workers and visitors, non-verbal cues, and hesitations when discussing sensitive topics, documentary materials, including provincial tourism plans, local policies, and relevant legislation related to CBET. These multiple data sources allowed the authors to corroborate and contextualize participants' narratives, reduce overreliance on single accounts, and develop a more nuanced understanding of the governance and everyday realities of CBET work in Davao de Oro.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six interrelated steps suggested by Creswell (2013). First, all raw materials—including verbatim interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary sources—were organized, labeled, and stored systematically. Second, the researchers read the transcripts and notes several times to gain a holistic sense of the data, paying close attention to tone, pauses, and emotional expressions.

Third, initial codes were generated by highlighting significant statements and segments related to the research questions. Fourth, similar codes were clustered into broader categories and themes that captured shared meanings and recurring patterns in CBET workers' experiences.

Fifth, these themes were developed into rich descriptions and interpretive narratives that conveyed the essence of participants lived experiences while remaining grounded in their own words. Finally, the themes were integrated into a coherent account and linked to existing literature and policy documents, allowing the findings to be communicated to both academic and practitioner audiences, including community leaders and tourism authorities.

Trustworthiness of the Study

This study considered the trustworthiness of the data and handled the participants' stories and experiences with sensitivity and responsibility, reflecting their lived experiences as community workers of the CBET in Davao de Oro.

It also explored qualitative methods to ensure the reliability of the results. It discussed four key points: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Qualitative researchers value understanding diverse perspectives. To gain credibility and objectivity, this research successfully enhanced trustworthiness (Elo et al., 2014).

Credibility. We recruited the participants carefully to ensure the credibility of the data. Only community workers from community-based ecotourism in Davao de Oro who met the outlined inclusion criteria were selected. This

was selected to make sure that the participants had prior experience with CBET. We conducted the interviews in good faith and was capable of recording the answers without any manipulation or distortion. To gather varied views, we assumed several roles throughout the interviews, including moderator, recorder, and note-taker. Moreover, the data was collected not in one location, but in a range of CBETs in Davao de Oro. This is a multi-site method of enhancing the validity of findings (Patton, 1999).

Transferability. While the study's findings are context-specific to CBETs in Davao de Oro and not statistically generalizable, we ensured transferability through thick description. We provided detailed information about the participants' roles, experiences (ranging from 1 to 9 years), and the specific socio-economic context of the CBETs, as supported by local tourism plans. This allows readers to assess the potential applicability of these insights to similar settings elsewhere. This openness enables the authors to consider the relevance of the study to other environments, allowing them to make informed judgments regarding the feasibility and validity of the study (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008).

Dependability. This study has employed a rigorous data analysis procedure to ensure the research is dependable and minimize bias. This involved a coding-recording procedure in which all participant responses of CBET in Davao de Oro were assessed multiple times. This made it possible to identify recurring themes and simplify data reduction, as it allowed for a focus on the most significant information. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted to achieve data triangulation. In this case, we have discussed the findings with a colleague to identify possible biases and assess consistency with the research. Finally, it aims to evaluate the dependability of the study and determine whether the same results would be achieved in the event of repeating the research. The process, however, does take into consideration the factual constraints of achieving ideal replicability in qualitative research (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008).

Confirmability. The study used only the data of the participants that were recorded using audio-recordings and detailed notes to achieve confirmability. The personal interpretations were minimized to prevent misinterpretation. An audit trail was maintained, and all responses were documented. Emerging themes, including benefits, challenges, suggestions, and observations, were highlighted. Moreover, the member checking was used. Following the development of themes, we returned to the participants to discuss the findings and ensured that the lived experiences of the participants were accurately captured in the research. Such a cooperative method enhances confirmability, as it ensures that the findings are based on the participants' views and not influenced by the authors (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008).

Role of the Researchers

The researchers served as inquirers, data collectors, transcribers, and interpreters throughout the study. They designed the study, formulated the research questions, and selected a phenomenological framework consistent with the aim of understanding CBET workers' lived experiences. As data collectors, they conducted the in-depth interviews and field observations, establishing rapport with participants and creating a safe, respectful environment for sharing. Given that one researcher works for the Provincial Government, reflexivity was important; personal opinions and policy knowledge were intentionally bracketed to minimize undue influence on participants' responses.

