Business Strategic Planning for Tourism Recovery in Caramoan, Camarines Sur Amid COVID-19: A SWOT–TOWS Approach

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Abstract

Aim: This study aims to formulate and validate a practicable, locally grounded strategic plan to support tourism recovery in Caramoan, Camarines Sur, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it (a) documents the pandemic's impacts on accommodation providers and tour operators; (b) constructs a SWOT profile; and (c) proposes and evaluates a TOWS-derived recovery plan, *Project BEST (Building and Empowering Communities through Sustainable Tourism)*, with stakeholder input. The study contributes to destination-level crisis management literature by integrating MSME perspectives with international evidence on recovery and resilience.

Methodology: A descriptive mixed-methods design was employed, combining semi-structured interviews and surveys with 32 accommodation providers and tour operators selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed through thematic coding to develop the SWOT matrix and weighted mean computation for evaluating plan acceptability. Ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly observed.

Results: The SWOT analysis revealed strong entrepreneurial resilience, improved facilities, and diversification as key strengths; operational disruptions and loss of foreign markets as weaknesses; domestic tourism rebound and digital innovation as opportunities; and lingering health and policy risks as threats. TOWS analysis yielded six strategic priorities under *Project BEST*: (1) continuity in operations, (2) health and safety compliance, (3) training and skills development, (4) marketing innovations, (5) showcasing Caramoan's uniqueness, and (6) flexible products and services. Stakeholders rated the plan highly acceptable across appropriateness (4.51), usability (4.39), and duration (4.30). These outcomes affirm the feasibility of *Project BEST* as a blueprint for resilient tourism recovery, aligning with regional evidence that destinations with digital readiness and clear protocols achieve faster rebounds.

Conclusion: Caramoan's tourism recovery prospects are promising given robust domestic demand and improving international mobility. A locally anchored, evidence-informed strategy operationalized through *Project BEST* can transform macro-level recovery efforts into enterprise-level resilience and community empowerment. This framework is transferable to similar coastal destinations pursuing sustainable, inclusive, and risk-responsive growth.

Keywords: *tourism recovery; SWOT–TOWS; strategic planning; sustainable tourism; Caramoan; Philippines; COVID-19*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has long been recognized as one of the world's largest and most dynamic industries, contributing significantly to global economic growth, employment, and cultural exchange. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2023), tourism accounted for approximately 9.2 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP) and supported more than 320 million jobs prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This multifaceted sector encompasses interrelated industries such as transportation, hospitality, travel services, entertainment, and retail, which collectively stimulate local economic activity and community livelihoods. However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented global disruption. When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March

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11, 2020, governments worldwide implemented lockdowns, border closures, and travel restrictions, resulting in a 74 percent decline in international tourist arrivals in 2020 (UNWTO, 2021). Although global tourism began to recover gradually by 2023, the World Travel and Tourism Council reported that challenges such as labor shortages, evolving traveler behavior, and health and safety concerns continued to hinder full recovery. Consequently, international recovery strategies have emphasized digital transformation, micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) resilience, and sustainable tourism development aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In the Philippines, tourism has been a key pillar of socio-economic development, contributing 12.8 percent to the national GDP and generating employment for approximately 5.7 million Filipinos before the pandemic (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2020). The pandemic, however, severely affected the sector. The suspension of domestic and international travel led to a sharp decline in tourist arrivals and revenues, with estimated losses reaching ₱400 billion in 2020 (Department of Tourism [DOT], 2021). In response, the national government implemented the Tourism Response and Recovery Plan (TRRP) and the National MSME Resilience Framework, both of which emphasized sustainability, digital innovation, and support for tourism enterprises (DOT, Department of Trade and Industry [DTI], & National Economic and Development Authority [NEDA], 2022). MSMEs—representing 99.5 percent of all Philippine businesses, employing 63 percent of the workforce, and contributing 35.7 percent of total value-added output (DTI, 2023)—were among the hardest hit. Many faced temporary closures, workforce reductions, and limited access to financial assistance, particularly in rural and island destinations where tourism forms the economic backbone. While government programs such as the Small Business Corporation's CARES Program and DTI's Negosyo Centers provided relief, their reach was limited and did not fully address long-term recovery needs.

