2. Resource Frontiers: Palawan, the Calamianes Islands and Esperanza

Welcome to Rizal—the last frontier of Palawan, the country’s last ecological frontier…. Mt. Mantalingahan’s unspoilt beauty made more exhilarating by crystal clear rivers and miles and miles of virgin forest serve as home to varied, rare and endangered species of flora and fauna.

To those who have experienced its largely unspoilt natural and cultural treasures, Rizal is truly worth the visit, again and again. Its people, representing a diverse combination of different ethno-linguistic groups, have been a showcase of peace and unity. Working in harmony, they have been able to harness the untapped resources in them, and directing these into worthwhile courses of action geared towards the common goal of development.

Rizal is well on its way to becoming a major area of sustainable growth and development. With the support of its people, the Municipality shall move onward to more efficient utilization and conservation of resources through more responsive governance (mayor of Rizal, southern Palawan, 2006).

This quote by the mayor of Rizal from a tourist pamphlet exemplifies some of the tensions and contradictions underlying understandings of the frontier in Palawan. Here, a fundamental tension between development and conservation is apparent. I have considered it worth quoting at length because it provides an excellent snapshot of how the nebulous concepts of development and conservation are constantly confused and strained in Palawan.

While these comments could easily be simply dismissed as an example of the sort of political doublespeak for which politicians are so often criticised,1 I prefer to view them as a valuable indication of some of the existent tensions over how to engage with the natural resources of the province. In the mayor’s comments, conservation and development are seen as good things that are necessary and a common goal, yet the tensions and contradictions between them are not articulated. While the source of Rizal’s uniqueness and value is its ‘unspoilt natural and cultural treasures’, the overall theme is the need for progress and development. These sorts of ambiguous messages are also in other promotional pamphlets, road signs, billboards and political speeches throughout Palawan.

1 And especially those in Palawan with reference to the concept of ‘sustainable development’.
Then Governor Reyes, (2000–10) for example, would cite the need for ‘Palawan’s development’ and speak of ‘linking our growth areas to centres of trade’, then in the next line talk of the need for ‘environmental conservation and protection’.

Contested notions of the frontier form the setting for the specific arguments about poverty and the environment that I develop in this book. Palawan is a province marked by its abundance of natural resources, and has long been considered as a social and resource frontier. This notion of a frontier however, encompasses various interests that are frequently in tension with each other. Commercial extractive processes, conservation and related tourism activities are the most visible modes of resource use that enact contradictory notions of how the frontier should be managed.

In this chapter I aim to provide a background to the book by exploring some of the ways in which these conflicting patterns of resource use have developed historically. The chapter shows how different interest groups contest the ways in which natural resources are managed and exploited at the provincial, regional/municipal and barangay/sitio levels. I focus in the first section on how the province of Palawan has become a frontier. Secondly, I scale down to the region my book is focused on, the Calamianes Islands and the municipality of Coron in particular. I examine how this area is a marine resource frontier. Thirdly, I give some background information and detail how these issues have played out in Esperanza, the community in which I did my fieldwork research.

**Palawan**

**Defining the Frontier**

The term frontier has been used to describe various locations and cultures. Perhaps most famously, in the United States, Frederick Jackson Turner classified the regions just beyond the belt of non-European settlement as frontier lands. Lying between the ‘wilderness’ and the urbanised or settled areas, the frontier was ‘the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilisation’ (Turner 1996 [1920]: 3). For Turner, the frontier was the zone that contributed to the making of the nation. He argued that the origins of American vitality, democracy and culture generally lay in the life of the frontier.

Since then, other academic and popular writers have adopted and used the term in various ways. In particular, many accounts have written about frontiers of capitalism (Tsing 2005). From this perspective, the frontier has been assumed as the region in which capitalism has yet to penetrate. ‘Resource frontiers’ were originally described by Friedmann (1966) as ‘peripheral’ zones of new
settlement, such as has occurred in regions of the Amazon basin. Other writers have used this term to describe the ways in which regions have been progressively settled, and their natural resources extracted (Hyndman 1994; Brookfield et al. 1995). Brookfield et al. (1995), for example, show how Borneo and the eastern peninsular regions of Malaysia have been incorporated into the two countries of Indonesia and Malaysia as frontiers for particular natural resources; supplying oil, timber and other products.

Using the word ‘frontier’ to describe Palawan generally or without reference to specific resources can be problematic. For one thing, as McDermott (2000) pointed out, the term implies that ‘expanding states, markets and migration have only recently reached its shores. In fact, translocal factors of incorporation have long shaped the course of social and environmental change on the island’ (ibid.: 77). In the Calamianes Islands, for example, Indigenous Tagbanua were trading swallow’s nests with the Chinese hundreds of years ago (Wright 1978: 56). Such a broad conception ignores the fact that Palawan is not a frontier for the various indigenous groups that have lived there for many years—the Molbog and the Pal’awan in the south of Palawan, the Batak in the north, and the Tagbanua in the central mainland and the Calamianes Islands (Eder and Fernandez 1996).

A different conception of the frontier looks at how the very idea of the frontier is constructed and enacted by various competing groups. Tsing (2005: 29) has pointed out that ‘[m]ost descriptions of resource frontiers take for granted the existence of resources; they label and count the resources and tell us who owns what’. Instead of using this approach, Tsing argued that resource frontiers, such as the Meratus Mountains in South Kalimantan where she has worked, are ‘scale-making projects’ (ibid.: 57–8); they enact particular visions of the landscape. Frontiers, from this post-modern perspective, are ‘imaginative projects’ (ibid.: 68) that construct the environment as wild and untamed, and the ways that people imagine frontiers are just as important as any objective notions about the frontier.

I do not intend to provide a rigid definition of the term frontier here, because by using Tsing’s perspective on the frontier, I concentrate instead on how the frontier is perceived and enacted by various groups. Although Tsing did not define it as such, this approach closely resembles that of post-structural political ecology. In this sense, I refer to Palawan as a frontier because of the ways that different interest groups perceive it as such. I focus on the role of natural resources in the ways that the frontier is enacted by these competing interests. Here, I look at how the frontier is simultaneously an economic and a political space at the three geographical scales of the province of Palawan, the region of the Calamianes and the sitio of Esperanza.
Migration and Resource Extraction

Migration to Palawan has been a key driver of environmental and social change since the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1903, the total population of the province was 35,369 (Eder 1999: 24). By 2007, it was 892,660 (NSO 2010). During the early part of the century, migration was predominantly from Cuyo, a small island that is part of Palawan Province but lies in the northeast Sulu Sea, between mainland Palawan and Panay (see Map 1-2). Eder and Fernandez (1996: 7–11) relate that during this period, Palawan was not as important as a settler destination as other Philippine frontiers such as Mindanao. After World War Two however, Palawan experienced a large surge in migration that has continued. Migrants since this period, and especially since the 1980s, have predominantly come from the islands in the Central Philippines known as the Visayas (ibid.: 8). While there were some state-sponsored settlement schemes, such as that in Narra in Central Palawan, the majority of migrants to Palawan arrived spontaneously. This was mostly due to overpopulation, environmental degradation, and the prevalence of highly exploitative class relations and political unrest on Visayan Islands such as Cebu, Leyte, Samar, Negros and Bohol (Eder 2008: 37). I describe this process in more detail later when I discuss migration to Esperanza.²

The frontier more recently has been an ambiguous and contested notion in Palawan. As Eder and Fernandez have observed:

… as the island and its peoples have become increasingly integrated into wider economic systems, the competition to control and exploit (or, more recently, to preserve) Palawan’s resources has increased apace. Such competition today is very fierce indeed, and what may be called ‘the politics of natural resource use’ dominates both local, provincial, and national government development planning and the everyday lives of the island’s residents (Eder and Fernandez 1996: 6).

