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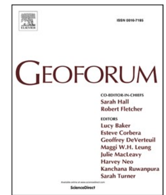

A virtual paradise? Platform algorithms, coastal change, and the production of nature in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Across parts of Southeast Asia, coastal governance strategies have drawn on 'ecotourism' initiatives for 'sustainable development' by constructing captivating imaginaries of coastal places and people as sites of touristic production and consumption. Increasingly, representations of exotic and pristine coastal natures are reproduced virtually in support of this campaign through Web 2.0 platforms and their underlying algorithms. As ecotourism expands in the region, growing networks of social media users coproduce and consume abstract virtual natures with profound consequences for coastal peoples and ecosystems. In particular, Instagram, a popular photo sharing social media platform, has become central to reifying and distorting complex coastal realities. Drawing on a case from *El Nido*, Palawan Island, the Philippines, our paper examines how the virtual representation of coastal places and people on Instagram accelerate coastal transformations. Our results reveal how the political economy of coastal governance and the platform capitalism of social media converge to accelerate ecotourism in ways that realign virtual ideals and material realities. As virtual imaginaries shape coastal realities, new forms of exclusion and misrepresentation of people and places drive the displacement of local fishers, violence against activists, and coastal degradation. Bringing together research exploring (mass) ecotourism, platform capitalism and virtualism, we argue that greater scholarly attention should be placed on how new digital actors and platform algorithms influence how coastal peoples and places are imagined, consumed and subject to violence over time.

1. Introduction

"*Epic sunsets. Secret lagoons. Virgin Islands. Limestone cliffs. Blade-sharp cliffs. And more cliffs. Did we say cliffs? Sun on your skin. Salt in your mouth. Raw white beaches, everywhere!* […]. *Mmm, what warm, silky water. Welcome to El Nido, Palawan! Just click, book, experience, repeat*" (https://elnido.ph/ 2019).

The quote above encapsulates how coastal tourism in Southeast Asia has developed through the confluence of livelihood change, governance interventions, and abstract representations of coastal spaces that capture the imagination—and dollars—of tourists (Fabinyi 2018). Coastal tourism growth and the forces driving its expansion have facilitated 'coastal transitions' that are frequently framed as logical, growth-oriented progressions in a context of declining marine resources, increasing market expansion, and the need for coastal dwellers to maintain wage-based livelihoods (Jeyacheya & Hampton 2020; Eder 2008). Despite the various income benefits flowing from coastal tourism to rural peoples, however, research demonstrates that its rise regionally has often driven wealth accumulation into fewer hands while facilitating coastal grabs, displacing coastal dwellers and marginalizing their livelihoods (see 2018; Knudsen 2016; Kinseng et al. 2018; Youdelis 2013).

The rise of ecotourism development across the region is one of the factors central to accelerating processes of enclosure, privatisation, and commodification of coastal places (Cabral and Aliño 2011;Knudsen 2009). Among other impacts, this has spurred representation and consumption of coastal tourism settings across the region as 'virtual realms' accessible almost anywhere in the world (Smith 2018). A growing number of public and private sector actors, as well as tourists themselves, now invest in an array of digital media platforms as part of a new 'attention economy' that produces exoticised 'virtual realities' of people

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and places that often distort or obscure local realities (West & Carrier 2004; Kothari & Arnall 2017). The intensity with which tourists and tourism providers interact on social media platforms to promote, book, and evaluate their experiences has increased the circulation of simplified representations and exotic imaginaries with profound implications (see also Hanan & Putit 2013; Gössling 2017).

In this paper, we explore how the social media platform, Instagram, has risen in prominence with major virtual and material impacts since its creation in 2010 (Smith 2018, 173). The platform has become an "image machine that captures and calibrates attention" (Carah & Shaul 2016; p. 1), wherein dominant actors fuse and coproduce brands, ideals, and images for virtual consumption. As expressions of 'platform capitalism' (Kenney & Zysman 2016) aiming to produce and capture social and economic value (Srnicek 2017), platforms like Instagram powerfully mediate and set the terms of participation, interaction, products, and services development for the activities they depict. The rise of Instagram has spectacularised images of certain places and people to produce a hyper-virtual nature, accelerating visitor numbers, exotic imaginaries, and infrastructure with often violent social and ecological outcomes (Büscher 2020). Despite the recent growth of attention to how social media platforms represent people and places in particular ways as the basis for digital value creation, little is known about how these platforms and representations shape ecotourism development and, in the process, influence broader processes of coastal change.

