Strategic public management for sustainable eco-cultural tourism development in Malapatan, Sarangani Province

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the role of strategic public management in fostering sustainable eco-cultural tourism development in Malapatan, Sarangani Province, Philippines. It seeks to assess the current tourism status, analyze governance approaches, identify challenges and opportunities, and propose a strategic framework for sustainable development. A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were gathered through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis, and site observations. The study engaged stakeholders from local government units (LGUs), indigenous communities, tourism operators, and civil society organizations. The study found that Malapatan possesses rich eco-cultural tourism assets rooted in indigenous heritage and natural landscapes. However, challenges persist in infrastructure development, stakeholder coordination, community engagement, and policy implementation. A Strategic Public Management Framework was proposed. The study focused solely on selected barangays in Malapatan and excluded perspectives from general tourists. Future research may incorporate broader geographic coverage and quantitative assessments of tourist behavior and economic impact. Nevertheless, the findings provide a practical guide for LGUs and stakeholders aiming to implement sustainable, inclusive, and culturally grounded tourism strategies.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is a sector that can significantly contribute to a nation's shared prosperity by creating jobs, generating income, fostering community engagement, and promoting sustainable practices. With 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals in 2023, the sector generated 1.7 trillion USD in export revenues and 3.3 trillion USD in output, equivalent to 3% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), measured in tourism direct gross domestic product (UN Tourism, 2025). Among the regions, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe recorded the strongest recovery, while Southeast Asia shows potential as the fastest-growing destination.

In the Philippines, the share of the tourism sector in 2023 amounted to PHP 2.09 trillion, which constitutes an estimated 8.6 percent of the national GDP (Mapa, 2024). However, the Philippines ranks at the bottom compared to neighboring countries in Southeast Asia in terms of tourist arrivals in 2024. The Philippines recorded only 5, 949, 350 international tourist arrivals, while Thailand, which occupies the top spot, welcomed 35, 545, 713 foreign tourists (Outbox, 2025). It also recorded the slowest recovery rate at 72.02% compared to Cambodia, which registered 101.35%.

In response to the current status of the tourism industry in the Philippines, the national government, through the Department of Tourism and in cooperation with the local government units, has initiated specific reforms and initiatives to boost the sector. One of these initiatives is the approval of the National Tourism Development Plan. The framework emphasizes the strengthening of tourism governance through close collaboration with national and local stakeholders. This complements the report of the UN Tourism in 2025 which recognizes the important roles of policymakers and tourism actors in planning, investment, and governance to harness tourism's potential as a means of promoting shared prosperity and achieving the SDGs.

Public governance and management create sustainable eco-cultural tourism. Regional and local planning must adhere to national standards to avoid environmental damage and ensure the sustainability of ecotourism ventures. Moreover, public management plays a critical role in empowering local communities to manage and benefit from tourism initiatives. In the case of the municipality of Tboli, the municipal government worked with local villages to develop ecotourism sites, enabling residents to operate and manage these attractions (Alampay, 2024). In Romblon, strong policy support and effective governance to enhance the benefits of community-based tourism for local communities (Andalecio et al., 2022).

While literature is abundant in managing ecotourism or cultural tourism, there is a significant gap in integrated analyses, particularly those anchored on strategic frameworks for local public administration (Wasela, 2023). Moreover, existing scholarship in the Philippine context tends to focus on prominent destinations, while municipalities like Malapatan are underexplored (Alampay et al., 2005; Perez, 2017). Addressing this gap, the present study examines how strategic public management can guide and enhance eco-cultural tourism development at the municipal level.

This study seeks to assess the current status of eco-cultural tourism in Malapatan, Sarangani Province. It identifies the key challenges and opportunities for sustainable eco-cultural tourism in the municipality. This research analyzes the role of public management, local governance practices, particularly in policy-making, stakeholder engagement, and infrastructure planning, can contribute to the long-term viability of tourism in Malapatan. A Strategic Public Management Framework tailored to the eco-cultural context of Malapatan is also proposed to be utilized by the local government. By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to offer a replicable model for other localities aspiring to balance tourism growth with ecological integrity and cultural continuity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainable Eco-Cultural Tourism

Tourism is considered by the United Nations (2025) as one of the world's fastest-growing industries. For many countries around the world, it is an important source of income and employment, especially in developing countries. Given its importance, government agencies, business sectors, and the people engaged in the tourism sector are taking steps to identify, develop, preserve, and promote various tourism sites. To realize them, the United Nations is promoting sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism, as defined by the World Tourism Organization (2005), takes complete account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, SDG target 8.9 aims to devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products by 2030.

Under the umbrella of sustainable tourism is ecotourism, which is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about

nature and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally-oriented (Fennell, 2020). A subset of ecotourism is eco-cultural tourism. Quintana (2020) defines it as a small-scale and fundamentally emotional form of tourism that promotes socio-cultural and traditional values and environmental awareness and offers benefits to both rural and urban areas. This type of tourism requires a platform and type of tourism planning that encourages local, sustainable development involving all tourism sectors.

2.2. Public Management and Sustainable Tourism

Public management in tourism refers to the processes and mechanisms by which government institutions, particularly local government units (LGUs), regulate, coordinate, and promote tourism activities to ensure sustainable outcomes. It encompasses policy-making, resource allocation, stakeholder engagement, and implementation of programs that balance economic growth with environmental and cultural protection (OECD, 2022). In the Philippine context, the Local Government Code of 1991 (Republic Act No. 7160) decentralizes governance, granting municipalities like Malapatan authority over tourism-related policies, programs, and partnerships. Public management thus enables LGUs to mobilize resources, establish regulatory frameworks, and collaborate with community stakeholders (Nur et al., 2023).