The tension between development and conservation in Palawan can be seen more specifically in practices of commercial resource extraction, conservation and tourism.

Commercial resource extraction has long been an important economic activity in the province. Logging was dominant for many years in the post-war period, and during the 1980s it intensified with the activities of Pagdanan Timber Products. Owned by a businessman who had originally made his fortune exporting logs from Indonesia, Pagdanan Timber Products annual revenue by 1993 was

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² Seki (2004) has analysed in great historical detail such migration from Cebu Island in the Visayas to community settlements in Palawan.
US$24 million—equivalent to three quarters of the total income of the people of Palawan, and 24 times the provincial government’s annual budget (Broad and Cavanagh 1993: 45).

The environmental movement waged a high profile campaign against Pagdanan during the 1980s (Broad and Cavanagh 1993: 39–55; Eder 2008: 31–2). Threats and intimidation against environmentalists were common in this period, but the movement was eventually successful. Commercial logging was banned in 1992 with the passing of The Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) for Palawan Act (Republican Act (RA) 7611). At the time of fieldwork, mining, oil, gas and fisheries were important resource extraction activities. With a change in the mining laws to allow fully foreign-owned companies to operate in the Philippines from 2004, the Arroyo administration strongly encouraged mining. Palawan now has several operating mines and many more in stages of exploration, mostly in the south of the province. Gas and oil, mostly offshore to the northwest of the mainland, also provide considerable revenue for the province.

Much of the recent popular identity of Palawan as a pristine wilderness has been shaped by the enactment of the SEP (see Esguerra 1999). Recognising what it declared to be the unique environmental heritage of Palawan, the law aimed at managing the natural resources of the province in a sustainable manner. The main strategy was to divide the entire province into different zones that would regulate what activities could or could not take place within them. Core zones, for example, banned all human extraction of natural resources, while tribal ancestral zones were aimed at giving indigenous groups of Palawan increased levels of control over the land they occupied. The Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) was created to implement the SEP. Significantly, a complete ban on commercial logging was put into place at the outset as part of the law.

NGOs, Conservation and Social Justice

Since the 1980s, a significant environmental movement has mobilised in Palawan. A host of national NGOs such as the Environmental Legal Assistance Center (ELAC), Tambuyog and Haribon has worked on projects throughout the province. Larger international NGOs such as Conservation International (CI) and WWF, the Conservation Organisation (WWF-Philippines) have also initiated and been involved in the management of several large-scale conservation projects. Partly because of these activities, Palawan now has two of the eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the Philippines. The origin, nature and activities of these environmental NGOs have been explored in detail by a host of academics including: Austin (2003); Bryant (2005); Austin and Eder (2007); Dressler (2009); and Novellino and Dressler (2010).
One of the most significant features of these NGOs, according to Austin, is their link to ideals of social justice. She points out that the leaders of many environmental organisations in Palawan were involved in human rights NGOs established during the time of Marcos. In contrast to other more preservationist forms of conservation, Austin (2003: 328) argues that the community-based coastal resource management projects she studied emphasise social justice as much, if not more than resource conservation. For many of these NGOs, the goal is to ensure stronger and more equitable rights of access to natural resources for local communities. For Austin, community-based coastal resource management ‘is not just a coastal management program, nor is it a conservation/protectionist program; it is a social movement to allow fisherfolk the rights to livelihoods and food that was once plentiful in their communities’ (ibid.: 53). Similarly, Bryant (2005: 69) argues that ‘the pursuit of social justice and environmental conservation has tended to converge over time in the Philippine NGO sector … it is the rare environmental NGO that does not … recognize social and political preconditions for sustainability’. While several major international conservation NGOs such as CI and WWF have strong presences in Palawan, a related distinctive feature of the conservation movement in Palawan has been the development of what Austin (2003) terms ‘meso-level’ NGOs, staffed and headed by Filipinos.

A great deal of academic literature on Palawan has examined the activities of this conservation movement. Austin and Eder (2007: 365) assert that ‘the environmental movement on Palawan, along with stronger roles for NGOs, has resulted in both better environmental protection and improved well-being for local peoples’. They highlight the ‘hybrid’ nature of Palawan’s NGOs, arguing that many such NGOs successfully combine their linked goals of social justice and environmental advocacy. Lawrence (2002) also provides an optimistic account of a conservation initiative in Malampaya Sound, observing that it has fostered significant opportunities for local social change.

Such interpretations of the environmental movement in Palawan are contested. For Novellino (2007: 82), ‘[t]he old, strictly punitive protectionism is now being replaced by equally dangerous “community-based” forest management programs’. He declares that Western conservation in Palawan ‘has the effect of ideologically disempowering indigenous communities, while jeopardising their livelihood patterns’ (Novellino 2003: 172). He further argues that different moral beliefs among NGO workers/conservationists and their indigenous counterparts, as well as persistent state bureaucratic requirements, facilitate neither cultural nor environmental sustainability. Bryant contends that some of the NGO-led conservation initiatives in Palawan tend to reproduce processes of govern mentality in their interactions with local communities. He views such NGOs as ‘agents often (but not always) keen to empower the poor but who
frequently serve to extend political rationalities of control and surveillance to hitherto “marginal” people and biota’ (Bryant 2002: 286). Dressler (2009), in his analysis of the divisive role of the Subterranean River National Park, argues that the impacts of the initiative have exacerbated the ethnic and class differences between paddy and swidden farmers (see also Novellino and Dressler 2010).

My purpose is not to argue whether the conservation initiatives are ‘good’ or not, but these activities, combined with modes of resource extraction, provide the backdrop to perceptions of the poverty-environment relationship that form the focus of my analysis. Here I aim to emphasise merely the ways that conservation activities in the province have become institutionalised, and the heterogeneity of such activities.

