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Selected Civil Society Groups in Japan, Thailand, and the Philippines as Sustainable Tourism Regime Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: At the core of international regimes are environmental issues and tourism is one area where international bodies like the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) have given attention in recent decades. The UNWTO has created a set of formalized norms for sustainable tourism embodied in the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (GCET) which is an evolving regime. Meanwhile, civil society groups have now been more positively recognized in their involvement in the implementation of regime laws. Conservation International Philippines and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Philippines, Wakayama University's Faculty of Tourism and Center for Tourism Research in Japan, and Khiri Travel Thailand as the selected civil society groups for this study have demonstrated in their norm diffusion at the domestic level their capacity as regime entrepreneurs of the GCET. A qualitative case study approach is employed using multiple cases bound by in-depth data collection from interviews with six key informants from the four groups supplemented by archival and government documents, and online periodicals. Thematic content analysis is used in analyzing the interview data to identify common patterns across data set. The data reveal the strategies employed by these groups in diffusing the regime norms, as well as the adherence of these strategies to the GCET's provisions. The conclusion affirms the crucial role of civil society in the adaptation of global advocacy strategies to accommodate local environments.

Key Words: civil society; sustainable tourism; norm diffusion; regime; regime entrepreneurs

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been celebrated as the savior of many communities around the world for its ability to generate hard currency, new income and jobs. However, many destinations have been caught

off-guard with its adverse impacts on natural, social, and cultural resources.

International cooperation is thus deemed necessary by national governments to facilitate the exchange of good practices. This cooperation arises



from the need to alleviate the negative consequences of tourism development neglecting rural areas distant from their capital cities. But what are regimes?

Stephen Krasner defines regimes as implicit or explicit norms, principles, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations. Since norms are the primary regime element that is diffused, this study will make use of the term *norm diffusion* while generally acknowledging civil society groups as *regime entrepreneurs* because the latter are also engaged in the advocacy of principles, implementation of rules, and structuring decision-making processes.

Changes in norms can emerge from the international level and then domestically diffused by civil society groups. This new approach transgresses the traditional concepts of state-centered international regimes and adopts a perspective that surpasses the level of nation states and takes into account non-governmental actors.

Meeting in New York in 1999, the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development endorsed the concept of a code for sustainable tourism and requested the UNWTO to seek further input from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and labor organizations. More than 70 UNWTO Member States and other entities submitted their written comment on the Code. The culmination of an extensive consultative process resulted in the 10-point Global Code of Ethics for Tourism and was unanimously approved by the UNWTO General Assembly at its meeting in October 1999 in Santiago, Chile.

The GCET is an evolving regime with an all-inclusive set of principles with the objective of guiding stakeholders in tourism development: local and central governments, local communities, tourism professionals, and domestic and international visitors. It is an evolving regime because it has yet to attain the status of a legally binding convention.

In this study, non-state actors in the form of civil society groups play a crucial role in diffusing locally the global norms on sustainable tourism being the regime entrepreneurs that they are. Despite their lack of political and economic authority, these groups make use of strategies to localize and strengthen

these norms among domestic tourism stakeholders – a task that cannot possibly be carried out by state initiative alone.

1.1 Significance of the study

The significance of this study is three-fold: (1) it would benefit students, researchers and practitioners of tourism because it underscores the value of ensuring tourism's sustainability so it could yield the most benefit for local communities and national governments, (2) it highlights and sets the GCET apart as one of the many international agreements on sustainable tourism that is in the process of becoming a convention with a legally binding framework, and (3) it identifies the strategies used by civil society groups as regime entrepreneurs in diffusing the GCET's norms at the domestic level.

1.2 Scope and limitation of the study

The study is not intended to determine at what stage the GCET is as a regime, or to assess the effectiveness of the regime. It is neither generalizing the findings from this study to East Asia, Southeast Asia and other regions given the limited number of civil society groups that were selected. It merely aims to find out if the strategies employed by these groups in diffusing the norms locally are adherent to the GCET's provisions.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study uses the regime-centric approach which, according to Breitmeier et. al, has vigorously taken root in international environmental politics. Despite the fact that in many cases the state is the prominent agent, it is recognized that other agents have pivotal roles in the construction of norms, directly acting as international regime entrepreneurs and participating as advocates, implementers, and decision-makers at the domestic level.



It utilizes the neoliberal institutionalism strand which views the creation of intergovernmental regimes "above" the state and of efforts by national actors "below" the state as providing mechanisms that can eliminate or mitigate the negative environmental externalities that result from independent state decision-making.

