

The threat of ‘new Boracays’



3-km west-to-south Sibolo beachfront
Photo by A. Ridao

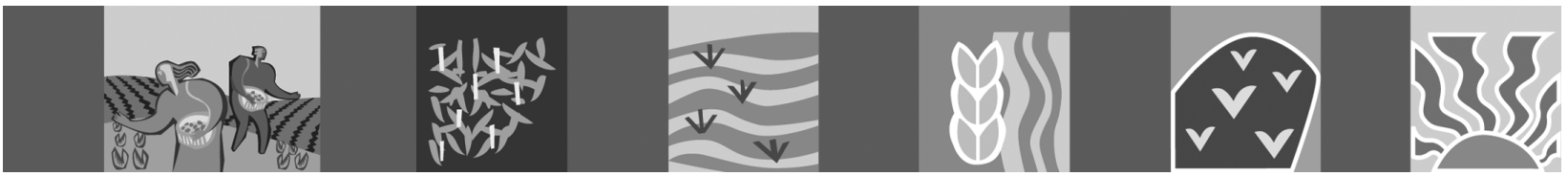
Boracay is the Philippines’ most widely known island. Every year, more than a million tourists are drawn to its powdery white sand, clear water, and world famous sunset. In 2012, Boracay was named the “Best Overall Island” by Travel + Leisure Magazine.

Before Boracay became the tourist destination we know today, however, it was simply the home of the Ati, an indigenous tribe in Panay Island. To make way for resorts and other developments, the Ati were driven away from their pristine beach to live in the nooks and crannies of the southeast tip of the island. The remaining Boracay Ati communities have banded together against the encroachment of real estate and leisure and sports companies on the remaining two hectares of their ancestral domain. Their leader, Dexter Condez, was shot to death in 2013. He was 26 and, to this day, his murder remains unresolved.

Condensed from *To Develop or Not to Develop ‘New Boracays’: Threats of Destructive Tourism to Seaweed Farmers and Small Fishers in Caluya, Antique, Philippines* by AR Ridao of PAKISAMA. For more details of the case, contact: armand.ridao@gmail.com or raulsocrates@yahoo.com.



Marker for slain Ati leader Dexter Condez, only 26 years old, of the Boracay Ati Tribe Organization (BATO)
Photo by Joseph Angan



Boracay-inspired tourism

Just two hours away by fast boat to the west of Boracay is another beautiful group of islands. Caluya is a seven-island municipality with a population of 30,400 (NSO, 2010) located just off the northwest tip of Antique province in Panay Island, Western Visayas. Of its seven islands, four are being eyed for commercial tourism development: Caluya (specifically Barangay Imba), Sibato, Sibolo, and Liwagao islands.

Barangay Imba is a two-kilometer stretch of blue-green water and fine white sand, where fishers and seaweed farmers dock their boats and dry newly-harvested seaweeds. In the early morning of December 3, 2009, a 40-member demolition team with 60 policemen from mainland Antique

descended on the barangay's beachfront. The police started demolishing over 100 houses, evicting some 300 residents and relocating them to the village plaza, and, later, to a hastily built bunkhouse. The demolition was the result of a lower court victory by the area's supposed 'landowner.'

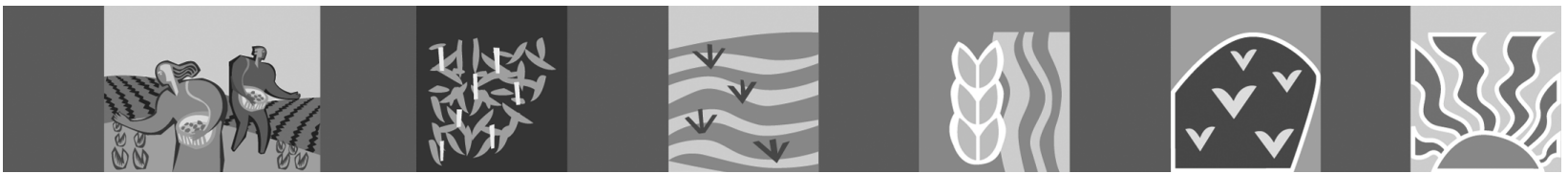
The dispossessed residents, who had occupied the area since after World War II, questioned the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) as to why such a person who had never set foot on the island could be entitled to own it. However, the DENR claimed that the result of their investigation could not be divulged as it was confidential. The residents have since lodged a complaint in court.