Tourism

Tourism in the Philippines has been heavily promoted in recent years. The Tourism Act of 2009 (RA 9593) formalised tourism promotion in law. In Palawan, tourism has been closely connected to the perception of the province as an ecological paradise, with government promotion focused on ecotourism and the natural features of the province. Indeed, for many years the official tourism website of Palawan featured a message from the then governor, who declared that ‘[c]onsidered as the Philippines’ last ecological frontier, our pristine and unique natural resources and attractions continue to awe visiting tourists both domestic and foreign’ (Palawan Department of Tourism 2007). Like this chapter’s opening quotation from the mayor of Rizal, this message embodies contradictory images stating that: ‘Palawan is a place where diverse activities may be held and different program [sic] that leads us to the continuous success of our conservation efforts as we move forward in the travel trade and surge toward economic development’ (ibid.). Tourist blogs and websites related to Palawan attest to the region’s unique setting, connected to notions of peace, tranquility and natural beauty.

Apart from a downturn in 2001, following the events of 9/11 in the US and a kidnapping incident involving an extremist Muslim group at the Dos Palmas Resort, tourism in Palawan has been increasing steadily. Provincial statistics up to 2004 state that arrivals reached a peak of 204 834 visitors in 2004 (Palawan Department of Tourism 2006). The most commonly visited destinations were areas of natural beauty: an underground river complex, island hopping expeditions in Honda Bay, and the beaches of El Nido. I will discuss shortly how Coron and the Calamianes Islands in particular are conceived of as a frontier for tourism, that is, as an area ripe for tourism investment and development.

Conservation initiatives, related tourism developments and resource extraction are three versions of the resource frontier that apply to Palawan. All three
versions conceive of Palawan as a frontier, a place where natural resources are available for exploitation, but in different and often contradictory ways. I turn now to the Calamianes where these issues also play out, specifically with regard to marine resources.

The Calamianes Islands

Background to the Calamianes

Coron. The next big thing (Slogan on t-shirts worn by Coron municipal officials at the Baragatan Provincial Festival, 2006).

Tall rocky mountains. White sandy beaches. Exotic islands. Rich seawaters. A whole treasure trove of minerals and natural wonders. These are the things that crop to mind whenever one thinks of Coron (Palawan’s then (and former 1986–87) Vice-Governor, Dave Ponce De Leon, Municipality of Coron, 2002).

The description of Coron—the largest town in the Calamianes Islands—as ‘the next big thing’ reflects a widespread feeling among people in the region that it is in the midst of great change and development. The second quote by Vice-Governor Ponce De Leon indicates the equally widespread perception that Coron’s distinctive features are its natural resources. Like the quote from the mayor of Rizal at the beginning of the chapter, the comments by the vice-governor bring to light some of the tensions and contradictions associated with understandings of natural resources in Palawan. The phrases ‘white sandy beaches’, ‘exotic islands’, and ‘tall rocky mountains’ emphasise beauty and perhaps the possibilities of tourism. ‘Rich seawaters’, ‘a whole treasure trove of minerals’, on the other hand, indicate the potential for commercial benefit. Such incongruous perceptions of the resource frontier can be seen in the ways that different modes of economic activity are contested in the Calamianes. After a short general background to the region, I focus on the historical development of fisheries, dive tourism and conservation.

The Calamianes are a group of several hundred islands lying off the north of mainland Palawan, divided into four municipalities with their respective population sizes in 2007: Coron 40 007; Culion 17 194; Busuanga 19 066; and Linapacan 11 688 (NSO 2010). Coron, the municipality (as indicated on Map 1-2) where I was based, has a land area of 94 952 hectares equivalent to around 950 square kilometres. Somewhat confusingly, the municipality of Coron includes the island of Coron, but Coron town and most of the rural barangays are located on the eastern portion of Busuanga Island (see Map1-1).
The municipality of Busuanga administers the rest of Busuanga Island. In 2007, there were 8577 people in the five barangays of the major town, Coron; while a further 31 500 lived in the 18 rural barangays.

The indigenous people of the Calamianes are known as the Tagbanua. They are linguistically distinct from the Tagbanua of the interior of mainland Palawan (Fox 1982). They are recognised in the Philippines as an indigenous cultural minority, and in 1998 they were given control of the land and waters surrounding Coron Island, under *The Indigenous People’s Rights Act of 1997* (PAFID 2000; Bryant 2002). They were struggling to gain Ancestral Domain recognition of further parts of Coron municipality when I was living there and the issue of land rights for the Tagbanua was a heavily politicised issue; similar to indigenous issues voiced elsewhere in the Philippines. In particular, questions about indigenous authenticity are commonly raised in the Philippines (Scott 1982: 28–41; Hirtz 2003), and the Calamianes were no different when I worked there. Tension also circulated over the growing numbers of tourists travelling to Coron Island. This island boasts prominent tourist attractions such as the Kayangan and Barracuda Lakes. Some in the tourism industry resented what they saw as the Tagbanuas’ efforts to gain control of the economic benefits of tourism without maintaining or investing in such attractions. Numbers of other foreign and Filipino residents around Coron municipality looked on the Tagbanua disparagingly.

The pattern of migration to Coron and the Calamianes mirrors the pattern that occurred throughout Palawan more broadly during the twentieth century (Eder and Fernandez 1996). During the first part of the century, migration occurred mostly from Cuyo. Migration from the Visayas intensified during the 1970s and 1980s, especially fishermen ‘who first appeared in Calamianes as crewmen on fishing vessels out of Manila’ (Wright 1978: 66).

Coron municipality now has a high level of linguistic and ethnic diversity relative to the rest of the country. Tagalog is the lingua franca, but Tagbanua and Cuyonon are also widely spoken among Tagbanua and Cuyonon residents. Tagbanua people live on settlements on Coron Island as well as other rural areas of the municipality. Visayan and Cuyonon settlers also spread throughout the rural areas but many also live in town. Businesses in town are operated by a range of groups, including Cuyonon, Visayans, and other migrants from Manila or elsewhere in Luzon, Chinese-Filipinos, and various foreigners from a range of Western countries. Politically, four or five extremely influential families have maintained strong influence since Coron was registered as a municipality in 1902. These families are involved in a ‘dynastic’ form of politics, however, their influence falls short of a monopoly on power, and other individuals and families have participated in the political arena throughout the history of Coron.
Coron was physically connected to the rest of the Philippines during 2006–07 by an airport that serviced daily passenger flights in small planes and cargo planes carrying live fish (see Plate 2-1). This airport was upgraded in 2008 with capacity to handle 50-seater planes. In 2006–07 Coron was also serviced by two large passenger ferries from Manila that stopped on their way to Puerto Princesa, and several smaller mixed cargo and passenger vessels. Although the roads in urban Coron are sealed, roads that circle Busuanga Island and those connecting inland settlements were in 2006–07 for the most part unsealed. As elsewhere in the Philippines, the Roman Catholic Church has the largest following, but other denominations are represented by the Filipino Catholic Church of Christ sect, Iglesia ni Cristo, and various Protestant Churches. There are also increasing numbers of Muslims who have migrated from southern Palawan and Mindanao.

Plate 2-1: Live fish caught in the Calamianes loaded for export at Coron Airport.