Drawing on the case of *El Nido*, northern Palawan Island, the Philippines, we examine how and why state, non-state, and tourism actors have used Instagram in ways that fuel ecotourism development while dramatically transforming the social and material realities of coastal spaces in *El Nido*, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Connecting histories of coastal change and platform capitalism, our analysis of viral images on Instagram shows how *El Nido*'s virtual reality is powerfully influenced by platform owners and algorithm developers. Drawing on interviews with local government officials and local actors, we argue that these viral images and imaginaries produce harmful representations that drive and conceal the violent impacts of eco-framed mass tourism. In doing so, our analysis contributes to growing discussions of how digital media constructs and reinforces a virtual nature (see Büscher, 2016; Büscher et al., 2017) that accelerates how ecotourism promotion shapes the experiences of platform users in part by shielding them from accessing information on the realities of the coastal places they visit (Carrier & Macleod 2005). By integrating theoretical insights from platform capitalism and virtual natures, we offer critical insights into how ecotourism, virtualism, and markets converge to powerfully transform coastal realities and ecologies.

We begin by outlining the background literature and methodology grounding our analysis. We then describe the rise of eco-framed mass tourism in *El Nido*, initially through community-based initiatives and then accelerated by new social media technologies, improved infrastructure, and enhanced modes of travel. We show how and why Instagram, in particular, has worked to accelerate a growth of tourism that intersected with and intensified violence against coastal dwellers and their environment. Based on this analysis, we argue that greater scholarly attention should be placed on how new digital actors and platform algorithms influence how coastal peoples and places are imagined and consumed, and drive violence impacts and outcomes over time.

2. Connecting ecotourism, platform capitalism, and coastal change

Coastal tourism development in Southeast Asia is inextricably connected to patterns of coastal resource access, use and management (Cruz-Trinidad et al. 2009; Fabinyi 2010; 2018). In recent decades, ecotourism has been heralded as a particularly important 'win-win' strategy for uniting biodiversity conservation and community development by international financial institutions (IFIs) as well as grassroots organizations (Fletcher and Neves 2012). In this way, coastal ecotourism promotion has proliferated as a response to depleting marine resources and declining livelihood opportunities for fishers (Fabinyi 2010). It is meant to provide an attractive income-earning opportunity for fishers to offset or substitute their fishing and thereby decrease pressure on marine resources (Cruz-Trinidad et al. 2009). Coastal ecotourism aims to resolve the crisis of overproduction and overconsumption of fish stocks resulting from expanding demand and markets by shifting the extractive value of oceans to its contemplative and aesthetic value for tourists (Fabinyi 2018, 87). State agencies, NGOs, and the private actors throughout Southeast Asia have thus championed ecotourism as a 'development alternative' to provide coastal communities with projects, infrastructure and capital to generate income (e.g., island-hopping tours) that temporarily compete and ultimately replace long-standing livelihoods, including small-scale fisheries (Eder 2008).

Despite such widespread promotion, 'sustainable' ecotourism typically fails to materialise. So-called ecotourism ideals and practices often become incorporated into and co-opted by pro-growth market logic and historically uneven political economies, quickly transforming into mass tourism and marginalizing local people and environments in the process (Cabral and Aliño 2011; Duffy 2015; Knudsen 2012; Ojeda 2011; West & Carrier 2004). This metastasising from niche to mass tourism drives commodification and exclusion, and thereby serves as a "powerful mechanism of accumulation by dispossession" (Ojeda 2011, 1).

Yet these dynamics are commonly concealed from the tourists whose travel contributes to their exacerbation. Carrier and Macleod (2005) have conceptualised this process in terms of capitalist 'ecotourist bubbles', whereby the complex realities of ecotourism destinations, and the impact of tourism development upon them, are obscured from tourists' view by providers who construct alternative realities for their clients. Here, ecotourism providers use various infrastructure, social media, and marketing tools to draw their clients to an exotic paradise ready for consumption that somehow amounts to the pleasurable, ethical, and sustainable experience the former believes the latter seek (by, for instance, framing ecotourism as contributing to sustainable development). In this way, ecotourism seemingly promotes the experiential consumption of nature to both conserve and develop coastal regions (see West 2006).

Ecotourism development thus proceeds through what can be understood as forms of 'virtualism': "the tendency to see the world in terms of idealised categories, a virtual reality, and then act in ways that make the real conform to the virtual" (Carrier and Miller, 1988, 5; see also Carrier & Macleod 2005). Virtualism arises when commodification and alienation processes transform a social existence of '*having* into *appearing*' within a digital realm (Debord 1967, Thesis 18). Upon intensifying, this leads to sections of society operating under a 'spectacle'—an illusion of the world composed of alluring images separated from the conditions of their production and "consumed in ignorance of the same" (Igoe 2010, 375). The spectacle works to distract and further insulate tourists from seeing and engaging with the complex realities of destinations as they travel through the 'ecotourism bubble' (Carrier & Macleod 2005, 316).

2.1. Platform Capitalism, Instagram, and Ecotourism

Through virtualism, consequently, people begin experiencing, perceiving, and consuming the world via the 'spectacle' of a digital 'hyper-reality' of multiple coalescing images (Baudrillard 1983). In time, virtual and 'actual' reality become one mediated whole that cannot be separated. As Carrier and Miller (1988, 2) note, people's sense of virtual reality thus becomes "prescriptive of what the world ought to be" as it converges with the material, leading them to "make the world conform to their virtual vision". All that is excluded from the virtual imaginary commonly becomes marginalized to maximize consumption opportunities (West & Carrier 2004). Pervasive, idealized virtual natures thus shape the social and material realities of ecotourism

destinations, and when commodified and consumed, can drive major socio-ecological changes. Importantly, however, emerging imaginaries are not necessarily cohesive or monolithic, but rather may be shaped by contradictory narratives of development and conservation.