The local government recognizes the community of Imba. It was given the status of a barangay and provided with an annual internal revenue allocation by the national government. It is under the protection of the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998 (Republic Act No. 8550) which allows small fishers prior-right use of seawaters up to 15 kilometers from beach lines of coastal areas, and mandates the Department of Agriculture (DA) and its Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) to support the establishment of fishing settlements near their livelihood source.

In Sibolo, an island barangay to the northeast of Imba and Sibato, the same 'new Boracay' theme has been playing since 2007. The two previous mayors and the incumbent have been encouraging residents to sell their land to Fil-Estate, a Metro Manila-based real estate company that owns half of Boracay and has a history of unresolved disputes there. With its South Korean partners, Fil-Estate reportedly promised to develop the place into 'another Boracay' with tourists to be flown in directly and regularly from South Korea. To this end, agents of the company, without a permit, cleared an area of farms and vegetation to make way for an airstrip that did not seem



Map by Shannon Arnold



viable since it fell short of the minimum runway length requirement of the Philippine Civil Aviation Authority. The residents stopped this, however, with help from PAKISAMA. The current mayor's effort to convince those who refused to sell their land was also to no avail.

To date, just under half of the beachfront residents of Sibolo Island have held on to their properties, segmenting what otherwise would have been a continuous three-kilometer stretch of fine, powder-white beach. They choose to ignore the financial enticements and intimidation. For example, the corn fields and vegetable patches of those who refused to vacate the interior of the island intended for an airstrip were mysteriously burned. They also resisted the efforts of the land developer's agent to 'relocate' their seaweed farms fronting part of the land bought by the developer, and the attempt by the company to fence off part of the ocean to be dredged and converted into a jet ski playground and swimming area for tourists.

In far off Liwagao to the northwest, an island is being advertised for sale for PHP300 million, alarming both Liwagao residents and Sibolo barangay officials. The place is being claimed by the nearby Municipality of Bulalacao of the Province of Oriental Mindoro, which sees Liwagao's 'Boracay-like' tourism potentials as a possible additional source of income for Mindoro.

The Semirara Mining Corporation, which operates in Caluya, is also reportedly interested in investing in the development of a 'new Boracay' there. The economic – mining, real estate, and tourism – interests of the mining company and its parent and sister companies have long been entrenched in the island (since mining operations started in the 1970s). They have also become intertwined with the local political elite, especially with the marriage of the majority owner's nephew to the current mayor of the municipality. The mayor

now resides, with her husband, in the mining company's compound on Semirara Island.

Suppressing a thriving seaweed industry

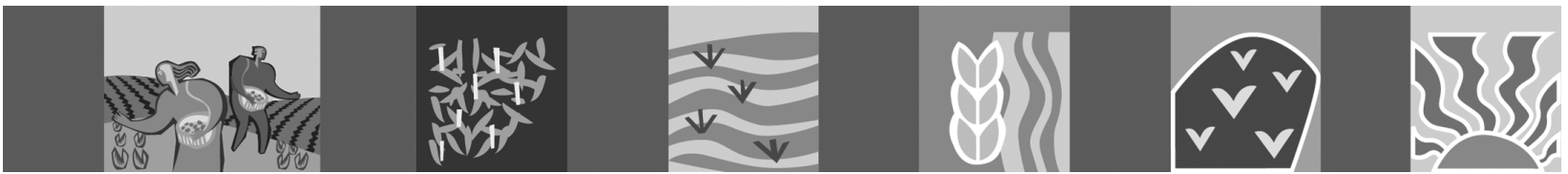
It is worth noting that Caluya is barely mentioned in official national government statistics and reports as a major seaweed-producing area in Western Visayas despite the volume of its produce. The 'latest' official figure (2006) for seaweed production in Western Visayas is 49,550 metric tons (DA-Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, 2006). Caluya's barely reported seaweed production estimated at 25,340 metric tons in 2012 – if added to the region's total in 2006, assuming that it remained the same in 2012 – would make Region VI among the top five seaweed-producing regions in the country, deserving of national and local government support.