Fisheries

Fisheries have a well-established history in the Calamianes, closely connected with the continuing influx of migrants (Fabinyi forthcoming). The fishing grounds of the Calamianes have been long considered as a resource frontier for migrants. While the region has experienced various booms and busts since the end of World War Two, the trend more recently has been towards the operation
of export fisheries. The scale of fisheries activities in the region has intensified especially since the 1990s with the development of the live reef fish for food trade.

In a review of Philippine fisheries in 1948, Herre noted that the fishing ground near the Calamianes, the South China Sea, was:

> a virtually untouched source which has been shown to be suitable for trawling over large areas. Vast, uncharted shoals, banks and reefs west of Palawan are reported to abound in tuna, bonito, scads, and a great variety of reef fishes. These rich fishing grounds await the development of a modern fishing fleet (Herre 1948: 278).

Japanese fishing vessels had been fishing Calamianes waters for some years, but the real boom in fisheries for the people of Coron began during the 1960s with the influx of many bag net or lift net (basnig) boats. These boats used a large bag net and fished at night with the aid of gaslights, attracting large numbers of anchovies (dilis). Many new arrivals to the Calamianes were able to join as crew members on these boats and owners rented their boats to local captains. Mostly, the boats would fish around Coron Bay with trips lasting for only three or four days at a time. During my fieldwork, residents nostalgically described this period as a time of plenty. It reached its peak in the 1970s: by 1976 there were 115 basnig boats owned and based in Coron (Baum and Maynard 1976: 23), but catches declined from the early-1980s, and in 2006–07 there were fewer than ten boats operating in the whole region.

During the 1970s, the Calamianes were also host to a wide range of commercial vessels based in Manila. At this time, Wright (1978: 48) stated that ‘Calamianes is a major fishing ground and a transit point for the largest fishing companies which operate out of Manila Bay’. In particular, the Calamianes and Palawan more broadly were the primary sites of the now notorious muro-ami fishing vessels. These boats used a technique involving hundreds of swimmers, often children, who attached nets to the corals. They then pounded the corals with rocks attached to ropes, scaring the fish into the waiting nets. The biggest muro-ami fishing family, from southern Cebu, had its base of operations on Panlaitan Island in the Calamianes and fished the waters of northwestern Palawan and the South China Sea (Butcher 2004: 192–3; Fabinyi forthcoming).

From the 1970s until the time my fieldwork, various other commercial fisheries have developed; some have had good yields for a long time but others have disappeared as stocks quickly depleted. Various trawling operations, especially the Danish seine (the hulbot-hulbot), have been operated by local residents since the original basnig boom (see Ingles 2000). Other commercial fishing boats based in Coron have included boats targeting fusiliers, or boats targeting multiple
species with hand-lines. Baby purse seines based in Manila and Mindoro operated in the region on a seasonal basis for many years. Apart from commercial fisheries, residents of the region also target fish using a variety of small-scale and subsistence techniques. A baseline survey of the capture fisheries in Coron Bay in 2004 (Cruz 2005) found that residents from the region used more than 30 gear variations, under seven major categories of which gillnets and hook-and-line were the most popular.

Since the early-1990s, one fishery has emerged as dominant in the Calamianes: the live reef fish for food trade (see Plates 2-1, 2-2, 2-3). It has steadily increased, responding to growing international demand from the rapidly industrialising regions of Asia. By 2005, live fish export value in the Philippines had increased from US$7.2 million per year between 1991 and 1998 to a yearly average of around US$11 million between 2001–03 (Pomeroy et al. 2005: 16). The live fish trade in the Philippines began in Guiuan in southern Samar during the 1980s, and, following a pattern similar to other source countries in Asia, moved to new regions as stocks became depleted. By the 2000s, the live fish trade was concentrated in Palawan, which in 2002 was estimated to produce 55 per cent of the country’s live fish (Padilla et al. 2003: 7). Within Palawan, Coron has historically been a focal point for the trade (Fabinyi and Dalabajan 2011).

Plate 2-2: Leopard coral grouper atop a float representing Coron at a provincial festival held annually in Puerto Princesa.

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3 The term ‘live fish trade’ is often used to refer to both the marine ornamental trade (see Plate 2-4) and the live reef fish for food trade. While fish for the marine ornamental trade were collected in the Calamianes, the extent of this trade was far less than the live reef fish for food trade. Hereafter, when the term live fish trade is used it refers specifically to the live reef fish for food trade.
Plate 2-3: Leopard coral grouper held in an aquarium.

Plate 2-4: NGO worker holding a fish caught for the marine ornamental trade.
The live fish trade developed in the Calamianes during the early-1990s and by the end of the decade, 60–70 per cent of communities were involved in live fish collection (Padilla et al. 2003: 24). In the Calamianes, the live fish trade is virtually a one-species fishery, focused on *Plectropomus leopardus*, also commonly known as the leopard coral grouper. These fish are kept alive during the fishing trip (which can last up to two weeks), before they are transferred to a holding facility in Coron. After a short rest period, they are flown via Manila to Hong Kong, where many are re-exported to China.

**Tourism**

Tourism is a second way in which Coron is conceived of as a marine resource frontier. Seen as beautifully ‘unspoilt’ and ripe for development, Coron is being heavily promoted by municipal, provincial and national governments as a new tourist destination. The development of new resorts, accompanied by escalating land value and the increasing numbers of foreign and Filipino tourists all testify the view of Coron as a new Philippine tourist destination.

In 1978, Wright had as one of the themes of his Ph.D. in Geography the development of a plan to promote tourism in the Calamianes. He argued that the Calamianes possessed geographic, climactic and natural assets that had positioned it perfectly to take advantage of the growing tourism market. As he put it: ‘Calamianes is pollution free. There is no overcrowding or traffic. There is no latent security hazard. Floods, landslides, tidal waves and earthquakes are not known here. The main typhoon zone is to the north. Calamianes is close to Manila, but little-known and unspoiled’ (ibid.: 180). He advocated strong investment in tourism based on these features. Modelling his idea of tourism on regional locales booming at that period such as Pattaya in Thailand, his ideas about tourism were very different to the current rhetoric of ecotourism. Among other ideas, he advocated the development of a military club, a ‘sunset’ club at the beach, ‘special’ clubs for sailors and flyers, country clubs at the golf courses, and a helicopter pad and restaurant on the top of Mt. Tundalara, the highest mountain on Busuanga Island (ibid.: 216).

Through the 1980s, growth in tourism did not increase in the Calamianes as it did in other regions of the Philippines such as Boracay and Subic Bay. Instead, tourism eventually became linked with SCUBA diving mostly; offering 14 Japanese shipwrecks, bombed by US planes in 1944, around Coron Bay and Busuanga Island. For SCUBA divers who enjoy wreck diving, it is marketed as one of the most appealing locations in all of Asia. Dive tourism in Coron began to develop in the early-1990s and within ten years, there were eight dive
companies based in Coron town. Municipal government statistics on tourist arrivals in Coron were unreliable before 2008, and to compensate for lack of data, I found that talking to tourism operators who had been operating since the 1990s was a better way of obtaining a general understanding of the level of tourism. After a peak in the late-1990s, there was a significant downturn in arrivals after 2001, when the 9/11 attacks in New York and the Dos Palmas Resort kidnapping incident seriously damaged Palawan’s tourism industry. Many dive operators were forced to leave. Since this time, and especially since 2008 with the opening of the new airport, the number of dive operators in town has increased again, and more are based in locations outside of Coron town with their own resorts.