Social media platforms such as Instagram play a key but understudied role in intensifying the rise, representation and impacts of ecotourism and its attendant 'bubble' though digital imaginaries, market exchanges and infrastructure. Online platforms that host social media brands have been defined as "multi-sided digital frameworks that shape the terms on which participants interact with one another" (Kenney & Zysman 2016, 61). Platforms connect consumers, markets, and producers and provide the infrastructure for such interactions to take place through the mobilization of code and data analytics—the basis of what is now known as 'platform capitalism' (Langley & Leyshon 2017; Srnicek 2017). Platform capitalism thus reflects the increasingly digital nature of capitalism whereby "ideas, knowledge, labour, and use rights for otherwise idle assets move between geographically distant but connected and interactive online communities" (Langley & Leyshon 2017, 2). Although these platforms often present themselves as neutral, empty spaces for interaction, their owners govern the potential for interactions (Srnicek 2017, 4) by operating to "engineer online connections" (Van Dijck 2013, 141) that generate specific results while presenting interactions as natural, authentic, and set by individual users (Van Dijck 2013, 144). By controlling what people see, how they see it, and how they react to what they see, platforms sell users' images, ideas, products, and services that generate dominant worldviews that conceal or obliterate more diverse ones (Carah & Shaul 2016; Van Dijck 2013).

Markets, ideals, and images infiltrate anywhere a smart-phone or laptop can be used. Mobile social media platforms defy geography and recreate alternate framings of nature (Van Nuenen & Scarles 2021; Zulli 2018). Such virtual natures reflect digital depictions of human and nonhuman entities that are used (or omitted) to represent and encourage investment in both the use and conservation of 'nature' to which these images ostensibly refer (see Büscher, 2016, 2020; Büscher et al., 2017). Social media such as Instagram now drive platform capitalism and conjure virtual natures in support of ecotourism's effort to unite conservation and development. Ultimately, however, as social media platforms become increasingly popular for travel blogging, sharing, and marketing, they drive market investment and capital accumulation in ways that lead to 'runaway' mass (eco)tourism (Zulli 2018; Büscher 2020).

2.2. *Instagramming Coastal Realities*

Acquired by Facebook for $1 billion in 2012 and now contributing over $20 billion to its annual revenue, Instagram's powerful features and functionality structure how people capture, share, and engage with other users' images (Carah & Shaul 2016). Its users affect one another by making judgements about how to capture, filter, and share 'lived experiences' virtually by modifying the content they are shown, ascribing further meaning and influence through "scrolling, liking, and commenting" (Carah & Shaul 2016, 71). Users' decisions about what to share and how to interact with posts are guided by features such as hashtags, location tags, language, captions, filters, and comments (Smith 2018). Algorithms mediate these interactions by drawing in as many active users as possible, (almost) irrespective of their intentions, motives, or the associated context (Zulli 2018). As a digital lure baited with pristine beaches, the platform creates value for advertisers and companies embedded in a virtual reality that builds a profitable marketplace to which users (tourists), local places, and, eventually, some locals align with (Smith 2018; Zulli 2018).

Scholars have thus described Instagram as relying on a capitalist "attention economy" (Zulli 2018). In this economy of appearance and attention, the image of a certain product becomes synonymous with and as valuable as the product itself, but only insofar as *un*marketable aspects can be filtered out. The aesthetic and digital labour that curates visual online brands on Instagram is significant (Abidin 2016; Mavroudis 2018; McFarlane & Samsioe 2020). When the incentives tied to platforms such as Instagram are connected to hyper-real representations of tourism, peoples, and places, tourist expectations and desires often demand that these hyper-realities are replicated and enacted in place. The discursive and material bridging and matching of virtual and coastal realities requires work in order to recreate imaginaries of coastal paradises seemingly 'empty of people', dramatically transforming the everyday lives of people, their livelihoods, and coastal environments.

3. Methodology

Once a small fishing village populated by the Indigenous Tagbanua and Visayan fishers, the town of El *Nido* in northern Palawan was recently promoted as the "ecotourism capital of the Philippines" (Rasch 2013, 242). It thereby grew from attracting just 40,000 tourists in 2010 to 258,641 in 2018, just before the COVID 19 pandemic (Department of Tourism 2019 (see Figs. 1 and 2). A year later the island was designated as one of the top 50 "most Instagrammable places in the world" (Big Seven Travel 2020). Palawan has long been associated with fascination, intrigue, and the promise of new opportunities for profit, conservation, and now middle-class tourism (Eder & Fernandez 1996; Webb 2016).