Seaweed production in Caluya

Photo by R. Modina

Most lamentably, the Seaweeds Industry Association of the Philippines (SIAP) had acknowledged Caluya as a major and developed seaweed-producing area in the country back in 2004. Yet the official "Seaweeds Road-map" issued by the BFAR in 2008 targeted a measly four hectares (ha) in Region VI for national government support, compared with 863 ha and



332 ha targeted for assistance in the ARMM and Region IX, respectively.

The table below is a comparison of the possible economic benefits that could accrue to the local government and people of Caluya from ‘new Boracays’ vis-à-vis benefits from a fully developed seaweed industry, using data from the local government on underdeveloped farm hectares and BFAR’s computation of possible income from properly tended, government-assisted seaweed farms.

While the total hypothetical gross annual revenue from a fully-developed seaweed industry may be much lower than the hypothetical total gross annual revenue from developed ‘new-Boracays,’ the revenues that may go to the coffers of the local government would be similar or slightly higher from the seaweed industry, if taxed appropriately, than from the ‘new Boracay’ tourist facilities. More importantly, the income that would go directly to the seaweed farmers, comprising roughly 40% of the total local population, would be almost 10 times more than the amount being

Hypothetical 2014 Incomes/Revenues from Fully-Developed ‘New Boracays’ vis-a-vis a Fully-Developed Seaweed Industry in Caluya		
Hypothetical Income/Revenue for 2014	Fully-Developed ‘New Boracays’ in Caluya (PhP million)	Fully-Developed Seaweed Industry in Caluya (PhP million)
Estimated Total Annual Gross Income	PhP27,575.1 ¹	PhP6,299.86 ²
Estimated Total Annual Revenue for the Local Government	PhP250 ³	PhP262.87 ⁴
Estimated Total Annual Income/Salaries/Wages of Local Workers (e.g., Tourism Employees or Seaweed Farmers)	PhP400.68 ⁵	PhP4,723.53 ⁶
Estimated Total Income for Local Business Investors/Traders (10% of gross income)	PhP2,757.51 ⁷	PhP1,576.33 ⁸
Estimated Gross Income for Metro Manila-based Investors and their Foreign Partners (roughly 88% of gross income)	PhP24,166.91 ⁹	None
Estimated Income for ‘Value-Adding’ Processors/Companies (mostly in Metro Cebu and some in Metro Manila)	None	PhP3,154.480 ¹⁰

¹ Gross income similar to Boracay’s as projected by the Department of Tourism for 2014

² Assuming that the full 2,883.7182 ha identified as seaweed-farmable in Caluya were planted to seaweeds and each ha produced a BFAR-computed 5,200 kg net yield of dried seaweeds per harvest per ha x 7 harvests per year x current ‘low selling price’ of PhP50/kg of dried seaweeds in Caluya + PhP10 markup by traders for each kg of dried seaweeds bought

³ Revenue similar to the Municipality of Malay, where Boracay is located, from preceding years

⁴ Assuming that the local government imposes a PhP3 tax—to be shared by farmer/seller (who may be asked to pay PhP1) and trader (who may be asked to pay PhP1.50)—for each kg of dried seaweed brought by traders to processors in Metro Cebu (i.e., 105,149,342.48 kg of dried seaweeds per year x PhP2.50 tax for each kg brought out = PhP262,873,356.20)

