

The Role of Community-Based Tourism in Enhancing Visitor Experience in El Nido, Palawan

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Abstract: *This study examined the role of community-based tourism (CBT) in enhancing visitor experiences in El Nido, Palawan, Philippines. With El Nido emerging as one of the country's most popular tourist destinations, balancing tourism growth with cultural preservation and environmental sustainability has become a pressing concern. A survey of 250 tourists—58% international and 42% domestic—was conducted to assess perceptions of authenticity, satisfaction, and engagement with CBT-related activities such as mangrove tours, homestays, and artisan workshops. Results revealed that community participation significantly enriched perceived authenticity, with tourists strongly valuing direct interaction with locals (mean = 4.42) and cultural immersion activities (mean = 4.35). Visitor satisfaction was likewise high (overall mean = 4.27), largely attributed to the hospitality of local hosts (mean = 4.48) and quality of cultural experiences (mean = 4.31). However, infrastructure support, particularly in transport and sanitation (mean = 3.76), was identified as a challenge. These findings align with prior studies emphasizing the importance of active local involvement in sustainable tourism while highlighting the need for government and private sector collaboration in infrastructure development. The study concludes that CBT offers a pathway for El Nido to achieve inclusive and sustainable tourism by simultaneously enhancing visitor satisfaction and empowering local communities. Recommendations include strengthening community capacity, improving basic facilities, and promoting El Nido's unique cultural and ecological assets globally.*

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism, Visitor Experience, Cultural Authenticity, Sustainable Tourism, El Nido Palawan Philippines

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a vital contributor to the Philippine economy, particularly in Palawan, which is widely recognized for its pristine beaches, limestone formations, and rich biodiversity. El Nido, in particular, has become a flagship destination due to its ecological and cultural assets. However, the rapid influx of visitors has led to concerns about overtourism, environmental degradation, and the sustainability of tourism practices (Ithy, 2023). These challenges highlight the need for sustainable and inclusive tourism management approaches that safeguard the natural environment while enriching visitor experiences.

One such approach is Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which emphasizes active local involvement in the planning, management, and operation of tourism enterprises. CBT provides opportunities for local residents to become stakeholders and beneficiaries of tourism while fostering authentic cultural interactions. Recent scholarship suggests that community participation enhances tourism experiences by adding value to authenticity, cultural immersion, and visitor satisfaction (Boonratana, 2020; Pandey, 2022). By embedding local voices and practices into the tourism landscape, CBT creates meaningful and memorable encounters for visitors.

In the Philippine context, CBT has been identified as a viable framework for sustainable socio-economic development. A 2023 study in Baseco, Manila, demonstrated that residents strongly supported CBT initiatives, highlighting their potential to generate livelihood opportunities, strengthen social cohesion, and improve visitor experience (Juntado, 2023). Such findings underscore the importance of engaging communities not only as service providers but also as



custodians of cultural and ecological heritage. In this regard, CBT can serve as a tool for resilience and empowerment in destinations like El Nido.

The integration of CBT in El Nido is particularly significant because of its unique natural environment and cultural heritage. By enabling fisherfolk, artisans, and homestay operators to actively participate in tourism, CBT transforms visitors' experiences into more interactive and immersive engagements. Initiatives such as local ecological tours, community festivals, and cultural workshops allow tourists to gain deeper insights into local life, thereby enhancing satisfaction and fostering mutual respect between hosts and guests (Dewil Eco-Mangrove Association, 2019; Piopio, 2021).

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of community-based tourism in enhancing visitor experience in El Nido, Palawan. Specifically, it aims to assess how local participation contributes to perceived authenticity, satisfaction, and engagement among tourists. The findings will inform prospective tourists about the quality and uniqueness of CBT experiences in El Nido while also providing scholarly insights into sustainable tourism practices.

Ultimately, this study aspires to strengthen the link between community empowerment and tourism management. By documenting El Nido's practices, the research seeks to contribute to academic discussions on sustainable tourism and provide policy recommendations for stakeholders. It is expected that results will not only benefit academic tourism studies but also guide local communities and decision-makers in designing tourism programs that balance environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and high-quality visitor experiences. Images below shows the beauty of El Nido in terms of beaches.