The researchers transcribed the interviews, coded and analyzed the data thematically, and continually reflected on their assumptions to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts. In presenting the findings, they aimed to faithfully represent CBET workers' realities and highlight their contributions to tourism development in Davao de Oro.

Ethical Consideration

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee. The researchers upheld the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and transparency. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any time without consequences, and the ways in which their data would be used and stored. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports, and identifying details were removed to protect participants'

privacy and well-being.

RESULTS

Lived Experiences of Community-based Ecotourism Workers

Shown in Table 1 was the lived experience of community-based ecotourism workers. The essential themes that emerged from the participants' statements are as follows: embedded local stewardship, shared operational preparedness, cultivating sustainable practices, exhausting resource constraint, encountering difficult tourists, precarious labor realities, and governance power struggle.

TABLE 1. Lived Experiences of CBET Workers

Essential Theme	Core Ideas
Embedded Local Stewardship	They live in the area, rely on it for their livelihood. Recruitment through social connections in the barangay. Not only as a livelihood but also as a responsibility to protect nature.
Shared Operational Preparedness	Workers highlight teamwork to ensure a smooth operation. Daily effort to maintain the cleanliness of the area. Ensure a culture of readiness.
Cultivating Sustainable Practices	Constantly remind guests not to litter, smoke, or cut trees, or pollute water sources. Informing visitors about boundaries, proper behavior, and respect for unseen spiritual beings. Remind guests to ensure safety.
Exhausting Resource Constraint	Limited budget from the LGU Lack of facilities Maintenance is heavy and exhausting. Workers face landslides, floods, soil erosion, and even tornadoes. Natural calamities disrupt operations.
Encountering Difficult Tourists	Tourists ignoring rules. Drunkenness, noise, or unsafe acts. Strict or demanding guests.
Precarious Labor Realities	Low and unstable wages, dependency on guests numbers Workers endure physically demanding tasks Work beyond capacity, even sacrificing personal needs
Governance Power Struggle	Land rights tension Profit-sharing issues Management authority concern

Coping Mechanisms of Community-based Ecotourism Workers with the Challenges of Everyday Realities in the Community

The coping mechanisms of community-based ecotourism workers in response to the challenges of everyday community realities are presented in Table 2. The essential themes that emerged from the participants' statements include: composed service adaptability, collective issue resolution, and adaptive livelihood practices.

TABLE 2. Coping Mechanism of CBET Workers with the Challenges of Everyday Realities in the Community

Essential Theme	Core Ideas
Composed Service Adaptability	Workers maintain hospitality even when criticized, misjudged, or wrongly blamed. They strive to explain calmly tourists' guidelines and make do with available resources. Prioritize listening and accommodating others' perspectives Avoidance of confrontation
Collective Issue Resolution	Involve the barangay leaders in boundary issues Conduct community meetings Issues beyond local resolution are elevated to municipal offices, MENRO, Tourism, or the police
Adaptive Livelihood Practices	Workers turn to site owners or managers for financial help. Families diversify their income through fishing or selling goods. Multiple income streams. Workers understand each other's limitations, especially for financial concerns.

Insights shared by the Participants as Regards the Benefits and Challenges Experienced by the Communities with Community-based Ecotourism Workers

Table 3 presents the insights of community-based ecotourism workers on the benefits and challenges experienced by their communities with CBET. The essential themes that emerged from the participants' statements include: empowered community engagement, shared community resilience, heritage-inspired stewardship, strategic tourism planning, and sustainable development priorities.

TABLE 3. Insights shared by the Participants as Regards the Benefits and Challenges Experienced by the Communities with CBET

Essential Theme	Core Ideas
Empowered Community Engagement	Helped them overcome shyness. Learned how to interact with a diverse range of people. Learned to voice their opinions and stand up for their rights.
Shared Community Resilience	Learned the importance of patience, humility. Maintained a positive attitude even when dealing with difficult customers. Learned persistence and to work together to find solutions. Learned the importance of community input and collective effort in developing and managing ecotourism projects.
Heritage-Inspired Stewardship	Gained a deeper understanding of their community's traditions, history, and sacred places. Developed a stronger sense of environmental stewardship. Learned the need to abide by regulations to avoid environmental damage. Strengthen cultural preservation and collaboration among different tribes.