More recently, tourism in Coron has diversified. Lodging houses, other than those associated with dive operators, have increased and tourism businesses are trying to promote an array of activities for tourists. These are mostly still outdoor-based attractions, such as ‘beach hopping’ (visiting multiple beaches), kayaking, yachting, fishing, and rock climbing. Importantly, the local municipal government in Coron elected in 2004 (subsequently re-elected in 2007 and 2010), made tourism a priority. After long negotiations, redevelopment of the Coron Airport finally began in June 2007, with high anticipation of larger numbers of international and domestic tourists. Improvements to achieve this included the concreting and expansion of both the runway and the apron. The new airport opened in November 2008, with then President Arroyo ‘express[ing] elation’ about the increasing numbers of tourists (Gov.Ph News 2008). Tourist arrivals to Coron have increased rapidly since the opening of the airport: a total of 13,980 arrivals passed through the airport in 2008 and by May 2009, 18,555 visitors had already been logged for 2009 (Palawan Times 2009).

One of the most potentially important tourism developments in Coron has been the high level of investment from members of the Boracay Group, a consortium based in the heavily developed resort island of the same name in the Visayas. During 2006–07 the group was acquiring resorts based around the Calamianes, and proposals were underway for the construction of several new ones. These investors saw the potential and opportunities in the beautiful beaches and islands of the Calamianes to create a ‘Little Boracay’, and this interest was noted by the then president in her 2007 State of the Nation Address (Arroyo 2007). Another high-profile tourism resort being developed is by the Singapore-based Banyan group, and has been showcased by the provincial and national governments as having the capacity to turn Coron into a ‘new Phuket’ (Calleja 2009).

When I interviewed local municipal officials about tourism, it was clear that many of them viewed the industry as a healthy, relatively risk-free alternative to fishing and farming. The mayor, for example, said that his aim was to promote tourism as the central economic activity during the reduced fishing season from
October to May, during the dry season. Many of his public speeches during 2006 were marked by references to Coron as a booming place, as evidenced by the building of new hotels and guesthouses. In 2008, then Palawan Governor Joel Reyes allocated for Coron more than ₱235 million\(^5\) out of the total ₱966 million fund deriving from the Malampaya gas project (Villanueva Jr 2008). This was the largest share of any municipality in Palawan, with Governor Reyes arguing that this was justified because of the high tourism potential of Coron. Other officials in other municipalities of the Calamianes were just as optimistic about tourism, talking about the potential of the stunning beaches in some of the more remote islands. They argued that it was necessary to ‘develop’ the beaches in order ‘to prepare for when the tourists come’.

Foreign investment is also channeled into the development of retirement properties. Following the trend throughout the Philippines of attracting older retirees from around the world, this form of investment has recently become more common in Coron, and property prices throughout the municipality are increasing rapidly. Small islands and coastal properties on the Busuanga mainland now routinely sell for millions of pesos. In nearby San Vicente, on the Palawan mainland, Eder (2008: 55) found that good locations were extremely expensive, and that ‘more than half of San Vicente’s prime beachfront property, both along the coast and on the various offshore islands, is under the ownership of foreigners and a handful of wealthy provincial politicians’. During 2006–07 in Coron at least half a dozen foreigners moved in and bought property. In other regions of the Philippines, such as parts of Negros, these trends are even stronger (Knudsen 2008).

**Marine Conservation and Management**

While the Calamianes have been technically subject to the same Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) laws as the rest of Palawan since their inception in 1992, large-scale conservation initiatives were only introduced relatively recently. Conservation constitutes a third important, related collection of people and interests struggling to prioritise their own access to marine resources in the Calamianes.

In 1998, a CI team conducted a ‘Rapid Marine Biodiversity Assessment’ of the Calamianes and subsequently concluded:

> The results of the Marine RAP survey firmly establish the Calamianes Islands as a primary target for marine conservation, especially in view of its extraordinary diversity of corals, molluscs, and other organisms, rapidly diminishing habitats and over-exploitation of marine resources.

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\(^5\) The currency referred to throughout this manuscript is the Philippine Peso (₱).
There is an urgent need for immediate action to prevent further degradation of the environment and to conserve a still relatively rich biodiversity (Werner and Allen 2000: 8).

Other reports have since confirmed the value of the marine environment around the Calamianes (FISH 2005). Despite the activities of CI and a few smaller NGOs, large-scale attempts at conservation and management have begun only recently. In 2005, a large-scale USAID-funded marine conservation project started its activities, and in 2004, a Japanese Government-funded ‘Sustainable Environment Management Project in Northern Palawan’ (SEMP-NP) directed its efforts to introduce various marine protected areas in the islands.

The SEMP-NP’s goal was ‘to conserve the precious environment and natural resources in Northern Palawan and provide alternative income methods through environmentally sustainable tourism for host community members’ (Green 2004: 3). In order to do this, SEMP-NP worked with the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD), the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and other bureaucratic arms of the Palawan administrative and political landscape to create a number of MPAs on the most popular dive sites around Coron. Chief among these dive sites were the sunken Japanese shipwrecks, previously under joint management of the dive operators based around Coron. Another MPA was created on a coral reef dive site closer to town. By the end of 2005, the process initiated by SEMP-NP was in operation and tourists were paying user fees for entry to dive sites.

The FISH project was a large USAID-funded project that ran from 2003–10; heralded as the first large-scale example of ecosystem-based fisheries management in the tropics (Christie et al. 2007). The project site in the Calamianes was one of four target management areas in the Philippines. The overall goal of the project was to achieve a 10 per cent growth in fish stocks by 2010, through the following activities:

- promotion of coastal resource management as a basic service of local governments;
- strengthening of the coastal law enforcement program;
- establishing a network of MPAs;
- introducing fishing effort restriction measures; and
- implementing institutional capacity building and constituency building.

While people running the FISH project were not originally involved in the set up of the MPAs introduced by SEMP-NP, they were later providing technical assistance to the communities affected by the protected area designation. They attempted to develop many other MPAs at different locations throughout the Calamianes. They also held workshops with government officials on coastal
management issues, and were advising on a range of policy and legislative
issues such as reform of the live fish trade, and the introduction of compulsory
registration for all municipal fishers.