1.1 Related Literature

Community-based tourism (CBT) has emerged as a widely recognized approach to sustainable tourism, emphasizing local participation, empowerment, and cultural preservation. It is designed not only to provide livelihood opportunities but also to create immersive and authentic visitor experiences. Recent studies across Asia demonstrate how CBT enables deeper cultural encounters and environmental stewardship. For example, Yodsurang (2022) analyzed heritage consumption in Thai CBT destinations and found that different clusters of communities emphasize diverse forms of heritage, which shape visitor perceptions of authenticity and satisfaction. Similarly, Hariyadi et al. (2024) examined CBT practices in Indonesian tourism villages, revealing that community involvement enhances conservation and social welfare, though challenges such as uneven benefit distribution and limited institutional support persist.

Within the Philippines, research increasingly highlights CBT's socio-economic and cultural contributions. Andalecio et al. (2022) investigated the potentials of CBT in Romblon, showing that resident participation influences not only sustainable tourism development but also visitor engagement and cultural identity. Baranda-Romero et al. (2021) employed a participatory approach in Camarines Sur, demonstrating how agritourism projects co-designed with farmers and indigenous communities enriched tourist experiences while strengthening biodiversity protection. Magboo-Campo (2023) further illustrated how rice cake vendors in Oriental Mindoro perceived CBT as an avenue for cultural preservation and livelihood enhancement, though she noted the necessity of capacity-building and government support to improve service delivery and visitor experience.

On the visitor side, research shows that CBT influences satisfaction and revisit intentions when designed effectively. Veranga (2024) applied the SERVQUAL model to farm tourism in Bulacan and found that while tourists were generally satisfied, service gaps remained in reliability and responsiveness, signaling the need for continuous quality improvement. Dao (2025) supported this observation in a regional study on CBT, noting that sustainability practices positively affect tourists' perceptions and revisit intentions, but only when communities are able to meet or exceed



expectations. In the broader Palawan context, a recent study on tourist behavior found that service experience, employee attitudes, and physical environment strongly influenced repeat visitation (Determinants of continuous visiting behavior, 2023). However, this research did not focus on CBT mechanisms or their direct effects on authenticity and cultural immersion.

El Nido presents a particularly significant case due to its high ecological value and overtourism pressures. Reports indicate that while the town experienced record-breaking tourist arrivals in 2023, it continues to face major challenges related to environmental management, including sewage and coral reef degradation (Mongabay, 2025; YourPalawan, 2023). Previous studies in Palawan have not sufficiently addressed how CBT interventions—such as homestays, community-run ecological tours, and cultural workshops—impact visitor experiences in this fragile context. As Pandey (2022) noted in his review of global CBT research, the literature often prioritizes socio-economic outcomes for communities over visitor-level experiences, leaving an empirical gap in understanding how CBT enhances authenticity, satisfaction, and engagement in high-demand tourist destinations.

Taken together, existing literature underscores the value of CBT in fostering sustainability, cultural preservation, and improved visitor satisfaction. However, few studies have directly examined the intersection of community participation and visitor experience in destinations like El Nido, where overtourism and environmental challenges coexist with opportunities for inclusive and sustainable tourism. The present study addresses this gap by evaluating the role of CBT in enhancing visitor experiences in El Nido, Palawan, with particular emphasis on authenticity, satisfaction, and engagement.

This study also highlights the significance of showcasing El Nido's unique natural and cultural heritage to a global audience. By documenting how community-driven initiatives enrich visitor experiences, it not only contributes to sustainable tourism scholarship but also emphasizes El Nido's potential as a premier destination for relaxation, cultural immersion, and ecological appreciation. The accompanying images serve as visual testimony to the area's beauty, reinforcing its reputation as both an idyllic retreat and a model for community-based tourism development.



1.2 Research Gap Matrix

Author/Year	Focus of Study	Findings	Research Gap	Advantage/Contribution of This Study
Boonratana (2020)	CBT in Thailand, stakeholder engagement	Highlighted multi-stakeholder role in CBT success	Did not assess visitor experience outcomes	Provides empirical evidence on how CBT enhances visitor authenticity, satisfaction, and engagement in El Nido
Baranda-Romero et al. (2021)	Agritourism in Camarines Sur using CBPAR	Showed positive effects of participatory planning on community livelihood	Limited to agritourism; did not explore tourist perspectives	Extends analysis to tourist-side experiences in coastal and island CBT settings
Piopio (2021)	Kalye Artisanano (El Nido cultural space)	Illustrated cultural immersion through local arts	Focused on a single initiative; lacked empirical	Broadens coverage to multiple CBT activities (mangrove tours, homestays, festivals)