When applied to eco-cultural tourism, public management ensures that development initiatives are not only economically viable but also socially inclusive and culturally sensitive. Rivera and Andrada (2024) emphasized that strong public management fosters resilience in the tourism sector by integrating sustainability into planning and governance. This study anchors its framework on this understanding of public management as a strategic enabler of eco-cultural tourism development.

2.3. Empowering Indigenous Communities through Sustainable Eco-Cultural Tourism in Southeast Asia

Sustainable eco-cultural tourism development in Southeast Asia among indigenous communities is one of the highly relevant topics considering the region's rich biodiversity and the cultural heritage of its indigenous populations. Drawing insights from various research papers and literature, this section examines and summarizes the status, key features, challenges, and strategies for developing sustainable eco-cultural tourism.

To be successful and sustainable, eco-cultural tourism requires community participation and empowerment, cultural preservation and promotion, environmental conservation, economic development, and sustainable livelihood. Sustainable eco-cultural practices require the participation of people in the community and the empowerment of indigenous communities. Community participation is an indispensable component of sustainable eco-cultural tourism. The involvement of indigenous communities ensures the alignment of culture and environment with tourism development. In Malaysia, Mohd Sukri et al. (2024) found that Indigenous communities' participation in tourism has improved not only their socioeconomic condition but also contributed to the conservation of cultural heritage and support sustainable development.

Similarly, in Vietnam, community-based ecotourism has been found to play a significant role in diversifying livelihood sources and preserving ethnic and cultural identity (Pham, 2024). However, a big part of the success of community-based tourism (CBT) depends on the level of involvement and empowerment of local communities. A study in Cat Tien National Park, Vietnam, highlights the challenges of top-down implementation, which can constrain local involvement and benefits. The study emphasizes the need for better stakeholder involvement, transparent governance, and genuine community engagement to improve CBT outcomes (Duong et al., 2024).

Cultural tourism is another key feature of eco-cultural tourism. The conservation of the vibrant culture and tradition in the region, when incorporated, can boost the tourism industry. Van (2024) found cultural tourism in Tuyên Quang, Vietnam, as a vital mechanism for safeguarding and disseminating the traditional values and practices of ethnic minority groups. To be an effective means for preserving indigenous arts and rituals, Van (2024) emphasized that it must be well crafted and implemented. Moreover, the integration of traditional knowledge and cultural expressions into tourism initiatives can enhance the authenticity of the tourist experience. In Taiwan, the study of Chen et al. (2024), found the importance of the integration of traditional knowledge into conservation and tourism activities. The study suggests that planning cultural activities based on local traditional knowledge can enhance community resilience and participation.

The third key principle of sustainable eco-cultural tourism is environmental conservation. Many indigenous communities in Southeast Asia live in areas with rich natural landscapes, which are often the primary attractions for tourists. Among the Kamoro indigenous

tribes in West Papua, Indonesia, community-based tourism is a way to preserve their natural landscapes and ecocentric worldviews. However, the long-term sustainability of such initiatives depends on the ability to balance economic benefits with environmental protection (Anindhita et al., 2024). In Vietnam, a case study on the Tua Chua Karst Plateau highlights the potential of community-based ecotourism for preserving natural landscapes and promoting sustainable development. The study uses the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) method to evaluate the potential of ecotourism development, emphasizing the importance of natural landscape uniqueness, indigenous cultural values, and stakeholder engagement (Phuong et al., 2022).

Sustainable eco-cultural tourism contributes to the economic development of indigenous communities. In Malaysian Borneo, community-based ecotourism has been found to improve local livelihoods and provide an alternative income source for rural communities. However, the sustainability of such initiatives is in doubt without the consideration of the community's vision and aspirations (Kunjuraman, 2024). In Thailand, a case study on Baan Khoa Lak village demonstrates how community-based tourism can uplift living standards, foster social connections, and promote environmental and cultural preservation. The village's community-based tourism program, which includes eco-tourism offerings like water rafting and homestays, has empowered residents by involving them in decision-making processes (Krittayaruangroj & Suriyankietkaew, 2024).

Despite the potential benefits, sustainable eco-cultural tourism faces several challenges. In a study conducted by Duong et al. (2024) in Cat Tien National Park, Vietnam, they identified power imbalances, capacity issues, and unfair distribution of benefits as significant constraints of local participation in an ecotourism venture. The study emphasizes the need for better stakeholder involvement, transparent governance, and genuine community engagement to improve CBT outcomes. In Indonesia, a study on mangrove ecotourism in Sei Nagalawan Village highlights the importance of institutional support, effective technology use, and human resource development for sustainable ecotourism management. The study also underscores the need for a holistic approach to environmental conservation and community empowerment (Sari, 2024).

2.4. Strategy Framework for Sustainable Eco-Cultural Development

Based on the experiences of other countries, to achieve sustainable eco-cultural tourism, specific strategies must be considered and employed. First, there should be

community-led initiatives. Empowering Indigenous communities to take the lead in tourism development ensures that their cultural and environmental values are respected and preserved. For example, in West Papua, community-led tourism initiatives have served as a barrier against less sustainable industries controlled by external agents (Anindhita et al., 2024).

The second is capacity building. Enhancing the capacity of local communities through education, training, and awareness campaigns is crucial for sustainable tourism development. In Taiwan, Chen et al. (2024) suggest that capacity-building programs should focus on creating tribal landscapes based on local traditional culture and planning cultural activities based on local traditional knowledge. Third, there should be policy support and governance. Effective policy frameworks and governance structures are essential for supporting sustainable tourism development. In Vietnam, the study on Tua Chua Karst Plateau emphasizes the importance of local tourism development policies and stakeholder engagement in ecotourism development (Phuong et al., 2022).