In the Bicol Region, the municipality of Caramoan in Camarines Sur exemplifies a destination that suffered significant economic setbacks during the pandemic. Known for its pristine beaches, island-hopping attractions, and eco-adventure tourism, Caramoan's economy depends largely on small-scale enterprises, including accommodation providers, transport services, and tour operators. The pandemic led to business closures, reduced visitor arrivals, and income losses, underscoring the urgency for a localized and sustainable tourism recovery plan. Despite the existence of national frameworks, limited research has explored how local MSMEs in small destinations like Caramoan can recover through evidence-based strategic planning. Prior studies have primarily focused on national tourism policies or macroeconomic recovery frameworks, leaving a gap in the understanding of destination-specific strategies that integrate community participation and local capacity building.

This study addresses that gap by developing and validating a business strategic plan for Caramoan's tourism-related MSMEs using the SWOT–TOWS analytical framework, which integrates internal and external factors influencing recovery. By incorporating inputs from local stakeholders, the study ensures that the proposed strategies are contextually appropriate and aligned with community needs. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of literature on post-pandemic tourism recovery and MSME resilience in the Philippines. It is among the first studies to apply a SWOT–TOWS–based approach specifically to Caramoan's tourism enterprises, offering a practical model for small destinations navigating post-crisis recovery. The findings are expected to support evidence-based policymaking, strengthen local entrepreneurship, and promote sustainable and inclusive tourism governance, aligning Caramoan's recovery efforts with both national and global sustainability goals.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Tourism remains one of the most dynamic yet vulnerable industries globally, serving as a vital driver of economic growth, employment, and intercultural exchange. Prior to the pandemic, tourism contributed 9.2 percent to global GDP and supported more than 320 million jobs (UNWTO, 2023). However, COVID-19 caused a 74 percent decline in international tourist arrivals in 2020 (UNWTO, 2021), marking the industry's most significant downturn in history. In response, global organizations such as the UNWTO emphasized the need for sustainable recovery through innovation, digital transformation, and inclusive participation. Studies revealed that enterprises demonstrating adaptability through restructuring, digitalization, and diversification exhibited stronger resilience and faster recovery (Hoang et al., 2021). Maneenetr (2016) underscored the importance of strategic planning and SWOT analysis in aligning organizational strengths with external opportunities to ensure continuity and competitiveness in turbulent contexts.

In the Philippine setting, the tourism sector contributed 12.8 percent to the national GDP and created approximately 5.7 million jobs prior to 2020 (PSA, 2020). The pandemic, however, severely impacted tourism MSMEs that form the backbone of local economies. To facilitate recovery, the government introduced several measures, including the Tourism Response and Recovery Plan (TRRP) and the National MSME Resilience Framework (DOT, DTI, & NEDA, 2022). Republic Act No. 11032, or the *Ease of Doing Business and Efficient Government Service Delivery Act of 2018*, also streamlined business processes to support enterprise resilience. Recent studies have highlighted that

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MSME recovery relies on strategic planning, innovation, and community-based development approaches (Fernando, 2020; Rebuya & Gasga, 2021). These findings indicate that locally driven initiatives supported by government policies can significantly strengthen recovery outcomes.

In Camarines Sur, destinations such as Caramoan experienced sharp tourism declines during the pandemic. Local government efforts, including training and business continuity programs (DTI–Camarines Sur, 2023), provided temporary relief but lacked comprehensive strategic direction. Thus, applying a SWOT–TOWS framework to Caramoan's context can support MSME recovery by enhancing competitiveness, promoting sustainable development, and ensuring long-term resilience.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Strategic Planning Theory (Gale, 2006) and the SWOT–TOWS Analytical Framework, complemented by principles derived from Consumer Behavior Models. Collectively, these theories explain how MSMEs in the tourism sector can recover and adapt strategically in a post-pandemic environment.