Likewise, transnational networks which are often formed by non-governmental actors are capable of both motivating states to address global environmental problems they would not otherwise address and of taking direct action on such problems without using international institutions or states as intermediaries.

Neoliberalism as a policy model seeks to transfer control of economic factors to the private sector from the public sector. In the same vein, much of what constitute civil society groups can be described as interest groups trying to divert public resources to causes they favor. These groups act as regime entrepreneurs to protect their interests and promote institutional ideas at the same time.

2.2 Instrument

The case study approach is employed because the research involves an issue that needed to be explored using multiple cases. Thematic content analysis might raise reliability as a concern because of the numerous potential interpretations of data possible and the potential for research subjectivity to 'bias' or distort analysis, but research subjectivity is a resource rather than a threat to credibility. There is no universal standard of interpreting data because interpretations are inevitably subjective.

The researcher used a questionnaire for a semi-structured interview where the researcher and the respondents engaged in a formal face-to-face interview. The researcher also developed and used an interview guide which is a list of questions formulated in a particular order that was conscientiously covered during the interview.

There is a need for quality criteria in selecting the interviewees for a sound qualitative case study research: the civil society groups in this study operate and/ or have satellite offices in East Asia and Southeast Asia; have direct and indirect

link with the UNWTO; and aim to increase knowledge and practice in sustainable tourism among private and public stakeholders.

The key informants or respondents under study are privileged witnesses, or people who, because of their position, activities or responsibilities, have a good understanding of the problem to be explored. They have administrative responsibilities and direct knowledge of the sustainable tourism programs of their respective organizations.

2.3 Generation and sources of data

In-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information is generated by interviews supplemented by the organizations' archival documents, government documents, and online periodicals.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Anirudh Krishna, it is neither functional nor possible to create any final list of civil society groups that can apply at all times and universally. Adam Jezard further states that the nature of civil society is evolving in response to technological developments and more nuanced changes within societies. Civil society actors blur the boundaries between sectors and experiment with new organizational forms.

Civil society consists of a vast array of formal and informal organizations including research and educational institutions, certain businesses, and foundations. In the case of Wakayama University, it is a national university and not a public university that has been operating autonomously without direct control of the state. Khiri Travel, although a company, may be classified as a civil society group because literature justifies that when it comes to nature conservation, companies and NGOs share a mutual interest. What secures a continuous provision of important services to companies is the responsible use of nature, and is essential in maintaining the biodiversity level in the region in which they operate.



3.1 World Wide Fund for Nature Philippines

WWF Philippines has been working as a national organization of the WWF network since 1997 and is the 26th national organization in the WWF network. It is successfully implementing numerous conservation projects to help protect some of the most biologically important ecosystems in Asia.

The organization advocates physical and resource integrity and biological diversity. A case in point is the organization's decision and initiative to ban the feeding of whale sharks in Donsol, Sorsogon to prevent the alteration of the natural ecosystem. This follows the GCET's provision on *tourism activities to be programmed in such a way that ecosystems and biodiversity are protected to preserve endangered species of wildlife*. The ban on feeding the whale sharks reflects the organization's involvement in lobbying the government, particularly the Department of Tourism (DOT), to implement policies such as the proposed Marine Wildlife Interaction Protocol which is already docked in Congress.

Following the recommendation of the DOT, the New York-based Royal Caribbean Cruise Ltd. (RCL) launched in 2016 a global partnership with the organization to promote Donsol as its first sustainable tourism destination. This is a 5-year partnership that begins with the Whale Shark Conservation Tourism Program with the aim of reducing the environmental impact on these sea creatures. RCL's CEO, Richard Fain, disclosed that his company made a \$200,000 donation to the organization in support of conservation programs in Donsol.

In the same year, the organization partnered with the PTC-CSJ Foundation Philippines Transmarine Carrier Group's Corporate Social Responsibility unit in implementing its Environmental Education (EE) Project in public elementary schools in Muntinlupa City. The EE Project's goal is to increase awareness and knowledge of students and teachers on environmental issues focusing on marine conservation, climate change, and sustainable lifestyle. This follows the GCET's provision on *introducing into curricula of education*

about the value of tourist exchanges, their economic, social and cultural benefits, and also their risks.

Much like the GCET's provision on *local populations to be associated with tourism activities and share equitably in the economic, social and cultural benefits which tourism activities generate, and particularly in the creation of direct and indirect jobs resulting from them*, the organization ensures that aside from the environmental aspect, the resources gained from tourism are also economically viable which means that there is local prosperity and employment quality that would make the entire community benefit directly. The whale shark ecotourism program mentioned earlier has generated jobs for community members and many of these locals are now tour guides.