To examine the rise and material impact of such tourism growth, we use a mixed-method approach consisting of discourse analysis of key tourism policy documents, a textual and image analysis of Instagram posts, and key informant interviews with ecotourism actors and government officials in northern Palawan. Specifically, we use critical discourse analysis to examine changing representations and impacts upon coastal peoples and places in northern Palawan. The approach critically engages how and why power asymmetries are discursively enacted, resisted, and reproduced in society (Fairclough 2013; Kress 1990). According to Van Dijk (2004) critical discourse analysis refers to an analysis of the origins, enactments, and meanings of 'talk and text' in changing social and political contexts. It suggests that social discourse informs dominant configurations of truth and power in society, which can drive and reinforce social and material inequalities over time. We add to this an analysis of media images and text from Instagram, policy documents and interviews (see below) to identify and associate forms of visual and textual representations. In this paper, representations therefore denote the process through which images (and language) shape meaning and perceptions of places and people (Hall 1997). Taken together, then, we consider the discourses that emerge from policy, social actors, social media platforms, and text as "forms of social practice" that respond to and actively shape the social and material world of coastal people and places (Jørgensen & Philipps 2002, 2).

In 2020, we selected ten key ecotourism and coastal management policy documents based on their relevance to the case (see supplementary material). Six news media articles were also sampled from popular newspapers in the Philippines (i.e., The Philippine Daily Inquirer, The Philippine Star, Rappler, The Manilla Times, Palawan News, and Palawan Times) that covered *El Nido*'s promotion in the early 2010s, growth in the mid-2010s and the tourism boom and its negative impacts in the late 2010s. These were examined and coded to indicate how coastal places and people in Palawan and El *Nido* were represented between the 1970s and 2010s.

To examine how the tourism boom of the 2010 s interacted with these policy and social media representations, we selected a sample of Instagram posts by three different groups. The activities of local governance actors and tourism service providers, respectively, were examined through the Instagram accounts of the Municipal Tourism Office of *El Nido* (*@elnidotourism*) and El *Nido* Resorts (*@elnidoresorts*).[1]

[1] Owned by Ten Knots Development Corporation (TKDC) El *Nido* Resorts was the first resort company in El *Nido* and has a long history of influencing conservation and ecotourism in the municipality.

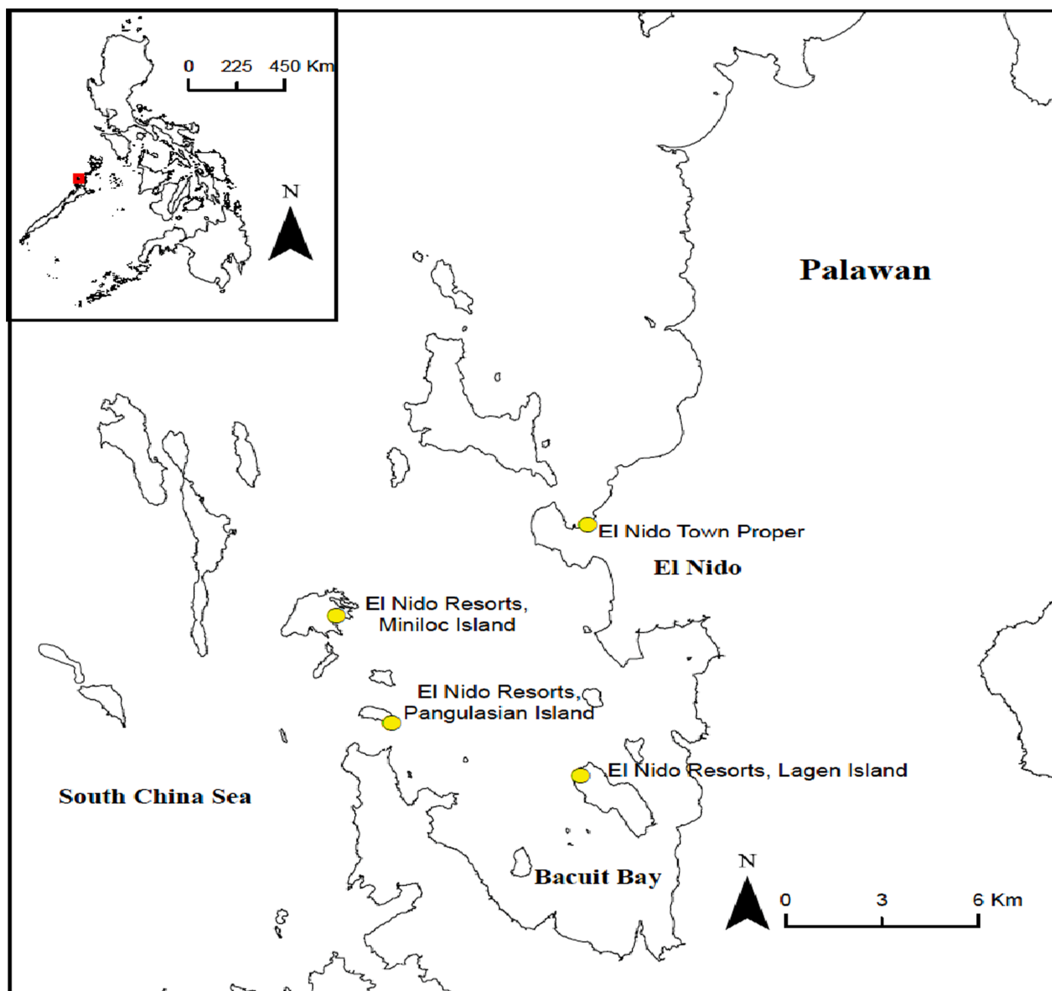

Fig. 1. Map of El *Nido*, Palawan with locations of El *Nido* Resorts (Copyright Callum Edwards 2021).