Strategic Tourism Planning	Recommend having a formal business plan. Consult with experts and local tourism offices. Secure the necessary permits. Underscore the importance of securing a titled property to avoid future land disputes and political interference.
Sustainable Development Priorities	The need to separate business from politics. Express a desire for more support from the government, particularly in infrastructure development and disaster relief. Ensure the welfare and training of their employees. Recognize that improvements are needed, such as better roads, new cottages, and additional facilities.

DISCUSSION

Lived Experiences of Community-based Ecotourism Workers

Based on the transcribed lived experiences of CBET workers, several themes emerged from their statements, including embedded local stewardship, shared operational preparedness, cultivating sustainable practices, exhausting resource constraints, encounter difficult tourists, precarious labor realities, and governance power struggle.

Embedded local stewardship. The study reflected that CBET workers are closely tied to their local area through social ties within the barangay, which provide livelihood opportunities and foster a shared responsibility for environmental protection and preservation. This result implies that CBET sustainability depends on strengthening community-driven stewardship, where cultural attachment and social networks motivate both livelihood support and environmental protection.

This emerging theme is consistent with the study of Treephan (2019), who highlighted that CBET is deeply intertwined with community relationships, religious values, and heritage, illustrating how stewardship grounded in tradition fosters both environmental conservation and cultural sustainability. Similarly, the result is consistent with the study of Stone (2015), who emphasized that stewardship rooted in genuine participation, in which this approach strengthens community ownership and responsibility. This perspective aligns with how CBET workers' deep connection to their area fosters collective action and shared accountability for environmental protection.

In addition, the result aligns with Guerrero-Moreno and Oliveira-Junior (2024), who note that while CBET promotes conservation, inclusive participation ultimately strengthens community stewardship and ensures long-term sustainability, a finding that directly supports this study's emphasis on social drivers. In this light, Palan and Priyanto (2025) asserted that local community involvement is essential for attaining sustainable tourism development, while Gomez (2025) demonstrated that community members' commitment to conservation is strongly driven by perceptions, cultural values, and livelihood dependencies.

Shared operational preparedness. The study highlighted that CBET workers rely on teamwork and shared responsibility to maintain site readiness and cleanliness, demonstrating a culture of cooperation essential for sustaining tourism activities and delivering quality services. This result implies that CBET success depends on strengthening operational systems that emphasize teamwork, consistency, and shared accountability in maintaining service quality and community trust.

This finding aligns with the study by Widiartanto et al. (2022), who emphasized the role of social capital, such as trust and cooperation, in enhancing both social cohesion and sustainability in CBET. Likewise, the emerging theme confirms the study by Kunjuraman et al. (2022) that the development and management of tourism activities in CBET involve the active participation of local community members and stakeholders. In addition, the results agree with the study of Kontogeorgopoulos (2005) that the daily shared responsibilities observed

among workers exemplify the social cooperation as the core of CBET.

Likewise, this cooperative environment directly builds the high degree of readiness as emphasized by Chong et al. (2022), which they found instrumental for successful ecotourism implementation. In addition, this internal teamwork and accountability provide the essential foundation for the kind of effective inter-organizational collaboration highlighted by Manaf et al. (2018), demonstrating that strong internal systems enable broader community impact.

Cultivating sustainable practices. The study revealed that CBET workers actively cultivate sustainable practices among tourists by guiding proper behavior, respecting site boundaries and local beliefs, and prioritizing safety, demonstrating that sustainability in CBET encompasses both environmental preservation and the protection of cultural values through community stewardship. This result implies that the long-term success of CBET relies on workers' capacity to integrate environmental care, cultural respect, and visitor management into daily practices.

The emerging theme aligns with the study by Hafezi et al. (2023), which highlights that the sustainability of CBET depends on workers' ability to balance environmental care, cultural respect, and visitor engagement. Similarly, the result agrees with the study of Anup (2015), which found that active participation of site-level personnel in guiding visitor behavior strengthens conservation practices, highlighting the critical role of workers in translating community objectives into daily sustainable actions. Further, the emerging theme agrees with the study of Wibowo et al. (2023), which highlights that that when CBET workers are actively involved in operational and visitor-management tasks, it fosters trust with visitors and cohesion within the local team, which is essential for maintaining consistent sustainable practices.