Strategic Planning Theory (Gale, 2006) emphasizes systematic environmental scanning and resource alignment to achieve organizational objectives. It supports this study by providing a structured approach to analyzing internal and external factors affecting MSMEs, enabling the formulation of responsive, sustainable strategies for recovery and growth.

The SWOT–TOWS Analytical Framework complements strategic planning by integrating diagnostic and prescriptive processes. SWOT identifies internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats, while TOWS translates these insights into actionable strategies. In this study, the framework guides the formulation of *Project BEST*—Building and Empowering Communities through Sustainable Tourism—anchored on MSME and stakeholder collaboration.

Meanwhile, Consumer Behavior Models (Madhavan & Chandrasekar, 2015), including the Nicosia, Howard–Sheth, Engel–Kollat–Blackwell, and Stimulus–Response models, are incorporated to interpret post-pandemic shifts in traveler preferences and purchasing patterns. These models explain how consumer decisions are shaped by information, learning, and environmental stimuli, providing a behavioral foundation for designing responsive marketing and service strategies in the new tourism landscape.

Collectively, these theoretical lenses explain how MSMEs can strategically plan, adapt, and innovate in response to environmental and behavioral shifts—forming the intellectual foundation for the study's proposed tourism recovery framework.
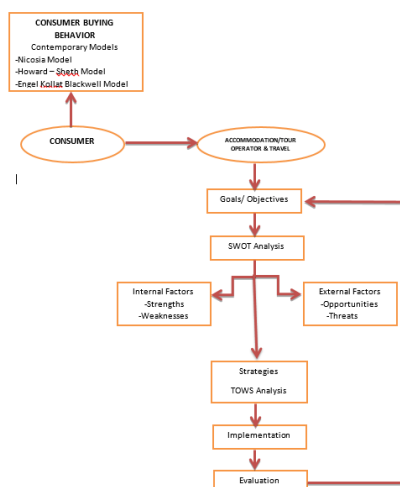

Figure 1. The Theoretical Paradigm

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates the integration of Strategic Planning Theory and the SWOT–TOWS Analysis in developing a business strategic plan for Caramoan's tourism MSMEs. The process begins with environmental scanning and SWOT assessment, followed by TOWS-based strategy formulation under Project BEST. The resulting strategic plan is then subjected to stakeholder validation to evaluate its acceptability, feasibility,

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and sustainability within the post-pandemic context. This framework operationalizes the theoretical constructs by linking environmental analysis to practical recovery actions that strengthen MSME resilience and promote sustainable tourism growth in Caramoan.
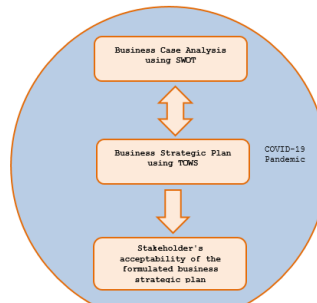

Figure 2. Conceptual Paradigm

Statement of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the global tourism and hospitality industry, and Caramoan, Camarines Sur—known for its island destinations and adventure tourism—was no exception. Accommodation establishments and travel agencies experienced travel restrictions, declining tourist arrivals, and financial instability. Despite recovery initiatives, there remains a lack of localized strategic frameworks designed to strengthen MSME resilience in Caramoan's tourism sector. This gap highlights the need for a sustainable, data-driven business strategic plan responsive to post-pandemic challenges. Hence, this study analyzed the current business environment and identified key factors influencing the viability and competitiveness of local tourism enterprises through SWOT analysis.