Capitalizing on technology for marketing is the fifth strategy. Leveraging technology for marketing and promoting ecotourism initiatives can enhance their visibility and attract more tourists. In Indonesia, the study on Sei Nagalawan Village highlights the importance of technology use in marketing and promoting ecotourism products (Sari, 2024). Lastly, cross-border collaboration: Sharing best practices and lessons learned across countries can enhance the sustainability of eco-cultural tourism in the region. A study on eco-trekking in Southeast Asia emphasizes the importance of cross-border learning and cooperation among countries in the region (Boonyasurat & Jongwanich, 2023).

2.5. Sustainable Eco-Cultural Tourism in Malapatan

Malapatan is a first-class coastal municipality of Sarangani province with a land area of 609.28 square kilometers. Alabel borders it in the south, the seat of the provincial government, and Glan in the north, the tourist capital of the Sarangani, known for its long white beaches. As of 2020, its population stands at 80 294, composed of Christians, Muslims, and the Indigenous people of Sarangani.

The municipality has a vibrant culture. It is the home of the famous Blaan "dreamweavers," who craft sleeping mats using the designs they have dreamt about. It is known for its expertly woven colorful "Malongs" (Sarong in other parts of Southeast Asia) and "Banig," hand-made by the "dreamweavers" of the village of Upper Lasang. The villages

of Sapu Masla and Sapu Padidu are potential sites that offer a glimpse of a rich history. It hosts Arabic tombstones as well as burial sites, which locals claim were as early as the 15th century, containing skeletal remains that may have belonged to early European explorers. In terms of delicacies, it is known for its "tinagtag" (rice crispy).

Moreover, Malapatan is also endowed with picturesque natural wonders that are potential for tourism. The municipality's mountains, waterfalls, and seascapes are potential tourism prospects. The villages showcase captivating landscapes for tourists who are in trekking and trail biking. Visitors are captivated by its river system and natural cliffs (Municipality of Malapatan, n.d.). However, despite its tourism potential, the municipality logged the lowest number of tourists arriving in 2024 among the municipalities in Sarangani. Glan, the neighboring municipality, recorded 1,310,278 tourist arrivals, while Malapatan had only 42,210 (Sarangani Tourism and Investment Promotion Center Provincial Local Government of Sarangani, 2024). This stark contrast presents an interesting research gap that this study intends to answer.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed qualitative research design. Pierce (2008) stresses that the qualitative method has the advantage of being able to equip the researcher with the ability to learn in-depth the dynamics and nuances of human and social interactions. For example, this study on strategic public management for sustainable eco-cultural tourism development in Malapatan, Sarangani Province enabled the researcher to focus on a specific geographic and governance setting, analyze the perspectives of stakeholders (e.g., LGUs, Tourism Operators, Indigenous Communities) and capture the cultural and ecological dynamics influencing tourism development. This approach was particularly valuable in understanding the multifaceted nature of the enablers and constraints influencing sustainable eco-cultural tourism development in the local context. The insights gained from qualitative interviews and focus group discussions informed the understanding of governance practices, stakeholder dynamics, and cultural-ecological interactions. For instance, identifying these enablers and constraints helped develop more effective public management strategies tailored to Malapatan's unique socio-cultural and environmental setting.

3.2. Participants of the Study

The participants in this study were purposefully selected based on their relevance to the development of eco-cultural tourism and their roles as community gatekeepers or individuals holding positions of responsibility and influence. Specifically, the study involved ten (10) participants, including local chief executive, tourism officer, representative from academe, barangay captains from the selected barangays of Sapu Masla, Tuyan, and Poblacion in Malapatan, Sarangani Province, who provided critical insights into local governance and community perspectives. In addition, tourism stakeholders such as cultural weavers, craft artists, and cultural bearers were included. These participants contributed their specialized knowledge of traditional skills and practices, offering practical perspectives on the development, management, and operation of eco-cultural tourism initiatives.

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

The data collection was done using semi-structured interviews (SSI). During the conduct of the interviews, the researcher did not strictly follow a formalized list of questions. Instead, open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion with the interviewee rather than a straightforward question-and-answer format (Doyle, 2020). In addition to the semi-guided questionnaire, follow-up questions were used to further probe the participants' responses, including both factual and probing questions. The researcher also utilized secondary data sources, particularly the existing Strategic Tourism Plan and the Comprehensive Development Plan of the municipality to supplement and contextualize the primary data gathered through interviews. These documents provided insights into the local government's vision, goals, and strategic priorities for tourism development, which helped validate the analysis of stakeholder perspectives.

3.4. Data Analysis

After conducting the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the researcher carefully transcribed each conversation and reviewed the data to understand the stories, ideas, and perspectives shared by the participants. The researcher used a combination of narrative analysis and content analysis to make sense of the information. Through narrative analysis, the researcher looked closely at how the local chief executive, tourism officer, barangay officials, tourism operators, cultural bearers, and indigenous community members

told their stories, how they expressed their experiences, struggles, and hopes surrounding eco-cultural tourism in Malapatan. Their narratives revealed not just facts, but feelings and values, particularly about their identity, heritage, and the way local governance influences their communities. Alongside this, the researcher also applied content analysis to identify common themes and patterns that emerged across all responses. There are recurring ideas such as government support, cultural preservation, economic opportunity, and environmental stewardship, and grouped them into broader categories for analysis. Using both methods helped the researcher view the shared realities in Malapatan, offering a richer understanding of how strategic public management plays a role in shaping sustainable eco-cultural tourism in the area.

3.5. Research Ethics

The study strictly adhered to ethical research standards involving human subjects. Ethical clearance was secured from the MSU College of Social Sciences and Humanities Ethics Review Committee. Participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Interviews were conducted in a respectful and non-intrusive manner, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data protection. Pseudonyms were used in reporting findings to protect the identities of participants. Safety protocols were followed during fieldwork, especially in Indigenous communities, to ensure respect for cultural sensitivities and community welfare.