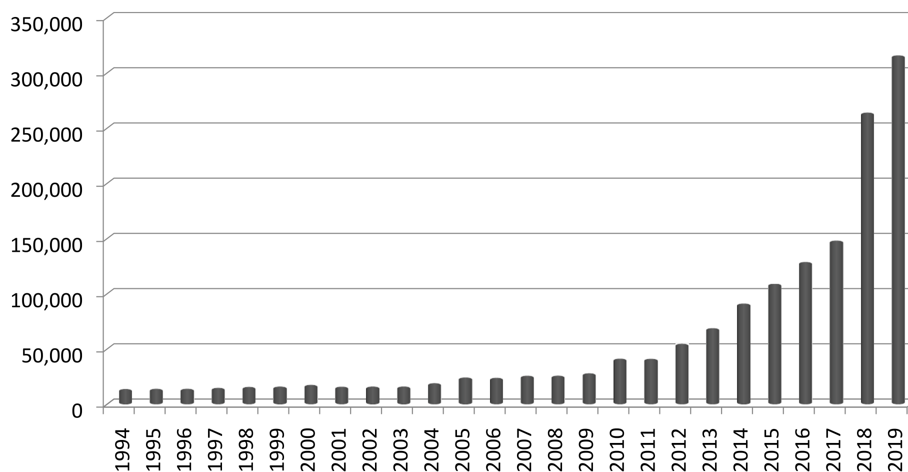

Fig. 2. Annual tourist arrivals to El *Nido* (1994–2019) (Municipal Tourism Office of El *Nido* 2020).

The third group comprised 'travel influencers' whose images of El *Nido* had gained the most attention online. To find a sample of these posts and the influencers behind them, we searched the #elnidopalawan hashtag and gathered the top nine posts. An algorithm "ranks" the influence of posts within a hashtag to return the nine most influential posts whenever a user searches that hashtag. The algorithm considers the engagement that posts receive in terms of likes and comments, the popularity of the hashtag, and how quickly posts receive engagement. Our sample reflected a selection of the most influential Instagram images of *El Nido*, with influence being defined by follower counts and level of engagement with images. The results therefore reflect the time in which we analysed the results. Screenshots were taken to preserve this data source.

Instagram images were examined in relation to how the representation of coastal people and places evolved from the application's launch

in 2010 until today through photographic techniques, such as the positioning of subjects and objects, inclusions and exclusions of certain actors, features of the environment, and the use of filtering and visual effects. Captions and hashtags were examined in relation to narrative structure and latent meaning. We also examined the function of hashtags in making images searchable to a wider audience while enforcing particular framings of coastal peoples and places. 'Likes' were examined as an indicator of post popularity. As the Instagram accounts selected are public and aim at generating maximum attention from potential tourists, they are not anonymised in this paper.

We also interviewed 11 actors (seven online, four in person in 2018) from state, private, and civil society sectors to gain insights into the production of certain representations and the impacts of tourism on El *Nido* not captured in policy, media, and Instagram content. Interviews were held in English, lasted approximately-one hour, and questions centered on the history and recent rise ecotourism, the role of social media images and representations, and the impact of tourism infrastructure of local people and environment in *El Nido*. Key informants included *El Nido* and Palawan tourism actors, protected area officials, representatives of civil society and private sector not-for-profit organisations, resort group representatives, and coastal resource managers.

Interview transcripts were coded in relation to the drivers and impacts of ecotourism's rise in Palawan and El *Nido* and representations of people and places. Key themes within these categories were identified and coded for. Participants have been anonymised for confidentiality.

4. Palawan imaginaries, coastal places, and people (1970s-2000s)

Located in the southwestern Philippines, Palawan Island has long been subjected to competing interests and struggles over the access to and control over natural resources and people tied to its discursive construction as a 'resource frontier'—an imagined wilderness that "disengage[s] nature from its previous ecologies" to offer resources as "raw material" for new projects, policies, and profits (Tsing, 2003, 5102). Informed by Spanish (1565–1898) and American (1898–1946) colonial laws and imaginaries, Palawan's framing as a notional resource frontier grew in the mid-twentieth century. Shifts in imaginaries, investments and migration patterns brought the island, its indigenous peoples, and its resources into the national economy, establishing a base from which tourism would develop and connect virtually to global markets (Eder & Fernandez 1996).