Other NGOs working on marine conservation in the Calamianes during 2006–07
included the Environmental Legal Assistance Centre (ELAC), a Filipino NGO
promoting the creation of MPAs and legal advocacy work, and the Marine
Aquarium Council, operating to reform the marine ornamental trade. There
are a range of other government institutions that are typically involved with
any attempt at marine resource management, most notably the Department
of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the Bureau of Fisheries and
Aquatic Resources (BFAR), the Department of Agriculture, and the Palawan
Council for Sustainable Development Staff (PCSDS). With such a diversity of
local actors the conservation movement in Coron defies easy categorisation in
terms of being either ‘preservationist’ or foreign. All permanent project staff in
the Calamianes during 2006–07 were Filipino and the motives and aspirations of
those involved in conservation work were diverse.

Like Palawan, competing interests see the Calamianes as a frontier. Marine
conservation, tourism and commercial extraction are three related assemblages
of interests, which contest contradictory versions of the frontier. I now move to
a closer examination of how such issues figure in the daily lives of the residents
of my primary research site, the sitio of Esperanza. I begin by giving some
historical and demographic background before detailing the role that marine
resources have had in Esperanza.

**Esperanza**

**Historical and Economic Contexts**

While a Spanish-Filipino family claim to have held title to the land from the
early part of the twentieth century, they were absent from the area until very
recently. Migrants from Waray-speaking parts of Northern Samar began arriving
in Esperanza in the late-1960s. The Calamianes and Palawan more generally had
a reputation at this time of bountiful marine resources, and a sparse population.
During this period, there were only two Indigenous Tagbanua families living in
the area of Esperanza and the coastline was only lightly settled. Almost all of
these early settlers described their motives for settling as wanting to gain better
economic opportunities through fishing. Migration from Samar continued in
the 1970s with families from other parts of the country arriving, mostly from
islands in the Visayas. During the 1980s, the rate of migration increased, and
according to the latest government census of 2007, the sitio had 103 households
with a total population of 529 people. While it is technically a sitio within the larger political unit of a barangay, its rural nature, large population and length along the coast make it more cohesive and independent than many other sitios. The barangay of which it is part stretches for several kilometres along the coastline. This area has a long history associated with fisheries in the Calamianes with many of the basnig boats in the 1970s based there and has as patron Saint Raphael; often depicted standing on top of or holding a fish.

Esperanza’s historical appeal as a migrant destination means that it is now home to people from all over the Philippines. Notwithstanding the high diversity of people however, the distinctiveness of such groups is changing over time, as indicated by the birthplace of current residents obtained by a survey of 70 households comprising 352 people (Table 2-1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coron</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samar</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bohol</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cebu</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negros</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romblon</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fact that over half of those residents surveyed were born in Coron is an indication of the high proportion of younger residents. While the vast majority of household heads were born in other provinces, they settled in Esperanza and had children who by 2006 outnumbered the original migrants.

One significant consequence of this is that Tagalog is now the lingua franca of the community. While various dialects, mostly from the Visayan region, continue to be spoken among adults from specific regions, Tagalog is the first language for most children growing up in Esperanza. I did not obtain survey or detailed data on what languages other households speak within their homes, but from my experience, Tagalog was used almost exclusively within the households I visited and stayed. Regional dialects tended to be used when residents communicated with relatives living in their original Visayan communities. In relation to Eder’s observation that ‘when, and how ethnicity “matters” in the lowland Philippines is still an important problem deserving greater scholarly attention’ (Eder 2003: 223, see also Eder 2004). I see the way that Esperanza is classified by outsiders as a community of ‘Visayans’ as far more important than internal ethnic differentiation of Warays from Samar, Boholanos, Cebuanos and so on.
In the Philippines, Visayans are frequently seen as a nomadic, sea-going people who are naturally drawn to the ocean. In Palawan in particular, they are viewed as particularly responsible for the widespread environmental degradation that has occurred in recent decades. Around Coron, and in town especially, the widespread view is that Visayans are poor fishers who cannot afford to do anything else. A few quotes serve to illustrate these perceptions.

Be careful, they are Visayans! They are poor! (An older, urban Cuyonon woman warning me of the dangers of living in a Visayan village at the start of my fieldwork).

They are like the Chinese. They are everywhere! (A conservationist from Manila, joking while visiting Coron).

They are only above the Tagbanuas (A Coron resident discussing social hierarchies of different ethnic groups).

They have a nomadic and destructive lifestyle (A conservationist referring to the reputation of Visayans as nomadic and their association with cyanide use).

This last quote is an example of a more widespread discourse (in the Philippines and elsewhere) that links ‘nomadism’ to environmental degradation (see Lowe 2006). Similar to how this term has been used to describe another mobile maritime group, the Bajo, the implications of continual, purposeless movement are inaccurate (Lowe 2006; Stacey 2007). Instead, with many Visayan fishers, seasonal or even permanent migration is more common (Zayas 1994; Fabinyi 2010).

Many indigenous Tagbanua residents were highly critical of Visayan migration to the Calamianes, arguing that Visayan fishing practices have had a massive impact on local livelihoods (Dalabajan 2000: 170). Leaders of Tagbanua communities, and frequently the NGOs that support them, have typically framed indigenous practices of resource use in direct opposition to those of migrants. They argue that while Tagbanua people have lived in relative harmony with their environment for hundreds of years, the problems of overfishing and coral reef destruction only began when migrants arrived in the Calamianes.

In his 2003 article, Eder discussed livelihood options for coastal residents in San Vicente on mainland Palawan. He critiques the popular notion that Visayan people are an ethnic group drawn to fishing and the life of the sea because of their cultural and ethnic background. He shows that their association with the sea in Palawan is due more to distinctive historical experiences, rather than any ‘cultural calling’ (ibid.: 218). He points out that Cuyonon and Agutaynen settlers migrated to San Vicente well before the earliest Visayan settlers, and that by the time Visayan migration intensified in the 1980s the price of land...
was prohibitively expensive. Visayan settlers therefore became drawn to fishing through economic necessity. He also offers an argument as to why we should consider fishing and farming not as separate, discrete strategies, but as intimately linked practices. He demonstrates the ways in which fishing and farming practices relate to each other, and points out that rarely are coastal communities simply composed of fishers or farmers (see also Dressler and Fabinyi 2011).

Notwithstanding the interconnectedness and variety of livelihoods among and within many coastal households in Palawan, Esperanza represents somewhat of an exception with its predominantly marine livelihood orientation. The heavy reliance of residents on marine resources is due to several factors. Firstly, the land around Esperanza, and indeed all around Busuanga Island, is drier than much of the Philippines, limiting agricultural options compared to other areas of Palawan. One of Busuanga’s most important crops is cashew, which is particularly hardy and well suited to drier tropical climates. Secondly, there is no irrigation or freshwater source around Esperanza that can be used for agriculture (wells provide the water for washing and drinking for most families). Thirdly, and perhaps the most important reason driving reliance on marine resources is the situation regarding their precarious hold on land title. For several years, the residents of Esperanza have been involved in a land dispute with the original Spanish-Filipino family who claimed title of the land and who had returned to Coron with the intention of developing the land for tourism purposes. The protracted legal negotiations and insecurity of their land tenure mean that Esperanza residents have been unable to farm to any significant degree any of the nearby land.