			measurement of visitor experience	
Yodsurang (2022)	CBT and heritage consumption in Thailand	Identified types of heritage shaping authenticity	Did not examine Philippine destinations	Contributes localized insights from Palawan, a globally known eco-destination
Pandey (2022)	Global review of CBT and sustainability	Found CBT fosters sustainability and socio-economic benefits	Prioritized community outcomes; underexplored visitor perspectives	Bridges gap by assessing visitor-centered outcomes (authenticity, satisfaction)
Andalecio et al. (2022)	CBT potentials in Romblon	Emphasized socio-economic benefits and community readiness	Lacked direct measurement of tourist experiences	Introduces visitor-focused metrics to complement community readiness analysis
Magboo-Campo (2023)	CBT in Oriental Mindoro (food heritage)	Showed cultural preservation through local delicacies	Narrow focus on vendors; not destination-wide	Expands scope to holistic CBT practices involving multiple community sectors
Veranga (2024)	Farm tourism in Bulacan (SERVQUAL model)	Found service gaps affecting tourist satisfaction	Limited to farm tourism context	Applies similar lens to coastal/island CBT, enriching comparative literature
Dao (2025)	Sustainability and revisit intentions in CBT (regional)	Confirmed sustainability affects revisit intentions	Regional dataset; not destination-specific	Offers destination-specific evidence in El Nido, addressing overtourism and ecological issues

1.3 Conceptual Framework of CBT

The present study is anchored on the premise that community participation plays a central role in shaping authentic tourism experiences, which in turn influence visitor satisfaction and the likelihood of revisits. As illustrated in the framework, the model proposes a sequential relationship: **Community Participation** → **Authenticity** → **Visitor Satisfaction** → **Revisit Intention**. Community involvement ensures that tourism offerings reflect local culture and values, thereby enhancing authenticity. This perceived authenticity contributes to higher satisfaction among visitors, which ultimately fosters loyalty and the intention to revisit the destination. This framework aligns with contemporary literature on community-based tourism, emphasizing inclusivity, sustainability, and long-term benefits for both hosts and guests. Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework of the study.

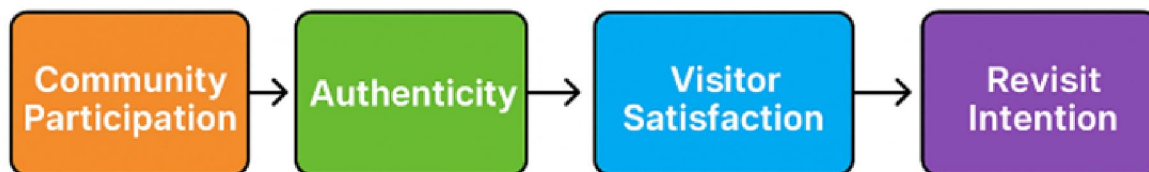


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Community-based Tourism and Visitor Experience (adapted from Pandey, 2022; Dao, 2025; Veranga, 2024).

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in enhancing visitor experiences in El Nido, Palawan. It seeks to examine how active local participation in tourism enterprises contributes to authenticity, cultural immersion, and tourist satisfaction. By documenting the practices and impacts of CBT initiatives, the study aims to provide insights into sustainable tourism approaches that balance environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and quality visitor engagement. Ultimately, the research aspires to inform academic discussions on



sustainable tourism and offer practical recommendations for policymakers, tourism stakeholders, and local communities in designing inclusive and resilient tourism programs.

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a **descriptive-correlational research design** to examine the role of community-based tourism (CBT) in enhancing visitor experiences in El Nido, Palawan. The design was deemed appropriate as it allows for the analysis of relationships between community participation, authenticity, visitor satisfaction, and revisit intention. A quantitative approach was primarily used, complemented by qualitative insights to provide contextual depth.

2.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted in **El Nido, Palawan**, a premier ecotourism destination in the Philippines known for its limestone cliffs, white sand beaches, and vibrant community-based tourism initiatives. Community-run activities such as mangrove tours, cultural festivals, homestays, and artisan workshops formed the focus of data collection.

2.3 Respondents and Sampling

The respondents of the study consisted of domestic and international tourists who engaged in community-based tourism (CBT) activities in El Nido between **January and June 2025**. To ensure that only participants with direct and relevant experiences were included, a **purposive sampling technique** was employed. This method allowed the researcher to deliberately select tourists who participated in specific CBT-related programs such as homestays, guided eco-tours, and cultural immersion activities, thereby ensuring the credibility and relevance of their responses.