Furthermore, Erdawati et al. (2024) demonstrate that those who directly manage tourism activities at the site level develop a sense of ownership that drives environmentally and culturally responsible practices, ensuring the protection of local resources, and Cheng and Chen (2022) affirm that that workers' guidance, informed by cultural attachment and local knowledge, encourages visitors to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors, reinforcing the workers' role as mediators of sustainability.

Exhausting resource constraints. The study revealed that CBET workers face persistent challenges from limited local government support, inadequate facilities, and demanding site maintenance, all of which are intensified by recurring natural hazards that disrupt operations and strain their capacity to cope. This result manifests that the sustainability of CBET hinges on community commitment and the provision of adequate resources, infrastructure, and disaster-preparedness mechanisms to ensure resilience against environmental and operational disruptions.

This finding aligns with the study of Stone (2015), who emphasized that the success of CBET is often undermined by capacity issues and resource limitations, which create barriers to sustainable tourism management. Moreover, the results confirm the study by Teshome et al. (2025), which found that infrastructural, manpower, and awareness-related difficulties are present in community-based ecotourism. Similarly, the emerging theme conforms with Tsai et al. (2016), who found that residents in disaster-prone tourism areas experience heightened operational challenges due to environmental fragility and recurring natural hazards, highlighting the critical need for adequate resources, infrastructure, and preparedness measures to sustain tourism activities.

At the same time, Guerrero-Moreno and Oliveira-Junior (2024) noted that while CBET offers cultural and environmental benefits, its long-term viability is threatened when communities lack adequate external support and capacity-building mechanisms. Adding a critical perspective, Warinda et al. (2024) observed that structural issues such as corruption, weak stakeholder collaboration, and poor governance exacerbate resource constraints, leaving communities vulnerable to economic stagnation and failure.

Encountering difficult tourists. CBET workers often deal with tourists who disregard established rules, engage in drunken or unsafe behavior, or make strict and unreasonable demands. Such situations test their ability to maintain both hospitality and order, requiring them to balance service delivery with the enforcement of

community norms. This suggests that managing difficult tourists is a matter of control or discipline and meaning-making, where workers interpret these actions through the lens of cultural values and community expectations.

This finding aligns with Nguyen et al. (2023), who noted that frontline staff and local guides often interpret tourists' rule-breaking behaviors through local cultural norms, adjusting their responses to maintain order while upholding community values. Similarly, the result agrees with the study of Alsarayreh (2018) that tourists have an inherent responsibility to respect and protect the destinations they visit. Further, Pookhao (2014) emphasized that effective management of visitor behavior requires attention to shared community goals and cooperative enforcement, highlighting the role of workers in mediating tensions and ensuring that tourism activities respect local customs. Likewise, Krüger (2005) highlighted that adherence to local values is crucial for minimizing conflicts.

Anchored on Blumer's (1969) Symbolic Interactionism, these encounters illustrate how CBET workers construct meaning from tourists' behavior and adapt their responses accordingly, whether they perceive such acts as disrespectful, unsafe, or simply uninformed. Through these social interactions, workers define their dual roles as both service providers and custodians of local rules, thereby reinforcing their identity as stewards of both culture and the environment.

Precarious labor realities. The study revealed that CBET workers face precarious labor conditions, including unstable, guest-dependent wages and physically demanding work that often requires personal sacrifice to sustain operations. This implies that while CBET promotes livelihood opportunities and community development, it simultaneously exposes workers to economic insecurity and labor vulnerability, reflecting a fragile balance between sustainability and survival.

The emerging theme agrees with the study by Robinson et al. (2019), that tourism employment often reproduces precarious, low-paid, and seasonal work, leaving local workers vulnerable to income instability. Likewise, the result aligns with the study by Valente et al. (2023), which highlighted that labor precarity in visitor economies contributes to household vulnerability and limits livelihood choices among tourism workers. In addition, Mai et al. (2023) confirmed that precarious labor conditions are strongly linked to negative well-being outcomes, underscoring the importance of fair labor policies within tourism-based livelihoods.

In addition, Guidetti et al. (2021) highlighted that while seasonal tourism work is inherently precarious and marked by instability, some workers still value its flexibility and social aspects, showing the multifaceted perception of precarious labor. Likewise, Radlińska and Gardziejewska (2022) found that tourism enterprises often rely on seasonal employment patterns, where workers experience intense workloads during peak seasons and limited opportunities afterward, mirroring the employment insecurity seen among CBET workers.