From Cuyo island off Palawan's east coast, Cuyonon farmers and fishers first migrated and comingled with the indigenous Tagbanua as early as the 16th century. Both engaged in diverse livelihoods involving subsistence and/or commercial production of timber and non-timber forest products, root crops and dry rice from swiddens, and wet rice for paddy systems (Eder & Fernandez 1996). In the 1950 s, Visayan fishers arrived and specialised in small-scale fisheries (Fabinyi et al. 2019), but it was not until the 1960 s and 1970 s that migration surged, increasing the population from 56,360 persons in 1948 to 102,540 in 1960 and 400,323 in 1990 (Eder & Fernandez 1996, 8). As other islands faced increasing population pressures, resource scarcity, and political unrest under martial law during the Marcos regime (1965–1986) (Eder 2008, 37), Palawan's marine resource abundance made it an increasingly attractive settlement destination (Ocampo 1996, 36).

The 1970 s and 1980 s emerged as eras of significant marine plunder (Fabinyi 2011, 53). The time was also marked by heavy commercial logging of the island's lowland and midland forests (Clad & Vitug 1988; Ocampo 1996). From 1965 to 1986, Palawan was claimed by "logging, mining, pasture, and fishing claims [and] corporate farming rights including rattan, almaciga and mangrove concessions" (Ocampo 1996, 37). Marked by a distinct "politics of plunder" (Clad & Vitug 1988, 48) politically connected businessmen claimed extensive Timber License Agreements (TLAs) across the island. Connected to Marcos, these political bosses used the timber trade to consolidate political networks to claim prime coastal areas in northern Palawan, where their own luxury resorts would emerge decades later, intersecting with and partly steering the underlying political economy and violence of intensifying ecotourism and its associated infrastructure needs (Clad 1988; Broad & Cavanagh 1993; Global Witness 2019).

4.1. The 'last ecological frontier'

The fall of Marcos in 1986 revitalized liberal democracy, free press, and the opportunity to organize openly (Bryant 2005, 76). Environmental campaigns facilitated the development of integrated conservation and development on Palawan under international conservation agencies, donor-assisted projects, and politicians outwardly supporting 'clean and green' development (Goldoftas 2006, 132; Dressler 2009, 62). The discourse of such campaigns reimagined Palawan as a 'last ecological frontier' in need of conservation due to 'high value' biodiversity in decline (Clad & Vitug 1988, 48).[2] Although this framing challenged resource extraction, it constructed a new frontier imaginary of pristine coasts and forest landscapes (Bryant 2005)—a regional imaginary that partitioned coastlines as marine protected areas (MPAs), ecotourism enclaves, and reorganized fisher livelihoods to conserve biodiversity (Eder 2008).

Entangled with the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and other donor programs and discourses, the Philippine state aligned with donor 'sustainable development' ideals in 1987 (Pomeroy and Carlos 1997). On Palawan, new political initiatives aimed to decentralise related laws and policies, including, but not limited to, the Strategic Environmental Plan for Palawan (SEP) (Republic Act 7611) in 1991. The Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) served as the SEP's governing, policymaking, and enforcement body for coastal management and development. It was at this time that donors further supported small-scale tourism as a 'sustainable development' strategy (Sandalo 1996).

In the early 2000 s, Palawan became a key site for Community Based Coastal Resource Management (CBCRM) initiatives funded by the USAID under its Coastal Resources Management Program (CRMP 1996–2002). CRMP interventions included technical support and training to establish MPAs and establish community-based coastal tourism initiatives to generate local income that would help to offset fishing efforts (Eder 2008, 93-151). Although such initiatives proved valuable, beachfront property became increasingly sought after for tourism resort development. As businesspeople and wealthy families began to stake claims over these areas, the ownership of the coastal commons was challenged, driving the partitioning and alienation of lands and resources from coastal communities (Eder 2008; Knudsen 2012). The seeds of the ecotourism spectacle were sown.

Claims by regional and local elites over coastal areas soon proved lucrative. In the 2000 s, a broadly defined ecotourism program was embraced as a key national strategy for sustainable development. Palawan's emerging image as a green frontier was central to this. Public and private sector actors believed they could capitalize on the aesthetic value of Palawan's coastlines and forests to boost coastal development 'sustainably'. Ecotourism became central to state and non-state discourses of reducing poverty and conserving biodiversity on the island. Amidst all of this, uneven coastal change dynamics—from mangrove

[2] One intervention was the World Bank–World Wildlife Fund's debt-for-nature swap program from 1988 until 1993, following a global acceleration in the establishment of marine and terrestrial protected areas in the 1970s and 1980s (West et al. 2006). This involved the creation of protected areas to reduce reliance on extractive industries such as logging in exchange for the purchase of US$2 billion of national debt to repay loans (Goldoftas 2006). International attention was further drawn to Palawan's ecosystems by UNESCO in 1990, when it declared the province an international "Man and Biosphere Reserve" (Sandalo 1996, 128).

clearing for commercial fishponds to the dispossession of Indigenous coastal lands by politicians—continued apace (Dressler 2009, 2011).