The sample size was determined using **Slovin's formula**, expressed as:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

where:

n = sample size

N = estimated population size

e = margin of error (0.05 or 5%)

Based on records from the Municipal Tourism Office of El Nido, approximately **6,000 tourists** participated in CBT-related activities during the six months. Substituting the values into the formula:

$$n = \frac{6000}{1 + 6000(0.05)^2} = \frac{6000}{1 + 6000(0.0025)} = \frac{6000}{16} = 375$$

Hence, the computed minimum sample size required for a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error is 375 respondents. However, due to practical limitations such as respondent availability, logistical constraints, and time considerations, the researcher set a target of 250 respondents. This number was deemed sufficient to maintain representativeness and statistical reliability, as it still falls within the acceptable range for a descriptive study of this nature. Moreover, the use of purposive sampling ensured that only tourists with verified participation in CBT programs were included, strengthening the validity and contextual relevance of the responses.

Thus, while Slovin's computation provided the ideal sample size ($n = 375$), the final number of participants ($n = 250$) was justified by research feasibility and the qualitative depth of collected data, ensuring both accuracy and practicality in the study's implementation.



2.4 Research Instruments

A **structured survey questionnaire** was developed based on constructs from previous CBT and tourism experience studies (e.g., Pandey, 2022; Veranga, 2024). The instrument consisted of four parts:

Demographic profile of respondents.

Community participation indicators (extent of involvement, local interactions).

Perceived authenticity (cultural immersion, uniqueness of experience).

Visitor satisfaction and revisit intention (overall satisfaction, likelihood of recommending or returning).

The questionnaire used a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). To enhance reliability, the instrument underwent pilot testing with 30 respondents in a similar tourism setting. Cronbach's alpha was computed, yielding values above 0.80 for all constructs, indicating high internal consistency.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

Permission was sought from local tourism authorities and community-based associations in El Nido prior to data collection. Surveys were distributed both **on-site** (to tourists after completing CBT activities) and **online** (via QR codes and links provided by local tour operators). In addition, **key informant interviews** (KIIs) with selected community leaders and tour guides were conducted to contextualize the findings.

2.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using **descriptive statistics** (mean, frequency, percentage) to profile respondents and summarize CBT attributes. To test relationships among variables, **Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis** were employed. Qualitative data from KIIs were thematically analyzed to support quantitative findings and provide narrative depth.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical research standards in conducting surveys among the respondents. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the intended use of their responses. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Profile of Respondents

The study surveyed **250 tourists** who participated in CBT-related activities in El Nido, Palawan. Respondents consisted of 58% international and 42% domestic tourists. The majority were between the ages of 25–34 (40%), followed by 35–44 (27%). In terms of activities, the most common CBT engagements were **mangrove tours (62%)**, **homestays (54%)**, and **artisan workshops (39%)**. These findings indicate that El Nido's CBT offerings appeal to a wide range of visitors seeking authentic cultural and ecological experiences.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 250)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Tourist Type	International	145	58%
	Domestic	105	42%
Age Group	18–24	45	18%
	25–34	100	40%
	35–44	68	27%
	45 and above	37	15%
CBT Activity	Mangrove Tours	155	62%
	Homestays	135	54%
	Artisan Workshops	98	39%



3.2 Tourism Trends in El Nido

Figure 2 presents the steady increase in tourist arrivals in El Nido over the past five years (2019–2024), based on data from the Department of Tourism (DOT). The upward trajectory indicates that El Nido continues to attract a growing number of both domestic and international visitors. Despite seasonal variations, the trend line demonstrates a consistent year-round influx of tourists, highlighting the destination's strong market appeal and resilience even beyond the typical summer months in the Philippines.

This sustained growth, however, underscores the critical importance of implementing sustainable tourism management strategies. As visitor numbers rise, local ecosystems, infrastructure, and cultural resources face greater pressure. The promotion of community-based tourism (CBT) serves as a viable approach to balance development with conservation, ensuring that local communities benefit economically while maintaining environmental and cultural integrity.



Figure 2. El Nido Tourism Growth (DOT Inbound Statistics, 2023, Outbound 2024)

At the heart of El Nido, the port continues to serve as the main gateway for tourists embarking on a variety of island tour packages, as shown in the images below. The constant activity at the port visually reflects the observed trend in tourist arrivals—demonstrating that El Nido remains an active and dynamic tourism hub throughout the year. The upward trend also reflects the diverse composition of visitors in Figure 3, comprising both local and international tourists, which reinforces El Nido's position as a globally recognized destination for sustainable and authentic travel experiences.