Research Objectives

This study generally aims to design a strategic business plan that supports post-pandemic recovery and long-term sustainability of accommodation establishments and travel and tour agencies in Caramoan, Camarines Sur. Specifically, it seeks:
1. To conduct a business case analysis using SWOT for accommodation and travel/tour agencies;
2. To propose a business strategic plan that enhances their competitiveness and resilience; and
3. To determine the acceptability of the proposed plan from the perspective of key stakeholders.

Research Questions
1. What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of accommodation and travel/tour agencies in Caramoan, Camarines Sur during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What business strategic plan can be formulated to enhance their operations and ensure sustainable recovery?
3. How acceptable is the proposed business strategic plan to the identified stakeholders?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively describe and analyze the current conditions, challenges, and strategic responses of tourism micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in Caramoan, Camarines Sur. As defined by Calderon and Gonzales (2018), descriptive research systematically portrays the characteristics and relationships of a given population or phenomenon as they exist in the present, without manipulating variables. It aims to present facts, identify patterns, and interpret observed realities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The mixed-methods approach was considered most appropriate for this investigation because it combined the measurable insights from quantitative surveys with the contextual depth of qualitative interviews. The quantitative component enabled the assessment of stakeholders' acceptability of the proposed strategic plan through numerical analysis, while the qualitative component captured experiential perspectives from MSME owners and managers. This

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design ensured a holistic understanding of the post-pandemic tourism landscape and facilitated the formulation of an evidence-based strategic plan grounded in empirical and stakeholder data.

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted in the municipality of Caramoan, Camarines Sur, a renowned island and eco-tourism destination in the Bicol Region, Philippines. The target population comprised local tourism MSMEs that remained operational during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 32 respondents participated, consisting of 18 hotel managers or owners (56.25%), 8 homestay operators (25%), and 6 tour agency owners (18.75%).

A purposive sampling technique was utilized to ensure the inclusion of only active and registered tourism enterprises with firsthand experience in post-pandemic recovery. This approach was appropriate because it focused on respondents most knowledgeable about the operational challenges and resilience strategies relevant to the study's objectives. The sample size of 32 was deemed sufficient to represent the key sectors of Caramoan's local tourism industry and to reach saturation in qualitative responses, balancing both breadth and depth of information.

Instrument

Data were gathered using a researcher-made questionnaire and an interview guide, both designed to address the study's objectives. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: Part I covered the demographic and organizational profiles of respondents; Part II gathered data on business operations and recovery strategies; and Part III assessed stakeholders' acceptability of the proposed strategic business plan in terms of relevance, feasibility, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact.

The instruments underwent content validation by three experts in tourism management and business strategy, each holding at least a master's degree and extensive professional experience in tourism enterprise operations. Revisions were made based on their feedback to improve clarity, accuracy, and alignment with study objectives. The reliability of the survey questionnaire was tested through a pilot administration among five respondents from neighboring municipalities, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89, indicating high internal consistency.

For the qualitative component, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to obtain detailed insights into the MSMEs' operational challenges, coping mechanisms, and perspectives on the proposed plan. Questions were designed to complement quantitative data and facilitate triangulation.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted from January to March 2024. Prior to implementation, the researchers secured permission from the Caramoan Municipal Tourism Office and coordinated with the Department of Tourism (DOT) Region V to identify active MSMEs. Primary data were collected through survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, while secondary data such as policy documents, tourism reports, and economic statistics were obtained from official agencies.

Quantitative data were collected using printed questionnaires personally administered to respondents at their establishments. The researchers scheduled visits to ensure a 100% retrieval rate and provided assistance in clarifying survey items when necessary. Qualitative data were gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with selected respondents from the same group, allowing the exploration of deeper themes related to resilience and recovery strategies. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were audio-recorded with permission for accurate transcription and analysis.