⁵ Similar to Boracay’s PhP265/day minimum wage x 21 days/month x 12 months x estimated 6,000 tourism workers in the island

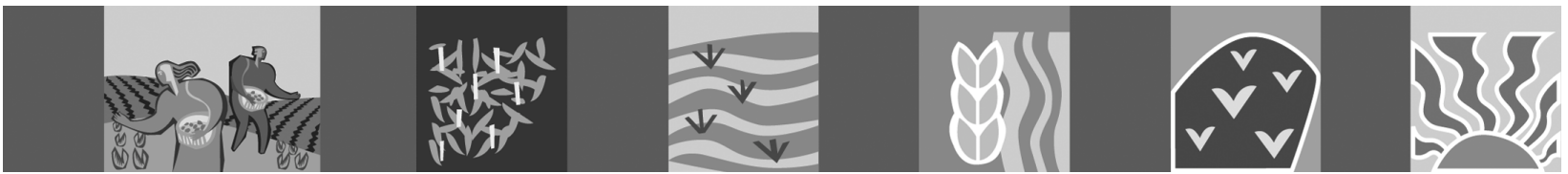
⁶ 90% of value of total dried seaweeds produced

⁷ Estimate from local accounts based on PAKISAMA 2013 interviews in/about Boracay

⁸ 10% of value of total dried seaweeds produced for small local businesses servicing the local seaweed industry (e.g., transport operators, gasoline vendors, stores selling replacements for lost or depreciated seaweed-farm items/materials), i.e., PhP524,836,712.40 + PhP1,051,493,424.80 (from the PhP10 markup of traders) = PhP1,576,330,137.20

⁹ Estimate from various corporate reports of tourism/leisure companies operating in Boracay (from official websites of various companies and of the Security and Exchange Commission, 2013)

¹⁰ SIAP-estimated PhP30 value added by seaweed processors in Metro Cebu/Metro Manila for each kg of dried seaweeds converted to carrageenan, agar-agar, etc. which are then exported for industrial/cosmetic/medical/food manufacturing uses in industrial countries (e.g., US, Europe, Japan) x 105,149,342.48 kgs of dried seaweeds sold to them per year = PhP3,154,480,274.40



“While the total hypothetical gross annual revenue from a fully-developed seaweed industry may be much lower than the hypothetical total gross annual revenue from developed ‘new-Boracays,’ the revenues that may go to the coffers of the local government would be similar or slightly higher from the seaweed industry, if taxed appropriately, than from the ‘new Boracay’ tourist facilities.”

paid to tourism workers/employees (80% of whom, in Boracay, were brought in by tourism operators from other parts of the country).

It should be pointed out, as well, that seaweed farmers are not only producers but also small business owners or micro-entrepreneurs. Their seaweed farms, in fact, work as de facto automated teller machines (ATMs) from where they can ‘withdraw’ cash, if necessary for emergency needs, by harvesting just enough seaweed to sell to local traders who pay them in cash. In contrast, ‘Boracay-type’ tourism offers only short-term work in construction, and as maids or spa masseuses or entertainers, mostly low-wage work which would give them a standard of living much below that which they enjoy as seaweed farmers.

Caluya is also a top coconut/copra producer, producing 44% of Antique’s total provincial output to date, and a top fish producer in the province. This means that Caluya has the added potential of becoming a major food supplier in the province and region, as well as a significant agricultural/fishery producer in the region and across the Visayas.