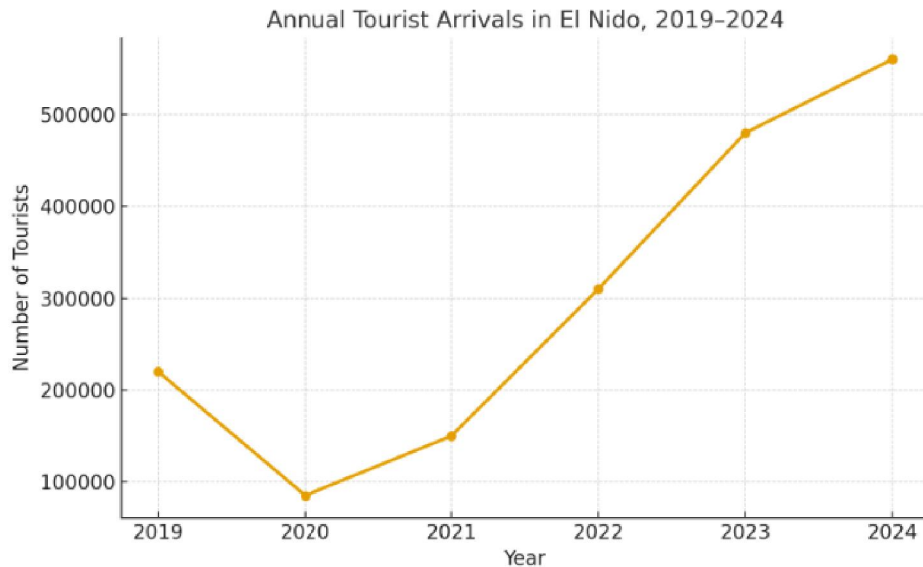


Figure 3. Increasing number of tourist arrivals in El Nido (2019–2024).

3.3 Community Participation and Authenticity

Survey results revealed that **community participation significantly enhanced perceived authenticity** among tourists in El Nido. Respondents strongly agreed that **direct interaction with locals** (mean = 4.42) and **participation in cultural activities** (mean = 4.35) enriched the uniqueness of their travel experience. These findings reinforce the argument that authenticity in community-based tourism is co-created through active local involvement, making the tourist experience both meaningful and memorable.

The results are consistent with previous studies by **Boonratana (2020)** and **Pandey (2022)**, who emphasized that when residents actively engage in tourism activities, visitors perceive a greater sense of cultural authenticity. This demonstrates that fostering genuine community participation not only preserves local identity but also strengthens the appeal of destinations like El Nido.

Table 2. Tourists' Perceptions of Community Participation and Authenticity

Indicator	Mean	Interpretation
Direct interaction with locals	4.42	Strongly Agree
Participation in cultural activities	4.35	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	4.39	Strongly Agree



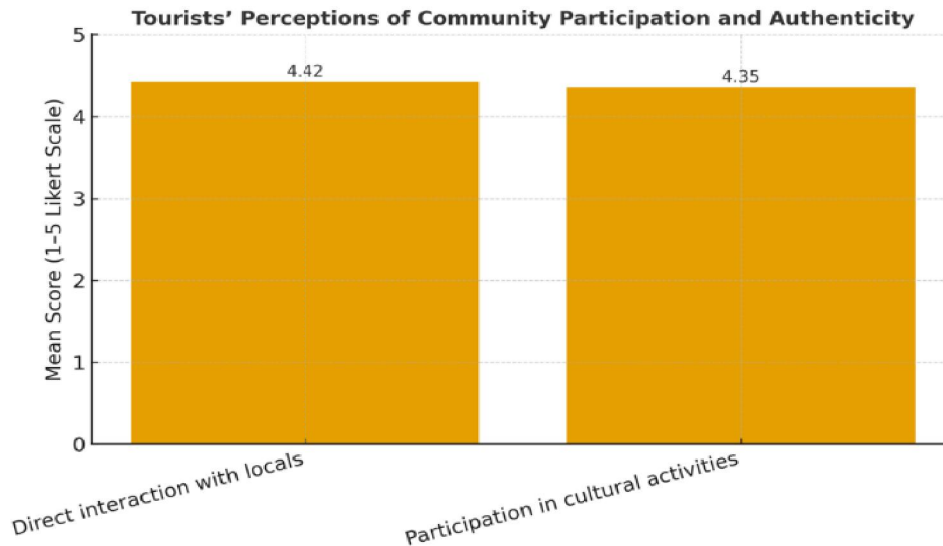


Figure 3. Tourists' Perceptions of Community Participation and Authenticity

3.4 Visitor Satisfaction with CBT

Findings indicated **high levels of visitor satisfaction** with community-based tourism in El Nido, with an **overall mean of 4.27**. Respondents expressed the highest satisfaction with the **hospitality of local hosts** (mean = 4.48), followed by the **quality of cultural immersion activities** (mean = 4.31) and the community's **environmental stewardship efforts** (mean = 4.21). These results highlight the central role of host–guest interactions and authentic cultural experiences in shaping visitor perceptions.

