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Environmental Governance, Development, and Conservation

Proposal

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Uncharted Waters: Local Perspectives on Cruise Tourism Expansion in Bocas del Toro

Introduction

Bocas del Toro archipelago, located on Panama's Caribbean coast, is a region of ecological and cultural significance. In 2023, Panama's Ministry of the Environment began reviewing an impact study for a proposed cruise ship port on Isla Colón, the archipelago's main island ("Cruise Ship Port Project," 2023). The construction of a permanent dock would mark a significant transformation in the region's tourism model.

Supporters of the port highlight its projected economic contributions. However, the potential long-term costs of increased cruise tourism, such as environmental degradation, cultural erosion, and economic inequality, remain significant concerns. This proposal raises questions about whether cruise tourism aligns with the region's sustainable tourism development.

This study examines local Bocatoreños' perspectives on the expansion of cruise ship tourism in Bocas del Toro, assessing the extent to which the proposed port aligns with sustainable tourism practices given its projected social, economic, and environmental impacts. This research is important as it centers the voices of local stakeholders in a region where tourism is the backbone of the local economy and biodiverse ecosystems are the primary attraction. By highlighting

community perspectives, this study examines whether the proposed cruise port supports Bocas del Toro's sustainable development, contributing to broader conversations on inclusive development and how sustainability is understood at the local level.

Background and Significance

The proposed cruise ship port in Isla Colón signals a broader shift in Bocas del Toro's tourism model, moving away from small-scale, community-based ecotourism toward mass, cruise-driven tourism, likely to result in expansion and increased foreign investment in the archipelago. While cruise ships have occasionally visited the archipelago by anchoring offshore and tendering passengers to Isla Colón (The Bocas Breeze, 2023), the construction of a permanent port would facilitate more frequent arrivals and larger ships. In 2023, Panama's Ministry of the Environment began reviewing a Category II Environmental Impact Study for a proposed \$6 million cruise ship port on Isla Colón ("Cruise Ship Port Project," 2023). The port would accommodate two Viking cruise ships up to 230 meters in length and include infrastructure such as a fixed pier, a floating dock, a marina, and new offices for the Panama Maritime Authority ("Cruise Ship Port Project," 2023). Supporters emphasize projected economic benefits, including \$5.9 million annually during construction and \$14.7 million in revenue over the first three years of operation ("Cruise Ship Port Project," 2023.) However, this development raises serious questions about long-term environmental degradation, cultural displacement, and increased economic inequality.

Historically, Bocas del Toro's economy was reliant on banana exportation, through time the province has shifted toward tourism as its primary economic driver ("Cruise Ship Port Project," 2023.) Ecotourism, in particular, plays a crucial role in the local economy, as the region's lush flora, fauna, and marine biodiversity attract many international and domestic travellers. Often

marketed as the “Galápagos of the Caribbean,” (“Cruise Ship Port Project,” 2023) Bocas del Toro attracted an estimated 100,000 visitors as of 2008 (Solimar International, n.d.), a number that has likely increased. With a local population of about 13,000 (Bocas del Toro Panama Properties, 2024), tourism now significantly outnumbers the resident population.

While tourism has generated economic opportunities, it has also placed stress on local resources and infrastructure. Research on small island tourism destinations like Bocas del Toro shows increased demand for water, food, and energy, elevated sewage and waste, pollution, coastline urbanization, and the degradation of key ecosystems such as coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass meadows (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020). Despite these impacts, coastal and marine tourism is projected to grow, becoming the largest value-adding segment of the ocean economy by 2030 (World Bank, as cited in Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020).

The people potentially most affected by the increase of cruise ship traffic are the local residents of Bocas del Toro, many of whom rely on tourism for their livelihoods. This proposal raises concerns about cruise ships displacing local businesses and threatening the community’s control over tourism. Additionally, environmental degradation poses threats to ecosystems that are both ecologically important and central to Bocas’s ecotourism appeal. Culturally, the shift toward cruise-based tourism risks diminishing the unique identity of Bocas, replacing local experiences with mass attractions tailored to appease cruise ship guests.