Governance power struggle. The study revealed that governance power struggles in CBET operations arise from unclear institutional arrangements and power imbalances among communities, government units, and private entities, which hinder equitable benefit-sharing and erode community trust. This implies that governance remains a critical determinant of CBET success, where inclusive decision-making and transparent benefit-sharing are essential to sustaining social cohesion and local empowerment.

This finding aligns with the study by Duong et al. (2024) that the absence of inclusive governance and equitable benefit distribution often results in power asymmetries and community disputes in CBET. Similarly, the merging theme agrees with the study by Stone (2015) that unequal access to resources and decision-making authority fosters exclusion and marginalization among community members. Pookhao (2014) further confirmed that weak governance and the shift from communal to profit-driven management undermine collective goals and provoke internal tensions.

Adding to these concerns, Raftopoulos (2018) observed that competition for tourism revenue and commodification of nature can intensify disputes, highlighting the need for transparent decision-making and equitable benefit-sharing to maintain social cohesion. Finally, Krüger (2005) emphasized that ensuring equitable participation and amplifying local voices in decision-making are crucial to mitigating governance conflicts and ensuring the long-term sustainability of CBET.

Coping Mechanisms of Community-based Ecotourism Workers with the Challenges of Everyday Realities in the Community

A number of themes emerged from their statements on the coping mechanisms of community-based ecotourism workers on the challenges of everyday realities in the community, namely: composed service adaptability, collective issue resolution, and adaptive livelihood practices.

Composed Service Adaptability. The study revealed that CBET workers cope with criticism, misjudgment, and unjust blame through composed service adaptability, maintaining hospitality and professionalism despite limited resources while regulating their emotions to preserve community harmony, sustain positive relations, and protect the reputation of CBET. This result manifests that composed service adaptability is a manifestation of cultural resilience and emotional intelligence among CBET workers.

This finding aligns with the study by Ramos and Prideaux (2013), which suggests that collaboration and respectful engagement with stakeholders are vital for navigating empowerment challenges within community tourism. In addition, the results confirm the study by Pilquimán-Vera et al. (2020), which found that CBET fosters resilience by reinforcing cultural revitalization and social capacities, enabling workers to remain composed even in adverse circumstances. Likewise, the emerging theme aligns with the study by Koo et al. (2022), which suggests that during times of crisis, maintaining effective communication and emotional resilience enables tourism workers to cope with stress and sustain service quality. As emphasized by Idajati et al. (2024), trust-based social networks and individual competence enhance community resilience, reflecting the workers' ability to adapt and maintain composure under pressure.

Collective issue resolution. CBET workers in Davao de Oro employ collective issue resolution as a coping mechanism, transforming individual challenges such as boundary disputes into opportunities for reinforcing community governance. This process, which escalates issues from barangay dialogues to local and national government agencies, exemplifies the multi-level, adaptive governance essential for CBET. This demonstrates that collective issue resolution strengthens both social cohesion and the sustainability of CBET initiatives, ensuring that disputes are managed fairly while empowering community members to actively participate in decision-making.

This finding supports the study by Ramos and Prideaux (2013), which suggests that moving beyond the concept of vigorous collaboration to reveal its precise mechanism involves a structured, tiered system of conflict resolution embedded within local political structures. Additionally, the result aligns with the study by Teshome et al. (2021), which demonstrates how organized community management systems function in practice to strengthen cooperative capacity and facilitate collective issue resolution within the community. Furthermore, the finding aligns with the study by Zhan (2024), which emphasizes the importance of regulatory alignment, demonstrating how community aspirations are operationalized through existing government channels. In this vein, the collective approach embodies participatory governance and resilience strategies, as highlighted by Zhang et al. (2022), enabling communities to navigate the complex and unpredictable challenges of CBET.

Adaptive livelihood practices. CBET workers in Davao de Oro adopt adaptive livelihood practices to cope with financial uncertainties, seeking occasional support from site owners or managers and diversifying household income through alternative activities and small-scale enterprises, which helps stabilize finances and reflects a cooperative understanding of one another's constraints. This implies that adaptive livelihood strategies are essential for sustaining both individual and community resilience, enabling workers to remain engaged in CBET operations despite economic fluctuations.