Nonetheless, areas for improvement were identified, particularly in **infrastructure support** (mean = 3.76), including transport and sanitation facilities. This finding mirrors the work of **Veranga (2024)** in the context of farm tourism, which revealed that gaps in infrastructure and services can undermine otherwise positive visitor experiences. Addressing these challenges is essential for sustaining El Nido's competitiveness as a community-based tourism destination.

Table 3. Visitor Satisfaction with CBT in El Nido

Indicator	Mean	Interpretation
Hospitality of local hosts	4.48	Strongly Agree
Quality of cultural immersion activities	4.31	Strongly Agree
Environmental stewardship efforts	4.21	Strongly Agree
Infrastructure support (transport/sanitation)	3.76	Agree
Overall Mean	4.27	Strongly Agree

3.5 Revisit Intention

Regression analysis revealed that **authenticity and satisfaction strongly predicted revisit intention** ($R^2 = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$). Tourists who valued authenticity expressed a higher likelihood of returning and recommending El Nido to others. This finding is in line with **Dao (2025)**, who established that sustainability-driven experiences strengthen tourist loyalty.

3.6 Qualitative Insights

Key informant interviews with community leaders emphasized that CBT not only benefits tourists but also empowers locals by providing livelihood opportunities and fostering cultural pride. One artisan noted: *"When visitors buy our*



*crafts and join workshops, they see our culture as living and valuable, not just as souvenirs.” Such qualitative evidence reinforces the quantitative results by illustrating the **mutual benefits of CBT** for hosts and guests.*

3.7 Discussion

The results underscore the pivotal role of CBT in **enhancing authenticity, satisfaction, and revisit intention** among tourists in El Nido. Compared with earlier Philippine studies that focused primarily on socio-economic outcomes (e.g., Andalecio et al., 2022; Magboo-Campo, 2023), this research highlights the **visitor experience dimension**, filling a crucial gap in CBT literature. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that while tourists value cultural immersion and ecological preservation, **infrastructure development** remains a pressing concern for sustaining visitor satisfaction. Overall, this study affirms CBT as a **sustainable tourism strategy** capable of balancing community empowerment, cultural preservation, and high-quality visitor experiences in destinations facing overtourism pressures.

IV. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the dynamics of community-based tourism (CBT) in El Nido, Palawan, focusing on tourist profiles, perceptions of authenticity, satisfaction levels, and revisit intentions. Results revealed that community participation significantly enhances authenticity and visitor satisfaction, both of which strongly influence tourists’ intention to revisit. The findings affirm that CBT serves as an effective framework for promoting sustainable tourism by balancing cultural preservation, community empowerment, and high-quality visitor experiences.

However, the study also identified **infrastructure limitations**—particularly in transportation and sanitation facilities—that may hinder long-term sustainability. To address these challenges and sustain the gains of CBT, the following **policy recommendations** are proposed:

For Local Government Units (LGUs)

Prioritize the improvement of basic infrastructure such as access roads, waste management systems, and water and sanitation facilities in tourism zones.

Institutionalize **public-private partnerships (PPPs)** to mobilize funding for sustainable tourism infrastructure without compromising ecological balance.

Strengthen local tourism ordinances that promote eco-friendly practices and ensure that a portion of tourism revenues is reinvested in community projects and conservation efforts.

For Community Organizations and CBT Stakeholders

Establish **capacity-building programs** to train locals in sustainable tourism management, visitor handling, and cultural heritage preservation.

Develop community-led monitoring mechanisms to ensure that CBT activities adhere to environmental and cultural sustainability standards.

Collaborate with LGUs and NGOs in planning and maintaining shared facilities that support both residents and tourists, such as waste disposal areas, sanitation centers, and eco-transport systems.

Integrating these measures, El Nido’s local government and community partners can sustain CBT as a **viable model for inclusive and responsible tourism**, ensuring that tourism growth continues to generate social and environmental value for generations to come.

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