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**BREAKING NEWS**

**Stakeholders, DTI push for Abatan river tourism dev't**

STAKEHOLDERS, including town executives and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) with auspices of the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), are pushing for, this time for real, the Abatan river basin development for what they described as "Community-based sustainable tourism project."

This developed following the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on the said project by the stakeholders concerned last week at MetroCenter Hotel in this city.

The said project was moved forward as this will not be a competition with the Loboc River cruising in Loboc town, now becoming an important component in the Chocolate Hills tour circuit and popular by both foreign and local tourists, said DTI regional director Aster Caberte.

But stakeholders in Loboc river cruising see otherwise. Other entrepreneurs said the more the merrier as this will spell competition.

The MOA "formalizes the partnership among the parties, the GTZ, Abatan River Development Management Council (ARDMC) and the Participatory Research Organization of Communities and Education towards Struggle for Self-Reliance (PROCESS)-Bohol Inc."

Representing the GTZ was Dr. Volker Steigerwald, program manager of the Private Sector Promotion program; Catigbian Mayor Roberto Salinas for ARDMC and Ms. Emmie Roslinda for PROCESS.

The eco-tourism development of the river through the inter-LGU collaboration could benefit the municipalities of Cortes, Antequera, Ballilhan, Maribojoc and Catigbian, said Salinas in an interview.

The Visayas-wide forum was held here to showcase the Abatan project, bannering the theme: Local and Regional Economic Development (LRED): Accelerating Development through Cluster Approach."

The LRED approach "is a bottom-up, participatory planning process that builds on the comparative and competitive advantages of an LGU."

Also, an initiative of the Fishnet Project of South Maqueda Bay cluster that involves six towns in Samar province was also featured during the forum, it was learned.

Earlier, the provincial government is pushing for the protection, preservation and development of Abatan watershed area through the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the province, the ABS-CBN Foundation Incorporated (AFI) and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

In his letter providing legal opinion to Vice-Gov. Julius Herrera and the Sangguniang Panlalawigan, Provincial Legal Officer Atty. Handel Lagunay pointed out that the province envisioned to partner with AFI and DENR "to implement a program to include the rehabilitation-reforestation, protection and management of the Abatan and Loboc watersheds to address the environmental, social and economic problems in the province."

It is also intended "to ensure the diversity, stability functionality and productivity of its natural capital to achieve sustained power generation, agricultural productivity, nature tourism and industrial development" for the benefit of the people, said Lagunay.

Lagunay said that local government units covered by the said watershed areas "will play important roles" in the program implementation.

The said program will be carried out through the Bohol Integrated Water Resources Management Board (BIWRMB), Lagunay said.

The MOA outlines the functions and duties of each signatory for the project implementation.



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Under the MOA, AFI, as media-based environmental organization, has signified its willingness to support and contribute to the project, and shall be responsible for task of leading in the formulation of Bohol watershed Management framework plan in coordination with other water councils.

The said plan includes development of a sustainable nature tourism program, nature trails, and other related activities that are important to the watershed management framework plan.

Reforestation, community organizing, livelihood development and marketing also spell species re-introduction and biodiversity program; environmental education program also form part of the said framework plan.

AFI also is tasked to put up a project management office and hire competent and professional and technical personnel for the smooth project implementation at the same time responsible for their control and supervision, the MOA provides.

For its part, the province is responsible for the relocation of all squatters within the watershed areas and providing opportunities for their re-settlement.

The province through the BIWRMB is also tasked to monitor and conduct periodic visits to the watershed areas and to provide access to AFI's personnel and employees to the said areas.

The province also is mandated under the MOA to allow the regulated use of and access to its facilities including infrastructure during the duration of the program and primarily responsible for mobilizing and securing financial and logistical resources for the program.

It is also to assist the DENR to conduct physical surveys in the three watershed areas, including the Wahig-Inabanga watershed.

The DENR is also tasked to ensure the watershed areas shall be free from alienation by any entity and cause the prosecution of persons violating any act in said areas.

The agency is also to assist in the socio-economic survey and undertake the ground border delineation of watersheds and prepare technical descriptions of the areas concerned.

Funds generated from fund-raising activities for the program implementation shall be placed in environmental trust fund (ETF) which shall be directly under the stewardship of BIWRMB, the MOA provides. (RVO)

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