Literature Review

Cruise tourism is often framed as a high-yield, low-impact strategy for economic growth in Small Island Developing States (SIDS.) In practice, however, destinations like Aruba show how increased cruise arrivals can overwhelm local capacity. Aruba, with a population of approximately 105,000, hosted over a million tourists in 2017. This resulted in an increased

demand for fresh water, garbage production, and emissions from freight due to growing food imports (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020.) Scholars have noted that such unrestrained growth creates a "race to the bottom," as SIDS governments compete to attract cruise ships by offering discounts and incentives, often compromising long-term sustainability (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020.)

Environmental degradation is one of the most widely reported consequences of cruise tourism. Cruise ships generate substantial emissions and contribute to pollution, especially when environmental regulations are weak or poorly enforced, as is common in areas of SIDS (Hampton and Jeyacheya, 2020.) Friends of the Earth (2014) reported that untreated waste is often dumped into the ocean just three nautical miles from shore, contaminating marine life and ecosystems. This issue is particularly concerning in ecologically sensitive areas such as Bocas del Toro.

A common argument in favor of cruise ship tourism is the potential economic benefits it could provide for the local communities. As in Vanuatu, cruise ship tourism has been promoted as an economic development strategy, yet evidence shows limited improvements in housing, health, and education, raising questions about where the profits are actually going. (Cheer, 2016.) Cruise operators and local elites often control the financial flows of the profits, leaving the local community marginalized (Cheer, 2016.) Furthermore, a recurring theme is the lack of transparency and accountability among cruise operators. In Vanuatu, research into the economic data is often incomplete or skewed, with limited access to information about passenger spending or environmental compliance (Cheer, 2016.)

The insights drawn from other SIDS are directly relevant to Bocas del Toro. As Panama moves forward with plans to construct a new cruise port on Isla Colón, many of the challenges identified in Aruba and Vanuatu are likely to resurface. While cruise tourism is often promoted as an economic opportunity, the evidence from Aruba and Vanuatu, suggests that its long-term impacts may be more harmful than helpful. This review highlights the need for community involvement and environmentally conscious practices if cruise tourism is to be sustainable.

This study draws on a sustainable tourism framework developed for the tourism sector in Wales. The framework is structured around four core pillars: promoting local economic prosperity, supporting community well-being and involvement, minimizing environmental impact, and protecting and valuing natural heritage and culture (Sustainable Tourism Framework, 2007.) Each pillar includes specific aims such as maximizing the local retention of tourist spending, strengthening job quality and access, minimizing pollution and resource use, empowering community participation, and safeguarding ecological and cultural assets. This is a strong lens to interpret this case, because it centers community well-being, local economic benefit, and environmental responsibility. This framework will provide a clear structure for evaluating whether the proposed cruise ship port in Bocas del Toro aligns with sustainable principles.

Research Design and Methods

This study adopts an action research design, which prioritizes local participation and community voice (Labaree, 2009). To gather data, this research would employ surveys as the primary method, using a Likert scale to measure levels of agreement, concern, and perception among participants. The survey would be distributed to residents of Isla Colón to quantify their perspectives related to the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the proposed cruise

ship port. Responses would be analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and trends, which would then be interpreted in relation to the sustainable tourism framework.

Examples of questions included in the survey would align with the four pillars of the sustainable tourism framework. These include: *“Do you think the proposed cruise ship port will benefit or harm local job opportunities?”* *“To what extent do you believe local businesses (restaurants, shops, tour operators, etc.) will benefit or suffer from cruise tourism?”* *“In what way will cruise tourism impact your quality of life?”*, and *“How do you believe the cruise port will affect local ecosystems such as coral reefs and mangroves?”* Additional questions ask whether cruise tourism can be developed sustainably in Bocas del Toro, whether increased cruise ships would affect the region’s cultural identity, and how important it is that tourism efforts preserve local traditions, languages, and practices.

Conclusion

This study is necessary to understand how local residents in Bocas del Toro perceive the proposed cruise ship port and whether it aligns with principles of sustainable tourism. By centering community voices, the research aims to answer the question: *To what extent do local perspectives support or challenge the expansion of cruise tourism in Bocas del Toro, and how do they assess the alignment of the proposed port with sustainable tourism practices given its projected social, economic, and environmental impacts?* The findings may have broader implications for tourism planning, offering insights into how future development projects can better reflect local needs, and protect environmental and cultural resources. Ultimately, this research could support local policymakers and planners in making more equitable and

sustainable development decisions for Bocas del Toro and other small island communities facing similar challenges.

Citations

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