Virtual campaigns to globally brand main protected areas, such as the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park (PPSRNP), soon initiated an ecotourism boom in central and, ultimately, northern Palawan (Dressler 2011). Expanded and declared a UNSECO World Heritage Site in 1999, its status went global through an intensive online branding effort led by city politicians (Dressler 2009, 156-157). As domestic arrivals grew, the government's media push to have Filipinos text-vote their ultimately successful nomination of the park's inclusion in the Seven Wonders of the World in 2011 catalyzed an exponential increase in international and domestic park visitors. From just 26,920 visitors in 2005 to 200,000 park visitors in 2012 (Webb 2016, 84), the island had become a global 'ecotourist hotspot'. Airports expanded, rural roads were concretized and connected, and plush new hotels soon accelerated domestic and international tourism arrivals in both the central and northern parts of the island (Dressler 2011). As PPSRNP's tourism capacity was exceeded, excess tourists spilled over into El *Nido*.

5. *El Nido*: From fishing village to viral ecotourism destination

In the 1970s, *El Nido*'s magnificent limestone karst cliffs, white sand beaches, and clear waters with rich marine life were the domain of Tagbanua and Cuyonon farmers and later Visayan fishers who had settled the coast (Eder 2008). Despite changing demographics, an influx of migrants,[3] and Tagbanua displacement to upland areas, El *Nido*'s pace of change was relatively slow until the late 1970 s (Arquiza & Yabes 2017; Hodgson & Dixon 2000). Few roads connected the town to commercial centers, and most trade involved agricultural and fishery commodities for household consumption and regional sale (Fabinyi 2012; JICA, 1997). Kerosene lamps burned in thatch huts, concrete and electricity were limited, and modern communications did not exist (Goldoftas 2006, 143). El *Nido*'s limited accessibility and exploitation prior to the mid-1980 s meant its landscape was primed for a burgeoning ecotourism sector (Aguilla et al. 2015, 6).

5.1. *The 'eco-branding' of El Nido*

El Nido's transformation into an eco-branded tourism hotspot began in the 1980 s, largely driven by Ten Knots Development Corporation (TKDC), a resort company formed as a joint venture between a Japanese sugar company and the wealthy, local Soriano manufacturing family (Goldoftas 2006). In 1981, the first major resort opened on Miniloc Island. A 30-minute boat ride from the town, the resort sought to attract wealthy international scuba divers by selling the experience of diving in pristine coral reefs and clear waters (Arquiza & Yabes 2017). In 1984, TKDC successfully lobbied the government to have Bacuit Bay declared a 34,000-ha marine turtle sanctuary (Administrative Order 518) (WWF-Philippines 2005). The resort's management used the marine sanctuary as a punitive enclosure "patrolling the area and in some cases apprehending illegal destructive fishermen and trawlers operating inside the bay" (Hodgson & Dixon 2000, 64)—a first instance of ecotourism facilitating the claiming of ocean spaces and resources for conservation and capital. Such private sector-financed conservation, leveraging of pristine aesthetics, and push for marine conservation transformed the municipality into a site of 'untapped' natural value ripe for conservation and development (Goldoftas 2006).

By the 1990s, the changing political landscape after the fall of Marcos (in 1986) facilitated a national push for ecotourism as a core sustainable development strategy (Goldoftas 2006, 132). The 1991 Philippine Tourism Master Plan listed El *Nido* ecotourism as a 'national good' that could enhance economic and ecological value for the nation. This was partially realized as *El Nido* was enlisted in the debt-for-nature swap program of the WWF, Haribon Foundation (a national environmental NGO), Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), and World Bank. The swap led to the expansion of the *El Nido* turtle sanctuary into a larger, 95,000 ha marine reserve managed by the DENR (WWF 2003). Yet as *El Nido*'s status of a global ecotourism destination grew, the area's lowland forests were subject to intensifying logging that allowed local and provincial elites to claim prime coastal lands (Vitug 1993) once again.

By the 2000s, *El Nido*'s 'eco-branded' tourism intensified. With the Underground River's new global status, a new ecotourism 'belt' connected Puerto Princesa to the northern coastal towns of San Vicente and *El Nido*. Private sector investments continued apace (Dressler 2009, 2011). Despite NGOs pushing for community-based ecotourism in northern Palawan (Eder 2008), the TKDC eco-luxury resort model and influx of private capital broadly defined El *Nido*'s tourism development and branding (Goldoftas 2006). In 1998, TKDC opened another resort on Lagen Island (Arquiza & Yabes 2017) (Fig. 1) and in 2002, Miniloc Island and Lagen Island resorts both won the Kalakbay Resort of the Year award, promoting the resorts as successful examples of ecotourism and consolidating *El Nido* (and Palawan) as a pristine island paradise within the Filipino national imaginary. However, given that unsealed roads made the 8–12-hour journey from Puerto Princesa City to *El Nido* slow and arduous, and only private resorts had light aircraft to fly in guests, some 80% of the town's 21,701 tourist arrivals in 2007 were destined for these luxury resorts (see Fig. 1). Despite (or because of) *El Nido*'s growing elite ecotourism status, the infrastructure required to transport regular 'tourists-in-waiting' to the municipality was still lacking. Virtual, digital platforms were about to change this dramatically.