To ensure the credibility and accuracy of findings, the researchers integrated both data sets through triangulation, where qualitative insights validated and enriched the quantitative results, particularly in the formulation and evaluation of the proposed strategic plan.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were encoded and analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequency counts and percentages to describe respondent profiles, and weighted mean and ranking to determine the level of acceptability of the proposed business strategic plan. These analyses provided measurable insights into stakeholder perceptions of the plan's relevance, feasibility, and sustainability.

Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed through content analysis, following transcription, coding, and categorization of responses into emerging themes aligned with the study's objectives. Thematic results were interpreted in relation to quantitative findings to achieve integrated conclusions.

The triangulation of data ensured reliability and validity by comparing quantitative outcomes with qualitative evidence. This integration allowed the study to substantiate numerical patterns with narrative insights, strengthening the development of the proposed strategic plan for Caramoan's tourism MSMEs.

Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to the ethical research guidelines. All participants were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights as respondents prior to participation. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, emphasizing voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any point without penalty.

Interviews were conducted only with the participants' permission, and all audio recordings were made with explicit consent. Personal identifiers were removed from the data to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The researchers ensured that all collected information was used solely for academic purposes and stored securely in password-protected files. In compliance with data management standards, all research files will be retained for three years after publication and then permanently deleted to ensure data privacy and integrity.

Results and Discussion

SWOT Analysis of Accommodation and Tour Operators

The SWOT analysis revealed that Caramoan's tourism micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) demonstrated notable strengths such as strong entrepreneurial resilience, improved facilities, and diversification of services. However, the sector also faced key weaknesses, including operational disruptions and the loss of foreign markets. Opportunities emerged from the rebound of domestic tourism and the growing adoption of digital innovations, while threats were associated with persistent health and policy risks.

Located in the Bicol Region of southern Luzon, Philippines–an area frequently affected by typhoons and other natural hazards–local entrepreneurs have historically exhibited exceptional adaptability. When COVID-19 struck in early 2020, Caramoan's tourism industry suffered severe setbacks due to travel restrictions and a sharp decline in visitor arrivals. Nevertheless, local business owners repurposed facilities for small events, training programs, and catering services, displaying remarkable determination to recover despite ongoing uncertainty.

This finding aligns with the Youth Resiliency Framework (Donnan & Hammond, 2007), which posits that internal and external strengths enable communities to adapt effectively to crises. One respondent highlighted, "We must believe in ourselves and pray to the Almighty," underscoring how faith, creativity, and collective action supported local recovery efforts. Weaknesses such as inconsistent local protocols, workforce reduction, and liquidity constraints reflected challenges common among MSMEs globally. The Greiner Growth Model supports this observation, suggesting that crises often compel organizations to adapt their structures and management strategies for long-term survival.

Meanwhile, the rebound of domestic tourism and renewed consumer confidence created opportunities for innovation. Entrepreneurs began investing in online marketing, contactless transactions, and compliance with new health standards. This adaptive behavior mirrors the Parasite-Stress Theory (Thornhill & Fincher, 2014), which explains that communities facing persistent environmental stressors develop behavioral mechanisms that strengthen resilience. Nonetheless, lingering threats–such as reduced leisure demand, unpredictable policy shifts, and lingering health concerns–continued to pose risks. Drawing from Lewin's Force Field Analysis, these challenges required balancing driving and restraining forces to sustain behavioral and structural change.

Quantitative findings from stakeholder surveys corroborated qualitative insights from interviews, both indicating that adaptability, digital innovation, and inter-organizational collaboration were central to recovery. Such results are consistent with recent studies emphasizing innovation and policy coordination as critical drivers of tourism resilience in the Asia-Pacific region (Kristiana et al., 2021).