3.2 Conservation International Philippines

Conservation International is a conservation organization that has been protecting nature for nearly thirty years. It is helping to build a healthier, more productive and more prosperous planet. The organization does this through science, policy, and partnerships with communities, companies, and countries. It has over 1,000 employees and works with more than 2,000 partners in 30 countries including the Philippines.

The GCET has a provision on *stakeholders in tourism development safeguarding the natural environment with a view to achieving sound, continuous and sustainable economic growth geared to satisfying equitably the needs and aspirations of present and future generations*. Parallel to this is the organization's participation in international conferences and regional meetings on biodiversity conservation, and influencing the agenda because it is a facilitator of those regional bodies like the Sulu-Sulawesi Marine Eco-region (SSME). Members of Conservation International's Sulu-Sulawesi Seascape lets the organization work with the governments of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia to protect the integral natural resources and the benefits that people get from them such as food, climate resilience, and livelihoods. The organization does this by establishing networks and marine protected areas for reducing human pressures.



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The organization has active partnerships with national government agencies, local government agencies in its project sites, and field offices of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). The organization undertakes technical studies to provide scientific basis for the effective management of key biodiversity areas and protected areas. It has strong links with international NGOs and other organizations for gaining technical support, and to source funds for financing local conservation efforts. This is in tune with the GCET's provision on *financial resources derived from visits to cultural sites and monuments should, at least in part, be used for the upkeep, safeguard, development, and embellishment of this heritage.*

Another aspect of sustainable tourism which the organization ensures is that people or tourists will benefit from the tourism value of a certain place by codifying whatever protection mechanism can be done. Attached to this role is the organization's capability in getting the private sector to help them. In the same way that the GCET recognizes the need for *public and private stakeholders in tourism development to cooperate in the implementation of the Code's principles and monitor their effective application*, the private sector in this case is important in ensuring that tourists benefit from the tourism value of a place because they provide funds and do monitoring. For example, this sector provides incentives to fishermen so they could also help with the safeguarding of the place. This creates a collective behavioral pattern that is beneficial to all actors involved.

3.3 Wakayama University – Faculty of Tourism and Center for Tourism Research

Wakayama University is the only national university in Japan to offer tourism studies through a PhD. Following the designation of the Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kili Mountain Range as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004, the Wakayama Prefecture declared itself as a tourism-based prefecture and has since been engaged actively

in community revitalization with tourism at its core. Meanwhile, the university's Center for Tourism Research launched in 2016 is responsible for initiating research opportunities through collaborative networking and exchange in Japan and beyond.

The Faculty runs a series of seminars and conferences centered on sustainability and tourism. The research projects of the Faculty and Center are focused on the goal of community development. Similar to WWF-Philippines' engagement of the community members in tourism activities, this too follows the GCET's provision on *local populations to be associated with tourism activities and share equitably in the economic, social, and cultural benefits they generate, and particularly in the creation of direct and indirect jobs*. Community engagement is really important because Japan's population is declining and will significantly drop in the next fifty years. So to retrieve the rural communities and Japan's economy, the institution cultivates tourism because it is seen as one of the ways to develop said communities. This is aligned with the GCET's provision on *giving special attention to the specific problems of vulnerable rural or mountain regions, for which tourism often represents a rare opportunity for development in the face of the decline of traditional economic activities*.

The Center conducts symposia with international scholars who come to talk about sustainability and what is referred to as environmental humanities so people in Japan are now involved with eco-humanities which enables them to find creative ways to think about and address sustainable tourism. The Center has international collaborations and networks thus they are pulled towards the direction of linking the local with the global. The first step is by inviting visiting professors who are leaders in the field of sustainability through classes on sustainable management. Again, similar to WWF-Philippines' EE Project, this follows the GCET's provision on *introducing into curricula of education about the value of tourist exchanges, their economic, social and cultural benefits, and also their risks*.

The Faculty is one of the rare institutions in Japan that champion the GCET since the Code is not well-known in the country. The Japanese have all



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types of understanding as to what sustainable tourism so they have a big stream which they are still trying to figure out. A clear heed to the GCET's provision on the *cooperation between the public and private stakeholders in the implementation of the Code's principles and the monitoring of their effective application* is the Faculty and the Center working to align the GCET with the Japanese government's strengths in their approach to tourism.