4. Findings and Discussion

Participants' responses were presented using their own words and organized under themes that emerged through content and narrative analysis. These themes reflect the shared experiences, insights, and perspectives of stakeholders involved in eco-cultural tourism development in Malapatan.

Theme 1: Emerging but underdeveloped eco-cultural tourism

"Sa totoo lang, nagsisimula pa lang talaga tayo... may visitors na curious sa kultura ng Blaan at sa natural attractions natin… Pero kulang pa sa promotion at facilities." (We are just starting. There are visitors curious about

the Blaan culture and our natural attractions, like falls and mountains. But promotion and facilities are still lacking). (Participant 1)

"Medyo developing stage pa... we need more support to push it forward." (It's still in the developing stage... we need more support to move it forward). (Participant 2)

"Very promising...pero gina trabaho ug kinahanglan pa nato ug mas organized nga development, mas maayo nga infrastructure ug aggressive promotion." (Very promising but it's still being worked on, and we still need more organized development, better infrastructure, and more aggressive promotion). (Participant 6)

"ang eco-cultural tourism sa Malapatan is a growing sector with a lot of potential nga wala pa nato ma-fully utilize... Pero medyo scattered pa ang development. Naa'y mga local initiatives, pero we need better coordination, stronger marketing, ug more investments in facilities that cater to this specific type of traveler." (Eco-cultural tourism in Malapatan is a growing sector with a lot of potential that we have not yet fully utilized... But the development is still somewhat scattered. There are local initiatives, but we need better coordination, stronger marketing, and more investments in facilities that cater to this specific type of traveler). (Participant 5)

Several participants (1, 2 and 6) shared the perception that eco-cultural tourism in Malapatan is still emerging and underdeveloped. They recognize the municipality's rich cultural heritage and natural attractions yet emphasize the need for better infrastructure, promotion, and community involvement. Participants acknowledged the municipality's rich natural and cultural assets as a strong foundation for tourism development. These assets include the unique traditions of the Blaan and Maguindanaon tribes, particularly their intricate weaving practices (Banig of Bai Estelita Bantilan and Inaul of Tuyan), diverse natural attractions such as waterfalls, mountains, and coastal areas, and the emerging narrative of peace-building in previously conflict-affected barangays. This sentiment was echoed by other participants (5 & 6), who described the current state as "very promising" but requiring "more organized development, better infrastructure, and aggressive promotion".

This perspective is supported by the Municipality's Strategic Tourism Plan (2023-2028) and Comprehensive Development Plan (2022-2027) which identifies eco-cultural tourism as a priority area with "strong potential but requiring targeted investments". Additionally, based on the Tourism Product Development Audit Report, Malapatan holds a

wide array of 61 tourism attractions, predominantly under the Nature Tourism category (falls, peaks, trails, mangroves, caves). A vast majority (approximately 85%) of these sites are classified as "Potential," indicating that while they possess inherent tourism value, they are currently underdeveloped and lack essential visitor-ready infrastructure. Only a limited number are labeled as "Emerging," and just few are identified as an "Existing" attraction.

This uneven level of development points to a systemic challenge: the lack of enabling infrastructure and services to support and sustain tourism growth. Without proper access roads, signage, sanitation facilities, and waste management systems, these sites remain inaccessible or unattractive to tourists, thus impeding both local economic benefits and community engagement in the tourism sector. The Department of Tourism (DOT) identifies the 5A's— Attractions, Activities, Access, Accommodation, and Amenities, as fundamental pillars of a successful tourism destination. A review of Malapatan's attractions clearly reveals serious deficiencies in "Access" and "Amenities" as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Product development audit report of tourism attractions in Malapatan

No.	Tourism Attraction Name	Tourism Attraction Category	NTDP Category	Development Level
1	Kinam Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
2	Lasang Cave	Caves (inland)	Nature Tourism	Potential
3	Daan Suyan Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
4	Fadlog Motor Trail	Nature Trail and Path	Nature Tourism	Potential
5	Kapya Pangintalanan	Unique Natural Landscape / Seascape	Nature Tourism	Emerging
6	Kihan Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
7	Kilas Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
8	Lanao Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
9	Mangrove Sanctuary	Agro-Forestry	Nature Tourism	Potential
10	Pananggalon Mangrove Board Walk	Agro-Forestry	Nature Tourism	Potential
11	Montilla's Peak Point	Mountains/hills/highlands	Nature Tourism	Potential
12	Purok Jolohano Mangrove Forest	Agro-Forestry	Nature Tourism	Potential
13	Samio Peak	Mountains/hills/highlands	Nature Tourism	Potential
14	Sapu Padidu Falls & Spring	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
15	Sapu Padidu View Deck	Unique Natural Landscape / Seascape	Nature Tourism	Potential
16	Siargun Uphill	Unique Natural Landscape / Seascape	Nature Tourism	Potential
17	Sitio Malinaw Falls	Unique Natural Landscape / Seascape	Nature Tourism	Potential