TOWS-Derived Business Strategic Plan: Project BEST

Based on the SWOT findings, a TOWS analysis was conducted to align internal strengths and external opportunities. This led to the formulation of Project BEST: Building and Empowering Communities through Sustainable Tourism, a comprehensive strategic framework for Caramoan's tourism recovery. The plan features six priority strategies:
1. Developing operational continuity plans to strengthen MSME resilience;

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2. Improving facilities and services to comply with updated health and safety standards;
3. Providing capacity-building and skill development programs;
4. Implementing innovative and data-driven marketing campaigns;
5. Showcasing Caramoan's unique attractions through creative destination branding; and
6. Minimizing business disruptions by offering flexible products and services.

Each strategy is supported by measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and an implementation plan outlining tasks, responsible agencies, timelines, and target outcomes. For example, by the first quarter of 2024, at least ten operational strategies were projected for implementation, 32 establishments were expected to achieve full health and safety compliance, and nine new eco-cultural destinations were identified for development by 2025.

The proposed plan was also evaluated by stakeholders for feasibility. Respondents rated its appropriateness (M = 4.51), usability (M = 4.39), and duration (M = 4.30) as highly acceptable. These ratings validate Project BEST as a viable model for sustainable tourism recovery.

Financial projections estimated a ₱1.0 million implementation budget: ₱500,000 for training and development, ₱150,000 for health and safety measures, ₱100,000 for marketing, and ₱75,000 each for innovation and flexible operations. Partnerships among local government units (LGUs), the Department of Tourism (DOT), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), and higher education institutions were proposed to strengthen implementation. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, such as progress checklists, ocular inspections, and KPI tracking, will ensure accountability and performance efficiency.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data affirmed that Project BEST embodies a holistic, evidence-based approach to resilience building. Its alignment with global post-pandemic recovery strategies and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals positions Caramoan as a model for community-led, adaptive tourism management.

Conclusions

The study concludes that Caramoan's tourism MSMEs have demonstrated strong resilience and adaptive capacity amid pandemic disruptions. The SWOT-TOWS analysis revealed that entrepreneurial perseverance, service diversification, and digital transformation were central to sustaining recovery efforts. By systematically aligning internal capabilities with external opportunities, Project BEST–Building and Empowering Communities through Sustainable Tourism–emerged as a feasible and contextually grounded strategic plan for revitalizing the local tourism economy.

The high stakeholder acceptability ratings affirm the practicality and inclusiveness of the proposed plan, suggesting that recovery anchored in participatory planning and innovation leads to sustainable outcomes. Furthermore, the integration of quantitative data and qualitative insights substantiates the conclusion that localized strategic planning enhances tourism resilience and community empowerment. The findings contribute to academic discourse by demonstrating how destination-specific, data-driven strategies can operationalize resilience theory within small-island contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the results and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:
1. The Local Government Unit (LGU) of Caramoan may institutionalize business continuity and safety certification programs to enhance preparedness for future crises.
2. The Department of Tourism (DOT), Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), and higher education institutions may collaborate to develop training modules on innovation, digital marketing, and crisis management tailored for tourism MSMEs.
3. Tourism enterprises may adopt digital marketing, cashless payment systems, and online booking platforms to expand market reach and operational efficiency.
4. Local entrepreneurs may form multi-sector partnerships with government and academia to promote resource sharing and inclusive tourism governance.
5. Policymakers may consider integrating Project BEST into the broader Tourism Response and Recovery Plan (TRRP) to replicate its strategies in other coastal and rural destinations.

Caramoan's tourism recovery is rooted in community resilience, adaptive innovation, and collaborative governance. Project BEST offers a locally relevant and scalable model that aligns with both national and global sustainability frameworks. It promotes inclusive growth, reinforces disaster preparedness, and serves as a transferable framework for destinations pursuing sustainable and equitable tourism development in the post-pandemic era.
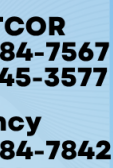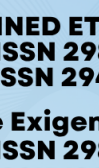
Future research may extend the evaluation of Project BEST to other island and coastal municipalities to further assess its adaptability, scalability, and long-term sustainability across diverse tourism contexts.

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