3.4 Khiri Travel Thailand

Established in 1993 as a destination management company, Khiri Travel Thailand is steadfast in growing its business in a sustainable manner and it aims to maximize the positive effects of tourism on individuals and local communities while maximizing negative environmental, social, and economic impacts. Adjunct to the company is Khiri Reach which is its charity arm that helps disadvantaged people through conservation, community development, environmental, and empowerment projects.

The company sets online workshops or webinars as part of its initiative to raise concern among those unaware of sustainability principles and the challenges facing sustainable tourism. As an example, there was a webinar about North Thailand and the company's branch manager presented it in Chiang Mai and introduced five or six ethnic tribes without interfering in their daily lives and without turning those villages into human zoos. This is in line with the GCET's provision for *the stakeholders in tourism development and the tourists themselves to observe social and cultural traditions and practices of all peoples, including those of minorities and indigenous peoples and to recognize their worth*.

One of Khiri Travel's biggest concerns is animal tourism. It has set the criteria for elephant-riding in tourism and is now extending the criteria to a wider range which covers all animals including wildlife spotting because Thailand has different national parks. The company understands that elephant tourism for livelihood is relied upon by certain locals in Southeast Asia, and that keeping elephants comes with considerable costs. Instead of immediately halting all elephant-related experiences,

the company intends to address the issue in a practical manner that will benefit all stakeholders. This echoes the GCET's provision on *designing tourism infrastructure and programming tourism activities in such a way as to protect the natural heritage of ecosystems and biodiversity and to preserve endangered species of wildlife*.

Meanwhile, Khiri Reach has dedicated an ongoing People and Planet Projects in each Southeast Asian country managed by passionate Khiri Ambassadors. The People Projects' goal is to help the disadvantaged sectors of society across Asia and support communities in improving their living conditions in a sustainable manner. This follows the GCET's provision on *applying tourism policies in such a way as to help to raise the standard of living of the populations of the regions visited and meet their needs*.

The threat of destruction of the natural resources across Asia is a pressing concern, therefore conservation and an environment-friendly approach is an important feature of the Planet Projects that Khiri Reach supports. Aside from supporting individual projects, it also supports broader causes – from raising literacy levels to efforts to offset carbon emissions which reflects the GCET's provision on *giving priority to and encouraged by national, regional and local public authorities the avoidance, so far as possible, of waste production*.

Khiri Reach is also taking practical steps in dealing with the pervasive plastic bag problem, and at the same time, helping local people with disabilities by distributing a thousand cotton bags in each destination it visits. The 1,000 "Earth Bags" were manufactured by the Special People Foundation (SPF) in Chiang Mai which gives work to people with disabilities in Thailand. Each bag is uniquely designed and painted individually by physically impaired artists – most of which are children from Chiang Mai. This initiative follows the GCET's provision on *tourism activities to promote the individual rights of the most vulnerable groups, notably children, the elderly, the handicapped, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples*.



4. CONCLUSIONS

The following are the common strategies of the selected groups in diffusing the GCET's norms: (1) the imposition of bans and restrictions on certain tourism activities to protect wildlife and biodiversity, (2) the incorporation of environmental issues in the school curricula to educate students and teachers, (3) the inclusion of locals and community members in tourism activities so they can benefit from the jobs generated by them, (4) the funneling of sourced funds into local conservation efforts, (5) the recognition of the rights of indigenous groups to a harmonious relationship with the environment and the potential of vulnerable groups in the sustainable development of tourism, and (6) the bridging of the public and private sectors to create a network for cooperation.

The norm diffusion strategies employed by these groups clearly adhere to the provisions of the GCET. These groups acting as regime entrepreneurs are capable not only of localizing transnational ideas, but also of articulating and balancing the needs of locals with global norms making these communities better equipped to address the current and future challenges of sustainable tourism.

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My esteemed panel members: Dr. Elaine Tolentino – Associate Professor, International Studies Department of De La Salle University, Dr. Francisco Magno – former Director of the Jesse M. Robredo Institute of Governance of De La Salle University, and Dr. Emma Lopez – Assistant Professor, Institute of Tourism of the University of the Philippines.

My credible and highly competent respondents: Mr. Raul Burce – Project Manager of WWF Philippines, Mr. Enrique E. Nuñez – Country Executive Director of Conservation International Philippines, Dr. Kumi Kato – Associate Dean of the

Faculty of Tourism and Deputy Director of the Center for Tourism, Mr. Takuya Fujii – Project Coordinator of the Faculty of Tourism, Dr. Adam Doering – Associate Professor of the Faculty of Tourism, and Mr. Marc Ruffet – former Commercial Director of Khiri Travel Thailand.

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June 17-19, 2020



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