No.	Tourism Attraction Name	Tourism Attraction Category	NTDP Category	Development Level
18	Sitio Tule	Unique Natural Landscape / Seascape	Nature Tourism	Potential
19	Skylab View Deck	Unique Natural Landscape / Seascape	Nature Tourism	Potential
20	Tugal Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
21	Panay Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
22	Lun Masla Wet land/ Bird Sanctuary	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
23	Glandang Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
24	Kamgad Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
25	Upper Suyan Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
26	Kohan Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
27	Batuad Lake	Lakes and Pond	Nature Tourism	Potential
28	Mt. Tudok	Mountains/hills/highlands	Nature Tourism	Potential
29	Mt. Lambon View Deck	Mountains/hills/highlands	Nature Tourism	Potential
30	Mt. Tuwak	Mountains/hills/highlands	Nature Tourism	Potential
31	Tuak Falls	Falls	Nature Tourism	Potential
32	Mt. Salyan View Deck	Unique Natural Landscape / Seascape	Nature Tourism	Potential
33	Mt. Latian Range	Mountains/hills/highlands	Nature Tourism	Potential
34	Purok Pulot Cave	Caves (inland)	Nature Tourism	Potential
35	Uphill View Deck	Unique Natural Landscape / Seascape	Nature Tourism	Potential
36	Balungis Malong Weaving Center	Other Historical or cultural attractions	Cultural Tourism	Emerging
37	Casa Dolores Local Products and Delicacies	Souvenirs And Delicacies	Cultural Tourism	Emerging
38	GAMABA Mat Weaving School of Arts	Unique Cultural Heritage	Cultural Tourism	Emerging
39	Nanay Kap's Products	Souvenirs And Delicacies	Cultural Tourism	Potential
40	Pasalubong Center	Souvenirs And Delicacies	Cultural Tourism	Emerging
41	Suli Di Kaylu'an	Mountains/hills/highlands	Cultural Tourism	Potential
42	Suli Fasaka	Mountains/hills/highlands	Cultural Tourism	Potential
43	Tinagtag Making	Souvenirs And Delicacies	Cultural Tourism	Potential
44	Tinagtag Making (SPadidu)	Souvenirs And Delicacies	Cultural Tourism	Potential
45	Alkumain Beach (LPadidu	Beach for Sea Bathing	Sun and Beach Tourism	Potential

No.	Tourism Attraction Name	Tourism Attraction Category	NTDP Category	Development Level
46	Casa Dolores Resort	Beach for Sea Bathing	Sun and Beach Tourism	Emerging
47	Raadz Beach Resort	Beach for Sea Bathing	Sun and Beach Tourism	Emerging
48	Asuncion Beach Resort	Beach for Sea Bathing	Sun and Beach Tourism	Emerging
49	Pinobre Beach Resort	Beach for Sea Bathing	Sun and Beach Tourism	Emerging
50	Tariza Beach Club	Beach for Sea Bathing	Sun and Beach Tourism	Emerging
51	Willing Beach Resort	Beach for Sea Bathing	Sun and Beach Tourism	Emerging
52	Sili Farm Lunpadidu	Farm / Ranch	Others	Potential
53	Sapu Padidu Agrifarm	Farm / Ranch	Others	Potential
54	Kaong Farm Lun Masla	Farm / Ranch	Others	Potential
55	Sili Farm (LPadidu)	Farm / Ranch	Others	Potential
56	Upper Suyan Upland Rice Farm	Farm / Ranch	Others	Potential
57	Sili Farm (Pob)	Farm / Ranch	Others	Potential
58	Kinam Upland Rice Farm	Farm / Ranch	Others	Potential
59	Sapu Masla Dive Site	Farm / Ranch	Diving and Marine Sports Tourism	Potential
60	JM Beach Resort	Farm / Ranch	Sun and Beach Tourism	Emerging
61	Pakaradyan Festival	Festivals (e.g. official or de facto cultural heritage/community related)	MICE and Events Tourism	Existing

Source: Sarangani Tourism and Investment Promotion Center, Provincial Local Government of Sarangani

Theme 2: Role of Public Management in Eco-Cultural Tourism Development

"...for example, ang LGU mismo ang nagmintinar sa peace and order, which is important kaayo para sa tourism. Nag-invest pud ta sa pagpaayo sa mga dalan padulong sa potential tourist spots ug gisuportahan nato ang mga local festivals nga nagpakita sa atong kultura. We also facilitated dialogues between communities and investors para masiguro nga ang development is sensitive sa atong kultura ug sa panginahanglan sa atong katawhan." (For example, the LGU itself maintains peace and order, which is very important for tourism. We have also invested in improving roads leading to potential tourist spots and supported local festivals that showcase our culture. We also facilitated dialogues between communities and investors to ensure that development is sensitive to our culture and the needs of our people.) (Participant 4)

"Nakatabang ang LGU sa pag-facilitate og forums and events about tourism. Pero sa implementation, medyo hinay pa. Dapat tuloy-tuloy." (The LGU has

helped in facilitating forums and events about tourism. But in implementation, it's quite slow. It should be continuous.) (Participant 2)

"Public management in Malapatan has facilitated eco-cultural tourism development through initiatives such as implementing heritage preservation programs, supporting local artisans like Bai Estelita Bantilan, and improving infrastructure to promote cultural sites and natural attractions." (Participant 7)

"Specific examples of public management's influence include the zoning ordinances that identify potential tourism areas while aiming to protect environmentally sensitive zones. Our office has also been involved in conducting initial site assessments for tourism development and incorporating tourism considerations into infrastructure projects..." (Participant 6)

The participants shared a mix of encouraging examples and constructive feedback about the role of public management in tourism development. One participant (Participant 4) emphasized that public management has been instrumental in supporting tourism through infrastructure development, policy-making, and organizing cultural events. They also highlighted the importance of the local government unit (LGU) in maintaining peace and order, an essential foundation for tourism, as well as facilitating dialogue among stakeholders. Other participants (2, 6, and 7) shared similar sentiments, acknowledging that the LGU in Malapatan has made efforts to build a tourism-friendly environment. These efforts include improving infrastructure, supporting cultural activities, implementing zoning plans, and launching heritage conservation programs. However, they also pointed out some challenges, particularly the need for more consistent implementation of initiatives, stronger coordination among government offices and stakeholders, and more proactive, long-term tourism policies.