This finding aligns with the study by Clark et al. (2024), which highlighted that self-organization and entrepreneurial initiatives within tourism communities enhance adaptive capacity, enabling workers to navigate financial and operational challenges more effectively. Similarly, the results support the study by Erdawati and Ayub (2024), which suggests that economic empowerment through ecotourism provides new income-generating opportunities for local communities. Many have established small businesses using locally sourced materials, contributing to an improved quality of life. Moreover, Imanuloh and Wahyuni (2024) found that ecotourism development fundamentally restructures community life by enhancing social, human, physical, and financial

livelihood capital, thereby fostering a transition toward sustainable, tourism-based livelihoods.

Additionally, Guerrero-Moreno and Oliveira (2024) emphasize that active participation in CBET initiatives, including involvement in operational and livelihood activities, enhances both economic stability and social cohesion, thereby reinforcing resilience at both the individual and community levels.

Insights shared by the Participants as Regards the Benefits and Challenges Experienced by the Communities with Community-based Ecotourism

Several themes emerged from the insights shared by participants regarding the benefits and challenges experienced by communities with CBET. These themes are empowered community engagement, shared community resilience, heritage-inspired stewardship, strategic tourism planning, and sustainable development priorities.

Empowered community engagement. The study found that CBET empowers workers by developing their communication skills and social confidence, which in turn encourages active participation in community decision-making. This manifests that empowered engagement in CBET is a transformative process that builds confidence, social cohesion, and participatory capacity essential for inclusive and resilient CBET.

This finding aligns with the study of Duong et al. (2024), who emphasized that CBET serves as a social transformation tool by creating positive changes in the socio-cultural aspects of community life. Similarly, the result confirms the study by Aliah et al. (2020), which highlighted that participation in CBET enhances social interactions and fosters stronger community relationships. Also, Stone and Stone (2020) noted that active participation can lead to the realization of sustainable CBET outcomes, underscoring the importance of genuine engagement and empowerment among community stakeholders. Additionally, Santoso et al. (2024) argued that empowering individuals through active participation fosters collective action and resilience, which are crucial for the long-term sustainability of CBET.

Shared community resilience. Participation in CBET has fostered community resilience in Davao de Oro. Through daily interactions and operational challenges, workers develop patience and optimism. This shared experience builds the trust and collaboration needed to persevere, showing that resilience is a socially constructed process. This suggests that shared community resilience in CBET settings extends beyond personal endurance; it represents a collective capacity for adaptation, cooperation, and positive transformation.

The emerging theme aligns with the study by Idajati et al. (2024), which posits that strong social networks and individual capabilities significantly enhance community resilience. Similarly, the result agrees with the study by Pilquimán-Vera et al. (2020), which emphasized that CBET strengthens resilience by reinforcing social capacities within communities. In addition, Chen et al. (2019) affirmed that for a community to achieve significant and long-term resiliency, its collective ability to act together must be fully harnessed, while Fiseha (2019) noted that active community involvement fosters social cohesion and resilience, supporting the idea that shared resilience in CBET is socially constructed and cultivated through collaboration.

Heritage-Inspired Stewardship. CBET has reinforced workers' cultural identity and environmental stewardship. By engaging with tourists and sustainable practices, they have developed a deeper appreciation for their heritage and a collective responsibility to protect it. This has strengthened inter-tribal collaboration and the preservation of indigenous knowledge. This manifests that CBET cultivates heritage-inspired stewardship, where environmental care and cultural pride are intertwined, sustaining both the local community and its residents.

The emerging theme supports the study by Tauro et al. (2021), which concluded that ecotourism reconnects people with their cultural and biological heritage, integrating local identity, educational practices, and respect for both natural and cultural traditions. Additionally, the results affirm the study by Gajardo et al. (2023), which found that local perceptions of heritage, spirituality, and identity are strongly linked to environmental conservation and a sense of place, underscoring the importance of integrating cultural and non-monetary environmental values into practical conservation policies. Likewise, the findings align with the study by Treephan (2019), which emphasizes that environmental preservation is inextricably linked to cultural and

spiritual heritage, advocating for the integration of local traditions into ecotourism.

Complementing these, Aliah et al. (2020) found that active community participation in tourism development enhances social cohesion and empowerment when indigenous cultural heritage is meaningfully integrated into CBET practices. Likewise, Shahzalal (2016) notes that such participatory processes foster a deep sense of pride and cultural identity among community members, reinforcing the symbiotic relationship between heritage preservation and sustainable tourism.