What the Caluyanhons want

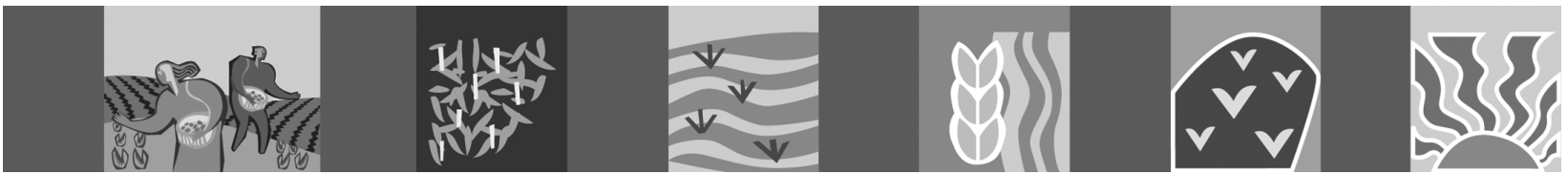
The seaweed farmers of Caluya are determined not to let what happened to the Atis of Boracay

happen to them. The people of Imba erected in late 2013, with their own hands, a *parola* (lighthouse) that serves not only as a beacon to fishers and seaweed farmers working at night, but also to symbolize their unity and hope to one day overcome and triumph over those who want to push them into the sea.

The people of Sibolo and Liwagao, some of them previous foes, have linked hands to stop the sale of Liwagao, as well as block the sale of the remaining beachfronts of Sibolo and stop the construction of an airport there that would cut across their farms.

The people in the southern half of Semirara Island have, for the first time, joined their brothers and sisters in simultaneous rallies to express their outrage over plans of expanding the mining company’s operations into other islands of Caluya. They are also protesting the efforts of the municipal government to eject farmers, without consultation, from land supposedly intended as a site for a mining ‘waste facility.’

These actions promise to be the beginning of something empowering and liberating that Caluyanhons have never done before, since the mining company started operations in the 1970s during Martial Law. They also oppose creeping efforts by real estate/‘leisure and sports’ companies to dispossess them of their seafarms,



beachfronts, and farmlands in favor of ‘new Boracay’-type facilities that cater to tourists.

Almost all – seaweed farmers, fishers, land farmers, and village officials of Liwagao, Sibolo, Sibato, Semirara, and Caluya proper including village officials who previously declared support for the tourism plan of the municipal government – oppose the plan to convert their productive seafarms into another Boracay, preferring instead to fully develop the agricultural, fishery/aquatic, and environment-friendly tourism potentials of Caluya. Based on consultations with them from 2007 to 2013, they recommend the following:

1. For the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to:

- a. stop surreptitiously issuing leaseholds on beachfronts being utilized by seaweed farmers and fishers for their livelihoods;
- b. check and monitor the strict compliance of Semirara Mining with national environmental laws; and
- c. be proactive in requiring environmental impact assessments (EIAs) on ‘tourism’ and ‘waste facility’ projects openly promoted by the local government without prior study, much less consultations, with those who will be affected/displaced.

2. For the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) to:

- a. provide proper aquaculture extension services and undertake extensive research on seaweed disease solutions; and
- b. help press for the enforcement of the delineated municipal waters to stop intrusion by commercial fishers and to review the municipal fisheries code.

3. For the technical staff of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) to:

- a. come up with agri-processing/packaging projects based on both actual consultations with Caluyanhons as well

as realistic feasibility/market studies, and not those conceptualized or copied from abroad, e.g., mixing seaweeds with noodles, which most of the beneficiaries trained thereon have declared to be a waste of government money; and

- b. evaluate with participants the outcome of such projects.

4. For the Municipal Government of Caluya to:

- a. listen and give preferential treatment to the people of Caluya, especially to seaweed farmers, fishers, and land farmers threatened to be displaced by projects that purport to promote ‘development and progress’ for the municipality;
- b. explore genuinely sustainable and environment-friendly models of tourism, e.g., those of nearby Puerto Princesa, and Coron with the Tagbanuas;
- c. be transparent and inclusive in their decision-making; and
- d. stop the expansion of coal mining.

5. For the Department of Energy (DOE) to:

- a. stop promoting dirty coal energy in the country; and
- b. stop issuing permits that would extend and expand Semirara’s operation for decades more into other islands of Caluya. ■

For the complete list of references, please contact the author of this case as indicated at the beginning of the article.