Despite this strong reliance on marine resources, there are still significant land-based incomes to be made in the sitio. During the dry season (amihan), when fishing is less profitable, some residents work as labourers or tricycle drivers in Coron town. One better-off family was able to acquire some land on the other side of Busuanga Island (a gift from a foreign son-in-law) for them to work and provide some employment for other residents. Others maintain what is locally referred to as a ‘sideline’ or a ‘Plan B’, a secondary income from raising hogs and chickens, working as domestic help in Esperanza or in town, or running a general store (sari-sari store). As Eder (2003) points out, often these ‘sidelines’ are maintained within households that usually rely on fishing as their primary income source. Typically it is women who work these ‘sidelines’ while their husbands go out fishing.

A summary of income sources for Esperanza residents from the government census data of 2007 is given in Table 2-2.
Table 2-2: Occupations of people in Esperanza.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Occupation</th>
<th>Number of people (n = 179)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fishing</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourer</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: occupation categories give little indication of the occupational multiplicity that exists. Source: NSO 2010.

The census data also indicates that Esperanza residents obtained a total income for 2006 of ₱5 521 000, equivalent to an average of ₱54 663 and a median of ₱46 000 income. Of this total income, ₱2 531 100, or 46 per cent, was gained through fishing, with an average income of ₱31 637 and a median income of ₱30 000 for fishers. These figures are only approximate and obtained using on-the-spot questionnaires of fishers, not by detailed long-term accounting or observation. However approximate, they do point to interesting aspects of income distribution. That 63 per cent of workers nominated fishing as their primary income, yet only 46 per cent of total income was produced by fishers points to the fact that while fishing is a common occupation, it is often the least financially rewarding. The large discrepancy between average and median incomes is most probably a reflection of the inclusion of several Manila-based workers on much larger incomes in the survey sample.

The role of dive tourism and marine conservation for the residents of Esperanza has become far more prominent in recent years with the development of the Esperanza Marine Park; one of the MPAs developed by the SEMP-NP. This is analysed in detail in Chapter 5 when I discuss the impacts of the MPA and attitudes towards it; namely, there had been few employment opportunities and the money from user fees had yet to be distributed while I was in the field. Three residents worked as tourist guides on dive boats, and many of the carpenters had worked on the dive boats owned by the dive operators. Indeed, Esperanza holds a reputation as a stronghold of master boat-builders (Plate 2-5). Mr Rosario was one such boat-builder, an older man who during his time in Esperanza had taught his techniques to various apprentices, both from Esperanza and from other barangays. He had developed a reciprocal relationship with the owner of the biggest dive shop in Coron town, and his responsibility was to build and maintain the boats and engines of all the boats. Apart from the impact of the MPA and those few residents who worked in tourism-related industries, however, Esperanza’s everyday economic engagements with marine resources are still primarily based on fishing. I turn now to the various fishing activities in Esperanza.
Plate 2-5: A carpenter working on his boat.

Fishing

The development of the Esperanza fisheries (as shown on Map 2-1) was typical of the pattern in the Calamianes I outlined earlier and is further detailed in Table 2-3 with the commonest fish caught provided in Table 2-4. The first major fishery people were involved with was the basnig fishery. Being new to the area and mostly very poor migrants, these people had little access to start-up capital and simply joined on as crew members on one of the many boats already fishing the waters of Coron Bay. The barangay captain at the time was a large figure in the basnig fishery and he owned most of the boats on which local Esperanza residents worked. Residents described this period as a time of plenty; fish were abundant and easy to catch. Fishing trips normally lasted only 3–4 days and were based within Coron Bay. As in other areas of the Calamianes, this fishery has now declined. By 2006–07 there were just three basnig boats from the barangay operating.
Map 2-1: Historical development of fisheries based in Esperanza.

Source: Cartography ANU.
### Table 2-3: Historical patterns of fishing in Esperanza.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fishery</th>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Fish targeted</th>
<th>Gear</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Crew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basnig</td>
<td>1960s–early 1980s</td>
<td>Anchovies, Scads</td>
<td>Lift net</td>
<td>Coron Bay</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Largo</td>
<td>Early 1980s–late 1990s</td>
<td>Variety of large fish</td>
<td>Hook-and-line</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net fishing</td>
<td>1970s–present</td>
<td>Rabbitfish</td>
<td>Variations of gillnet</td>
<td>Coron Bay</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusiliers</td>
<td>Late 1980s–present</td>
<td>Fusiliers</td>
<td>Hook-and-line with bait</td>
<td>Dibangan</td>
<td>20–30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live grouper</td>
<td>Early 1990s–present</td>
<td>Groupers, Leopard coral grouper</td>
<td>Hook-and-line with bait and lure</td>
<td>Calamianes, Northern Palawan</td>
<td>4–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh grouper</td>
<td>Early 2000s–present</td>
<td>Groupers, Leopard coral grouper</td>
<td>Hook-and-line with lure</td>
<td>Dibangan, Sulu Sea</td>
<td>20–30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s fieldwork data, 2006.

### Table 2-4: Common fish caught in the Calamianes waters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local name</th>
<th>Scientific name</th>
<th>Common name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alumahan</td>
<td>Rastrelliger kanagurta</td>
<td>Long-jawed mackerel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisugo</td>
<td>Family Nemipteridae</td>
<td>Threadfin breams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalagang bukid</td>
<td>Caesio cuning</td>
<td>Red-bellied fusilier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danggit</td>
<td>Family Siganidae (smaller spp)</td>
<td>Rabbitfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilis</td>
<td>Family Engrauliidae</td>
<td>Anchovies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galonggong</td>
<td>Decapterus sp.</td>
<td>Scads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanuping</td>
<td>Family Lethrinidae</td>
<td>Emperors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lapu-lapu</td>
<td>Family Serranidae</td>
<td>Groupers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulmul</td>
<td>Family Scaridae</td>
<td>Parrotfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pusit</td>
<td>Order Oegopsida</td>
<td>Squid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samaral</td>
<td>Family Siganidae (larger spp)</td>
<td>Rabbitfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suno</td>
<td>Plectropomus leopardus</td>
<td>Leopard coral grouper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulid</td>
<td>Family Caesionidae</td>
<td>Fusiliers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tambakol</td>
<td>Family Scombridae</td>
<td>Tuna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangigi</td>
<td>Scomberomorus sp.</td>
<td>Spanish mackerel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s fieldwork data, 2006.
As fishermen in Esperanza became more successful, they began to build their own boats. In response to the decline of the basnig fishery, during the early 1980s most fishermen switched to another type of commercial fishery called *largo viaje*. This method used heavy lines with multiple hooks, and targeted large, ‘first-class’ fish such as snapper, tuna, and trevally which were transported to markets in Batangas and Manila. Fishers were eventually forced to move to a fishing ground known as Reed Bank, far out in the South China Sea due to decline of fish stocks in Coron Bay. These trips lasted up to two weeks. *Largo* remained the dominant fishery in Esperanza until the late-1980s, when the increased price of fuel and other expenses forced fishers to look for other species closer to home. While *largo* continued to be used by most of the commercial operators during the 1990s, after this time it became a seasonal fishery and the fusilier fishery took over as the primary method used in Esperanza.