In the Philippines, this is often seen through the lens of the LGUs as they are at the forefront of tourism development at the local level (Republic Act No. 7160, 1991). Public management plays a vital role in shaping how tourism grows and functions, especially at the local level. It involves the decisions and actions taken by government agencies and public institutions to guide the planning, development, and day-to-day operations of tourism activities (Javed & Tučková, 2020). This can range from crafting tourism policies and regulations to building infrastructure, promoting destinations, and bringing different stakeholders together (OECD, 2022). In places like Malapatan, where tourism is closely tied to community identity and natural heritage, strong public management helps ensure that development is not only economically beneficial but also sustainable and inclusive (Rivera & Andrada, 2024). It helps

prevent negative effects such as environmental harm or cultural disruption. Just as importantly, it creates space for collaboration, between the government, local communities, private businesses, and even NGOs, so that everyone works toward shared goals in tourism (Nur et al., 2023).

Theme 3: Stakeholders Engagement and Collaboration

"Sila gyud ang nag-facilitate sa link between communities and national agencies."(They [LGUs] really facilitate the link between communities and national agencies.) (Participant 1)

"Collaboration gyud ang importante. Dapat ang LGU, mga tribo, ug private sector magtinabangay."(Collaboration is really important. The LGU, tribes, and the private sector should work together.) (Participant 3)

"Ang LGU ang nag-lead ug nag-regulate ani... Pero dili lang LGU. Kinahanglan nato ang tabang sa Tourism Council, sa atong local communities (especially our IPs), sa mga negosyo, NGOs, ug bisan sa national government agencies... Sila-sila ang custodians sa atong kultura ug kalikasan; ang businesses ang maghatag serbisyo; ang NGOs ang makahatag expertise sa sustainability; ug ang national agencies ang makahatag funding ug technical support." (The LGU leads and regulates this... But it's not just the LGU. We need the help of the Tourism Council, our local communities (especially our IPs), businesses, NGOs, and even national government agencies... They are the custodians of our culture and nature; the businesses will provide services; the NGOs can provide expertise in sustainability; and the national agencies can provide funding and technical support.) (Participant 4)

"Ang Tourism Council ang bridge between the LGU, private sector, ug communities, actively promoting tourism." (Participant 5)

"We aim to facilitate participatory planning processes where local communities are involved from the initial stages of identifying potential tourism sites and developing tourism products. We are working on strengthening communication channels between the LGU, relevant national agencies... and community representatives." (Participant 6)

Many participants spoke passionately about the importance of working together to support eco-cultural tourism in Malapatan. Participants 1 and 3, for instance, emphasized that collaboration among key stakeholders, including the LGU, Indigenous communities, and the private sector, is essential for meaningful and sustainable progress. One of them pointed out

how the Tourism Council plays a central role in this collaboration, acting as a bridge that connects the LGU, local communities, and business sectors to actively promote tourism (Participant 5). Building on this, Participant 6 shared that efforts are already underway to improve communication channels between the LGU, national agencies, and community representatives to ensure that everyone's voice is heard and included in tourism planning.

These conversations reflect a shared understanding that collaborative governance is not just helpful but necessary for the success of eco-cultural tourism. While there are existing coordination mechanisms, several participants acknowledged that these still fall short in practice. Gaps remain, particularly when it comes to ensuring meaningful participation from local communities, especially Indigenous Peoples. What's needed, according to the participants, are more inclusive, consistent, and formal platforms where communities aren't just consulted but are actively involved in shaping tourism plans and decisions. Their insights make it clear: for tourism to truly reflect the values and heritage of Malapatan, it must be co-created with the people who call it home.

Theme 4: Challenges in Promoting Sustainable Eco-Cultural Tourism

Sub-theme 4.1: Inadequate infrastructure and budgetary constraints

> *"Kulang gyud sa pondo ug facilities. Wala pa tay proper access roads ug signages." (We really lack funds and facilities. We don't have proper access roads and signages yet.)* (Participant 8)

One of the most common concerns raised by participants was the lack of infrastructure and limited funding that continue to hold back eco-cultural tourism in Malapatan. Many stakeholders shared a similar frustration: despite the area's rich cultural heritage and natural beauty, basic tourism infrastructure is still missing or insufficient. Roads are either unpaved or poorly maintained, signage is minimal or absent, and there are few facilities to accommodate visitors comfortably. As one participants put it, without these essentials, even the most beautiful destinations can remain hidden and underappreciated.

This situation is not unique to Malapatan. Around the world, other rural and developing regions face similar obstacles. For example, Xu et al. (2022) found that poor or insufficient road quality connecting tourist sites and limited public transport are significant constraints. Likewise, Vachanni (2024) observed that in North Macedonia, the lack of clear signage and

access infrastructure in rural tourism sites has discouraged repeat visits. Meanwhile, a study in China by Wang et al. (2021) confirmed what many in Malapatan already know: without good transportation links, even the most promising tourism regions can fall short of their potential.

These global findings mirror the experiences of Malapatan's local stakeholders. While there are active efforts to promote eco-cultural tourism, the lack of foundational support, such as accessible roads, clear signage, and basic visitor amenities, remains a major roadblock. Compounding the issue is the limited budget at the municipal level, which makes it difficult to prioritize or fast-track these much-needed investments.

Sub-theme 4.2: Weak policy enforcement and governance gap

"polisiya pud. Walay klarong guidelines para sa eco-tourism sa barangay level" *(also policies. There are no clear guidelines for eco-tourism at the barangay level).* (Participant 2)

"Ang current public policies naa man influence, especially those related to environment ug cultural heritage. Pero often broad ra kaayo sila ug dili specific sa needs sa eco-cultural tourism." (The current public policies do have influence, especially those related to environment and cultural heritage. But often they are too broad and not specific to the needs of eco-cultural tourism.) (Participant 4)

"The existing environmental laws and cultural heritage acts provide a baseline. However, ilang application and enforcement sa tourism areas needs strengthening. We lack specific policies that incentivize sustainable practices, like tax breaks for eco-friendly accommodations or guidelines for community-based tourism. The current policies don't fully address the unique challenges and opportunities of eco-cultural tourism." (The existing environmental laws and cultural heritage acts provide a baseline. However, their application and enforcement in tourism areas needs strengthening. We lack specific policies that incentivize sustainable practices, like tax breaks for eco-friendly accommodations or guidelines for community-based tourism. The current policies don't fully address the unique challenges and opportunities of eco-cultural tourism.) (Participant 5)