Strategic tourism planning. The study demonstrates that CBET workers link long-term sustainability to proactive legal planning. Securing permits and land titles is seen as vital to shield projects from political and legal challenges. This not only ensures compliance but also bolsters community confidence and a sense of ownership. This implies that sustainable CBET requires deliberate and inclusive planning rooted in local knowledge and institutional collaboration.

These findings are supported by Dangi and Jamal (2016), who emphasized that the sustainability of community-based tourism depends on well-defined governance structures, clear business planning, and stakeholder partnerships. Likewise, the results align with the study by Hilario et al. (2024), which affirms that stakeholders show commitment through their active engagement in resource management, collaborative initiatives, and tourism planning. Additionally, Gherghina (2015) concurs that securing a tourism license, operational permits, and professional certification is a mandatory prerequisite for tourism agencies, underscoring the significant role of these documents in ensuring a high level of quality and safety. Adding depth, Asian Development Bank (2015) emphasized the clear titles establish definitive land ownership, reducing the likelihood of conflicts over land use and access that can arise from competing interests.

Sustainable development priorities. CBET workers advocated for divorcing tourism initiatives from political influence to ensure stability and fairness. Their call for enhanced government support spans infrastructure, disaster response, and employee training, emphasizing that tangible improvements in facilities and welfare are crucial for long-term success. This implies that long-term sustainability in CBET depends on depoliticized governance, strengthened partnerships, workforce development, and strategic investment in infrastructure.

This finding aligns with the study by Mansur et al. (2024), who emphasize that sustainable tourism development must maintain ecological balance through transparent governance models. Likewise, the findings support the study by Zhang et al. (2020), which suggests that enhancing community competence through education and training is vital for the social capital and economic sustainability of tourism. Additionally, Ursa and Arunkumar (2023) concur that investing in local resources and training equips communities with the skills necessary for sustaining tourism growth, and suggest that well-planned infrastructure attracts tourists while enriching the local economy. Adding depth, Sinha et al. (2025) emphasize that government support through infrastructure development is necessary for facilitating sustainable development in ecotourism.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provided an in-depth account of the world of CBET workers in Davao de Oro. Findings revealed the overwhelming breadth of their responsibilities. They not only conserve the natural environment but also preserve the cultural identity and heritage of their community. They must navigate the daily intricacies of social interactions, manage limited resources, and respond to the continuous demands of keeping community-based ecotourism operations functioning.

The results further showed that maintaining community-based ecotourism is a complex and uncertain endeavor. Its success is not guaranteed; rather, it depends on effective community-level engagement, strong and responsive leadership, realistic and context-sensitive planning, and the capacity of workers and communities to adapt livelihood strategies as conditions evolve. The study also underscored a persistent gap between the intended purpose of tourism-related policies and the day-to-day experiences of CBET workers on the ground. This discrepancy highlights the need to align tourism development frameworks with the lived realities of those who implement and sustain CBET initiatives at the community level.

Overall, the findings emphasize that for CBET to become a truly sustainable endeavor, CBET workers must be genuinely empowered. They require sustained support through good governance, meaningful capacity-building initiatives, and evidence-based interventions rather than purely theoretical or compliance-driven programs. The study highlights the importance of incorporating the lived experiences of CBET workers into policy-making processes, program design, and the broader governance of tourism. Additionally, the study highlights the potential of experiential and participatory approaches in enhancing both community empowerment and sustainable tourism outcomes. By foregrounding the perspectives and practices of CBET workers, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between governance, community agency, and sustainability in tourism development.

Building on these findings, future research on CBET should deepen and broaden this knowledge base by examining other aspects of community involvement, sustainability, and governance, including through longitudinal designs that trace how CBET features and community adaptation strategies evolve. Comparative case studies across different regions of the Philippines, as well as mixed-methods approaches that measure key variables such as income changes, job security, participation in decision-making, and environmental conservation measures, would provide a more complete picture of the socio-economic and environmental effects of CBET. It is also crucial for future studies to include all key stakeholders, such as tourists, Local Government Units (LGUs), and private sector partners, to better understand how their roles, decisions, and collaborations shape the governance and sustainability of CBET. Through such avenues of inquiry, future research can generate practical and actionable evidence that informs fair and evidence-based policies, strengthens participatory governance, and promotes a more resilient, sustainable, and socially inclusive tourism model in the Philippines.

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