

Living proof

Apo Island's journey from ruin to modest riches

A bold local marine experiment begun in the early 1970s has transformed life on a small Philippine island and become an inspirational model across the globe for the simple logic of sustainable existence. **Linda Bolido** reports.

Apo looks like a typical fishing community at first glance. Conservation has kept its waters clear and clean. Even close to the shore, the no-take zone yields delightful marine discoveries.

Erlinda Bolido

On the far side of the island of Negros, in the coastal village of Caliling, where legend says giants roamed in olden times, fisher folk are now chasing the dream that first inspired the residents of neighbouring Apo Island, decades ago. To Caliling's villagers, and others like them in many of the Philippines' more than 7000 islands, Apo Island is a showcase of how they hope to live, and a model of how to accomplish that goal.

In fact, in addition to its regular stream of tourists, Apo has been hosting groups of fisher folk from across the country, Caliling included, eager to see and learn first hand just how the island accomplished what it did.

The dream that the Apo people are living, and which other coastal villagers have now adopted as their own, was a modest one. They simply wanted to earn enough to provide for their basic needs, send their children to school and feel secure in a steady livelihood.

Today, they have an elementary school, fishing is good and the income is regular. They are even able to earn extra money from tourism. The island is neat and trim with concrete, unlit pathways, modest but well-kept homes – none more than two storeys tall – clean shores and clear, rich waters. With a generator purchased from money the community earned from tourism, the island has electricity for six to 11 hours a day, allowing even the operation of a handful of television sets with video/compact disc player attachments. By no stretch of the imagination is life luxurious and easy on Apo, but, for the other fishing communities that could no longer eke out even the simplest living, it has become a role model.

With a coastline longer than that of the continental United States, the Philippines has hundreds, if not thou-

Tourists generate significant income for the community through schemes such as the souvenir T-shirts sold by members of the Apo Island Women's Association cooperative.

Erlinda Bolido



sands, of coastal communities where people rely mainly on fishing for their livelihood. The troubles that Apo's small population went through were typical of many, if not most, of these fishing communities.

The island did not come upon its celebrity overnight. During the early 1970s, it had begun to go the way of many fishing communities in the country. Eager for a good fish harvest in the shortest possible time, fishermen were resorting to destructive methods, like the use of dynamite across reefs. Eventually, fish yield dwindled and people had to go further and further out to sea for less and less fish.

Then in 1979 a group of researchers from Silliman University across the strait in the capital, Dumaguete, decided to make Apo a kind of off-campus laboratory.

Dr Angel Alcala, an award-winning marine biologist who was also former Silliman president and secretary of environment and natural resources, had become alarmed by the steady deterioration of the country's coral reefs. With some 20 000 square kilometres of reefs, the third largest in the world, the Philippines, he said, had the potential to harvest some 350 000 tonnes of fish, or about 15 tonnes per square kilometre, a year. But reefs, he reported, were only yielding about half of this potential.

Alcala then went on to help pioneer and launch the 'no-take' marine reserve concept on Apo island. 'It is very simple', he said. 'An area is divided into fishing and no-take zones. A 70:30 ratio (70 for the fishing section) is believed sufficient for sustainability. If there is a large population in the protected area, the people are moved to the fishing side.'

While he pointed out that the Apo reserve his team worked on was not the best site available, he accepted the fact that local people would not give up the best site, and so the team made the most of the marine area they were given. In doing so, they set up a remarkable turn around for Apo.



Apo's revived marine biodiversity and associated community success are exemplifying the simple tenets of sustainability, and motivating others around the world. Erlinda Bolido

By not banning fishing completely, Alcala said successes came because people were not deprived of their livelihood.

Conversion Regalado, a member of the barangay (village) council, said higher family incomes enabled the community to send their children to the high school on the mainland. Kids are ferried across early Monday morning and fetched Friday afternoon. The same boat that takes them back and forth also fetches and sends back the teachers who handle classes in the island's elementary school.

The Apo model has won not only awards for Dr Angel Alcala, but for the island itself too. Apo's concrete pathways were built with the modest prize money it won during the celebration of the International Year of the Reef a few years back.

Alcala stressed that the Apo experiment succeeded because the university worked closely with the community. The locals understood they had a stake in the success of the program, and they therefore managed, monitored and maintained what the university had set up.

And the community apparently is not taking things for granted despite all the accolades it has received. With the continued help of Silliman University, villagers constantly monitor the health of the sanctuary and the reefs to make sure that tourist traffic in particular is not creating new problems. No more than 15 divers and eight snorkellers are allowed in the marine sanctuary every day.

In April this year, Chicago's renowned Shedd Aquarium announced that it was setting aside a section of its Wild Reef exhibition to the coral reefs of Apo Island. It was perhaps the ultimate tribute to the trail-blazing accomplishments of Apo, less than an hour away by boat from lively Dumaguete City, capital of the province of Negros Oriental in the central Philippines. Shedd, in a press statement, described Apo's marine sanctuary as 'a place imbued with allure and wonder' and a 'lush ecosystem'. The statement said, 'There is no other place in the world's oceans as diverse as a reef in the Philippines'. Eight years in the making and Shedd's largest exhibit opening since the Oceanarium in 1991, the Wild Reef exhibit re-creates Apo Island – the 'animals, biodiversity and cultural connection behind this unparalleled marine ecosystem'.

While Shedd is enthused over Apo's ecosystem, for Filipinos living in other coastal areas it is not so much what Apo residents have done to their reefs that impresses but what the reefs have done for the villagers.

Linda Bolido is a freelance journalist and contributing editor of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and the monthly *Mirror* magazine.



Macaria Alaban, 73, carries on with the work she has been doing for most of her life – mat-weaving. Many mats are sold to the island's visitors. Erlinda Bolido

By not banning fishing completely, Alcala said successes came because people were not deprived of their livelihood. At the same time, the marine sanctuary helped stabilise and assure sufficient fish catch. Fish and other resources were able to recover and rebuild their populations in the reserved areas. Eventually, as numbers grew, the extra populations spilt over into the fishing zones.

'People are spending less time catching fish, while the harvest, seen at a per kilogram/per person/per hour basis, is rising,' Alcala noted.

The reserve had a beneficial side effect. With the return of a wide variety of species, diving and snorkelling aficionados found Apo one of the most rewarding destinations. It is estimated that the island now earns some US\$200 000 a year from tourism, which is shared among national and local governments and the community. Apo's share paid for the generator, the building of the elementary school, and will pay for other projects in the future.