"Di kaayo. Naay illegal logging and overuse sa watershed area."(Not really. There is illegal logging and overuse of the watershed area.) (Participant 10)

"Dili pa enough. Kailangan pa og stricter implementation." (Not yet enough. Stricter implementation is needed.) (Participant 8)

"While there's a foundation, I don't think adequate pa sila para maprotektahan ang atong cultural ug environmental resources in the context of tourism

development. Ang enforcement usahay lisud, ug ang policies dili specific sa pressures sa tourism." (While there's a foundation, I don't think they are adequate yet to protect our cultural and environmental resources in the context of tourism development. Enforcement is sometimes difficult, and the policies are not specific to the pressures of tourism.) (Participant 6)

"I have reservations about the adequacy of current policies. While they aim to protect our resources, they often lack specific provisions for managing tourism's impact... Without these specific measures, our resources remain vulnerable." (Participant 5)

Another major challenge raised by several participant is the lack of strong and clearly defined tourism policies, especially at the local level. Many shared concerns about how weak policy enforcement and the absence of clear guidelines are creating confusion among tourism operators and communities. Without solid rules to follow, people often feel unsure about what's allowed, which can unintentionally lead to practices that harm the environment or overlook the cultural values the community is trying to protect.

What stood out in the discussions was the absence of eco-tourism guidelines at the barangay level. This is especially troubling since barangays are often the first to manage and interact with the natural and cultural resources that form the heart of Malapatan's eco-cultural tourism. Without clear local policies, efforts to promote sustainable tourism can easily become inconsistent or ineffective. One participant noted that, while there is growing awareness about the potential of eco-cultural tourism, there is still a lack of structure to guide actions and decisions on the ground.

These concerns point to an urgent need for a more comprehensive and localized tourism policy framework, one that includes specific guidelines for barangays and emphasizes enforcement. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2018), strong governance and clear policy direction are cornerstones of sustainable tourism development. In Malapatan, this means crafting tourism policies that not only encourage growth but also protect the very resources, both natural and cultural, that make the area unique.

Sub-theme 4.3: Capacity and skills gap among stakeholders

"Lack of training sa mga locals ug kulang ang marketing materials." (lack of training for the locals and a lack of marketing materials). (Participant 2)

"The main challenges are balancing tourism development with environmental conservation and cultural preservation. (Participant 6)

A recurring concern among participants was the lack of training and limited capacity among local stakeholders, both tourism service providers and members of the host communities. It is evident because the institutional arrangement intended for tourism promotions in locality is limited. This gap in skills and knowledge was seen as a major barrier to fully realizing the potential of eco-cultural tourism in Malapatan. This shows that capacity building is not just about providing skills, it is about preparing communities to take ownership of tourism in a way that aligns with their cultural values and local context. These insights echo findings from recent research in similar contexts. For instance, Estrella (2024) reported in Siruma, Camarines Sur, that while locals were keen to work in tourism, they lacked both technical and soft skills expected in the hospitality sector. In Vietnam's Cam Kim community, Ngo et al. (2024) showed that offering workshops and participatory planning significantly boosted locals' capacity to lead tourism initiatives. Hence, capacity building is not just a nice addition, it is foundational. Proper training in tourism management, service delivery, cultural storytelling, and environmental stewardship is not about meeting checklists, it is about enabling communities to take ownership of eco-cultural tourism in a way that reflects their identity and safeguards their heritage.

Theme 5: Strategies for Improvement

The people who shared their voices in this study spoke not just from observation, but from lived experience. They expressed a collective hope for a more inclusive, strategic, and sustainable approach to managing eco-cultural tourism in Malapatan. These locally grounded recommendations offer meaningful pathways forward and closely align with both the challenges raised earlier in this study and global perspectives on sustainable tourism development.

Develop a comprehensive eco-cultural tourism plan. Many stakeholders emphasized the absence of a unified, long-term vision for tourism development in Malapatan. As Participant 1 explained, "*We need a clear tourism roadmap with input from barangays.*" Without such a guide, initiatives often appear fragmented or short-lived, focusing on festivals or isolated events. A comprehensive eco-cultural tourism master plan is necessary to identify

and prioritize assets, define stakeholder roles, and establish sustainability benchmarks. This aligns with global planning standards, which underscore the value of dynamic, community-driven tourism strategies (UNWTO, 2019).

Establish barangay tourism council. There is a strong call to institutionalize community involvement through dedicated tourism councils at the barangay level. Participants suggested that planning and budgeting processes remain top-down, limiting the contributions of grassroots actors. As to Participant 4, *"Include grassroots sa planning ug budget deliberations" (Include the grassroots in planning and budget deliberations) and* Participant 2, *"Pwede pa i-improve. Dapat regular ang community consultations," (Ensure regular community consultations)*. Establishing inclusive councils that engage IPs, women, youth, and other community voices would promote inclusive participation and better reflect local priorities, echoing the principles of collaborative and community-based tourism (Jamal & Getz, 1995).

Implement capacity building. The limited capacity building for both communities and LGU staff was frequently cited as a major barrier. *"There's a lack of training for locals and a shortage of marketing materials,"* Participant 3 noted. Participants highlighted the need for targeted skills development in areas like sustainable tourism operations, cultural preservation, entrepreneurship, and environmental management. This emphasis on human resource development is essential in ensuring that communities are not just passive beneficiaries but active leaders in tourism (Baum, 2006).