Fishermen modified their hook-and-line techniques in the early 1990s to target fusiliers in the area around Dibangan Island, a rich fishing ground southeast of the Calamianes. For most of the 1990s, these operators fished for fusiliers during the rainy season and for the first class fish in the South China Sea during the dry. By the turn of the century however, *largo* fishing had become completely unprofitable because of the continually rising costs of long periods at sea and the depletion of stocks at Reed Bank.

Technological change in fishing gear has proceeded, with continual improvements to enable greater catch for less effort. Over time, net mesh sizes have become smaller and, in particular, fish-finder technologies introduced during the fusilier-fishing era in the early 1990s were seen as a major innovation. Many of the technological innovations to fishing gear, such as the modifications to existing gillnets, have originated from the Visayan Islands. Knowledge of them was transported to the Calamianes through migration or when a local resident fished for a time elsewhere. The fact that Visayan fishers have developed many fishing techniques has been reported elsewhere in Palawan (Eder 2008: 86) and the Philippines (Spoehr 1980).

The central seasonal distinction for fishers in Esperanza is between the northeast monsoon (*amihan*), which runs from approximately October to early May, and the southwest monsoon (*habagat*), which runs from approximately late May to September. *Amihan* is characterised by dry, consistently strong winds that make fishing in small vessels very difficult and the fusiliers commonly targeted by captains become difficult to catch during this period. Hence *amihan* is the season of hardship in Esperanza, characterised by freshwater shortages, requests for credit from poorer families, difficulties navigating the seas and less fish at the market. *Habagat* on the other hand, is characterised by the milder
southwesterly winds that bring consistent rain and more gentle seas off the eastern coast of Palawan. This is the season of relative wealth in Esperanza, when families are busy with the catching, transport and marketing of fish. Perhaps the simplest characterisation of the differences between the two seasons came from one fisherman: ‘In amihan, we drink Emperador [cheap brandy]. In habagat, we drink beer!’

While there is no specific ‘market day’ by which the fishers have to regulate their activities, lunar cycles play a strong role in determining when they are able to fish. The full moon period is inevitably bad for most fishers, and at these times, squid dominate the market. Tidal patterns are also significant in regulating the times of departure for fishing vessels.

While a key characteristic of fishing in Esperanza is its flexibility and diversity, it is possible to characterise four primary fisheries: net fishing (targeting rabbitfish, see Plate 2-6), fusilier fishing (targeting fusiliers from the Family Caesionidae, see Plate 2-7), fresh grouper (targeting leopard coral grouper) and live reef fishing (targeting and then keeping alive leopard coral grouper (Plates 2-2, 2-3)). Net fishing and live reef fishing are both ‘small-scale’ in that they are not characterised as commercial fisheries under Philippine law, which stipulates that a commercial vessel is one which weighs more than three gross tons. These types of fishing are conducted on smaller pump boats with less powerful engines. In contrast, fusilier fishing and fresh grouper fishing are both commercial activities. While the season of amihan is generally less favourable for all types of fishing, the only strictly seasonal fishery is the fusilier fishery, which only runs during habagat. Almost all of the fishers in Esperanza are engaged to varying degrees with one or more of these four major fisheries.

Plate 2-6: Rabbitfish caught by net fishers.

6 Beer being considerably more expensive than any of the local spirits.
7 Chapter 3 describes the economics and other issues related to these four fisheries in greater detail.
Women occasionally fish with their husbands on small-scale vessels, but are not involved in commercial fishing. They do, however, have a central role in the marketing of fish and control over household finances (see Eder 2006). For many
fishing families that rely primarily on net fishing, for example, it is the wife who will often bring the fish to the market in Coron town and negotiate with the buyers at the market. Similarly, in the commercial fusilier and fresh grouper fisheries, it is frequently the wife of the boat owner who will take charge of crew payments and trip financing.

A wide range of other fishing techniques and gear are used in Esperanza. Another common method used by fishers unable to afford pump boats is simple hook-and-line, using a basic one-person boat and paddle power. These fishers target groupers and other first-class fish. During early mornings and evenings, some couples will wade along the shallows with a lamp and a net, capturing shrimp. At other times when the tide is out, women and children will comb the tidal flats, gleaning for shellfish (Plate 2-8). Some fishers maintain small fish cages to keep live groupers for grow-out (Plate 2-9). During the full moon period, when fish are wary of being caught, many fishers will use squid jigs to catch squid instead. Other techniques and gear used include spears, long-lines and crab nets. Still other residents form connections with the commercial ‘baby’ purse seine boats (pangulong) that sometimes stop outside the village, exchanging products for fish and then subsequently selling the fish.
An important point to stress about these patterns of fishing therefore is their flexibility. Many fishers, for example, will work with hook-and-line on a commercial fusilier boat during habagat, but then work on a net fishing boat during amihan. Others will work for some fusilier trips only, and then make trips with live reef fishing boats for the rest of the year. Fishers will make their
decisions about what gear to use, where to fish and which species to target based on a range of fluctuating economic, personal and environmental factors. It is of little use therefore to give statistics on the number of fishers who use particular gears and methods, as the members of the different fisheries are so interchangeable. Instead, households aim for occupational mobility within the fisheries sector, constantly adapting to changing economic and weather conditions. I have aimed here to merely provide an historical perspective and an introductory sketch to the fisheries of Esperanza.

Conclusion

I have shown in the preceding sections how natural resources are vital to the economic and everyday lives of Palawan at a provincial, municipal/regional, and local level. Conservation, tourism and commercial resource extraction are the primary ways in which groups of people are attempting to use or manage these resources. In the Calamianes, dive tourism, commercial fishing for export and marine conservation are the main modes of resource use. In Esperanza, everyday life is still dominated by fishing.

All three modes of resource use are at the same time adopted as strategies by governments at multiple levels in Palawan. All three modes are closely related, complementing and contradicting each other, and each can be seen as a particular way in which visions of the ‘frontier’ are enacted. As with my treatment of the poverty-environment relationship in this book, the focus in this chapter has been to adopt a perspective informed by post-structural political ecology to demonstrate not only the extent to which these three modes of resource use occur, but also how they are understood, represented and contested by various actors. Governments see tourism as a pathway to economic growth and development, and yet tourism relies on and is closely linked to the presence of conservation. Commercial resource extraction, particularly fishing, is still seen as essential and worthy of investment. Different administrative levels of the state, tourism operators, conservationists, businessmen and local residents all have different relationships with conservation, tourism and resource use. How the particular consequences and effects of these relationships play out in different situations is what I explore in the following chapters.