Develop tourism code. Although some policies exist, participants pointed to a *"disconnect between policy and practice."* The lack of consistent enforcement and feedback mechanisms often results in unsustainable tourism behaviors. *"Regular evaluation of tourism progress with feedback from locals"* was recommended by Participant 5. Community-driven monitoring systems, with adaptive strategies based on feedback, could ensure responsive and responsible tourism management, aligned with the principles of adaptive governance (Shemshad et al., 2025; Abreu et al., 2024).

The people of Malapatan are not just pointing out what is lacking but they are offering thoughtful, experience-based solutions rooted in their everyday realities. Their voices reflect a deep understanding that public management in tourism must be inclusive, locally grounded, and able to adapt to change. What they envision is not just growth, it is development that honors their culture, protects their environment, and brings shared benefits to the whole community.

These community-driven insights offer more than recommendations, they outline plans moving forward. If taken seriously and supported with the right resources, these strategies could turn Malapatan into a leading example of how eco-cultural tourism can thrive without compromising the values and identity of the people who call it home.

5.5 Strategic Public Management Framework

Figure 1

Strategic Public Management Framework

Strategic Management Framework in Malapatan, Sarangani
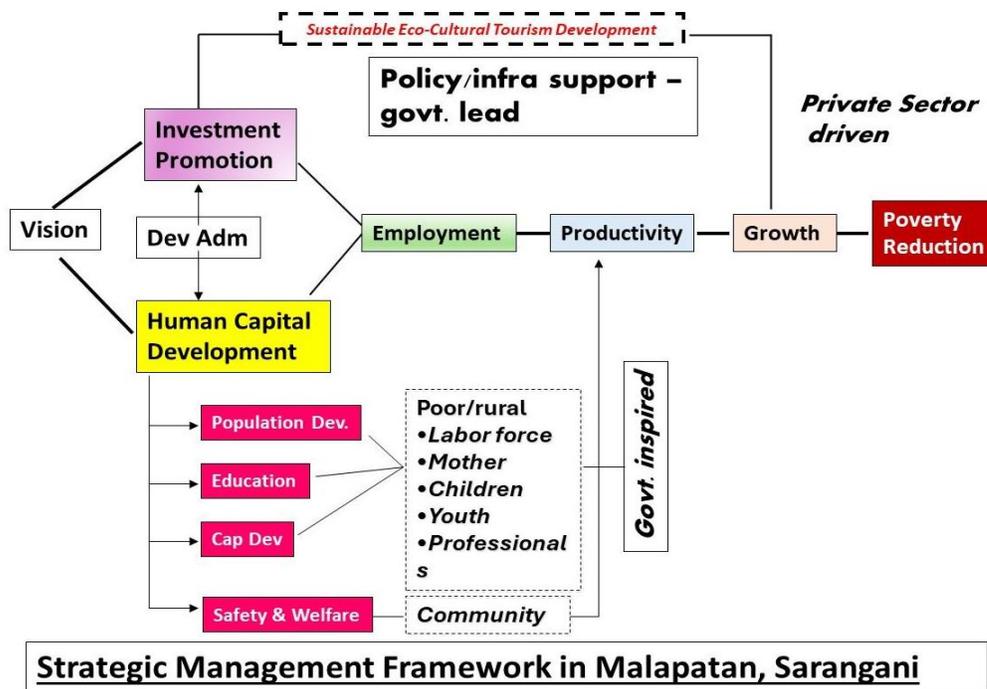
The framework, as shown in Figure 1, brings together investment promotion, skills development, and strong local governance in a way that centers both policy and people. It lays out how Malapatan can grow its eco-cultural tourism sector in a sustainable and inclusive manner.

Each recommendation from the community ties into a core part of this framework. For example, creating a Municipal Eco-Cultural Tourism Master Plan provides clear policy direction and infrastructure support. Strengthening local institutions, like forming multi-sectoral tourism councils or improving government coordination, ensures that investment and human development go hand-in-hand. Community-based training programs equip residents

with the skills they need to engage in tourism without losing sight of their cultural roots. Promoting local tourism, improving facilities and services, and passing a tourism code all help make the sector more organized and market-ready. Partnerships with national agencies and NGOs, meanwhile, bring in technical support and funding to scale up what works on the ground.

This study offers more than just a set of recommendations, it presents a roadmap that the local government and community can use to turn their vision into action. With the right support, this approach can help boost local employment, improve quality of life, and protect Malapatan's natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

5. Conclusion

This study assessed the state of eco-cultural tourism in Malapatan, Sarangani Province, and found that while the area has rich cultural heritage and natural attractions, its tourism sector remains largely underdeveloped. Key challenges include limited infrastructure, weak policy implementation, and gaps in stakeholder capacity. However, strong potential exists, as shown by the enthusiasm of local stakeholders, the active role of the LGU in public management, and community calls for more inclusive governance. Through the voices of Indigenous communities, local leaders, and tourism players, the study identified strategic opportunities to move forward, such as developing a comprehensive Eco-Cultural Tourism Master Plan, forming barangay-level tourism councils, strengthening stakeholder capacity, and creating a responsive tourism code. These recommendations are consolidated into a Strategic Public Management Framework that can guide local action and serve as a model for similar communities.

The research confirms the critical role of inclusive public management and collaborative governance in shaping sustainable tourism. While it answers the core questions on local governance and tourism viability, it also recognizes its limitation in not covering visitor perspectives or conducting environmental impact assessments, gaps which future studies should address. Ultimately, this research offers a grounded, actionable roadmap that balances growth with ecological integrity and cultural continuity not only for Malapatan, but for other localities with shared aspirations. The importance of aligning public management with community expectations is reinforced by studies such as Pontillas et al. (2025), who found

that resident satisfaction with tourism development is closely linked to governance strategies that balance socio-cultural, economic, and environmental outcomes.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Mindanao State University – General Santos. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by Mindanao State University – General Santos.

Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used Quillbot in paraphrasing ideas. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

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