5.2. *Digital El Nido going viral*

Imaginaries of *El Nido* had been constructed via brochures, postcards, blogs, and television throughout the 2000 s. Indeed, the number and type of tourists travelling to *El Nido* changed dramatically as it was increasingly exoticized on global television programs. The US *Amazing Race* (2004) and *Koh-Lanta,* the French version of *Survivor* (2007) (Arquiza & Yabes 2017) were projected into the living rooms of millions of potential tourists in Europe and the USA. In 2000, 90 percent of tourists coming to *El Nido* were from Asia (mainly Japan and Korea) and were destined for the luxury resorts. As a result of these shows, *El Nido* was opened to a new demographic of European and American backpackers (Local tourism official, Interview No. 1, 31 July 2020). The 2010s brought the circulation and sharing of manipulated, spectacularized images (e.g., with filters, enlargements). Seemingly remote coastal places appeared increasingly accessible, authentic, and consumable, particularly on Instagram. At this time, private sector tourism providers and state actors eagerly took to social media to create captivating virtual destinations that every-one could scroll through and imagine themselves within. Far more than previous media marketing, virtual tourists could take to Instagram to experience *El Nido* vicariously through the experiences of others. Some of these virtual tourists would become actual tourists, consuming, capturing, and sharing the nature that had drawn them (Igoe 2010).

In 2012, the Philippine Department of Tourism (DOT) used social media platforms to push its virtual campaign "It's More Fun in the Philippines." This entailed a *virtual call-out* to Filipinos to create and share humorous memes with their own pictures and captions that showed how daily activities were 'more fun' in the country (see Valdez et al. 2017). Through this campaign, the image of *El Nido* as a luxury island paradise filled with sun, sea, and sand—a secluded escape from the pressures of modern life (Fig. 3)—took firm hold in national and international imaginaries, drawing increasing numbers of tourists to the municipality. The town's beaches became widely known and celebrated, with one labelled as the 'best beach in the Philippines' by CNN GO in 2012 and 2014. Given the accelerating reach of online media, *El Nido*'s

[3] The population of El *Nido* increased rapidly from 1789 in 1918 to 7358 in 1970 (WWF 2005, 5).

Fig. 3. Snake Island and Big Lagoon pictured by El *Nido* Resorts for the DOT Campaign, accessed 20 October 2020, <https://www.itsmorefuninthephilippines.com/>.

fame spread globally, leading to it being rated the 14th most beautiful beach area in the world in 2013 (CNN GO). *El Nido* Resorts even earned the prestigious "Tourism for Tomorrow' award from the World Travel and Tourism Council.

This increased publicity was accompanied by an infrastructure boom that improved connectivity by land, sea, and air, catering to more tourist arrivals and a greater diversity of tourist requirements (e.g., both luxury and backpackers). In 2007, the final gravel stretch of the road to *El Nido* from Puerto Princesa was paved under a project run by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency. This project, aimed at preventing coastal erosion, took 1.5 h off the travel time between the cities, allowing the journey to be completed during the wet season (Yamamoto 2013). With the road's completion, more tourists who could not afford resort prices gained access to *El Nido*. Local, domestic, and foreign investors all scrambled to capture new market opportunities, opening resorts, restaurants, and hotels without environmental clearance or planning permits (DENR, 2018). Arrivals more than doubled from 14,794 in 2004 to 37,803 in 2010 (Fig. 2). According to the 2015–2022 Environmentally Critical Areas Network (ECAN) management plan for *El Nido*, there was a "market shift—from a few high-spending and long-staying visitors to high-volume, low-spending, and short-staying ones" (Aguilla et al. 2015, 65). Average stay times dropped from 5 days in 1996 to 3 in 2011 (2015, 65).

This rapid development and influx of investments into *El Nido* town proper continued to accelerate. The powerful Ayala family (of Ayala Land Incorporated)[4] bought and renamed TKDC as '*El Nido* Resorts' (Arquiza & Yabes 2017), acquired the airline servicing the resorts, and developed the 325-ha Lio 'Tourism Estate' (Ten Knots 2019). In 2014, *El Nido*'s main airport runway was paved and expanded, allowing for commercial flights to arrive from cities across the Philippines (e.g., Manila, Cebu, etc.) (Añonuevo 2019). Private capital, profit, technology, and political ambition had compressed the distance and time needed to reach and consume *El Nido* (Harvey 1989). While an intensifying array of events, brands and images had accelerated this compression, varied social media platforms were now literally 'in the business' of drawing in tourists through their consumptive preferences and ideals even before landing on Palawan.

6. *El Nido*'s virtual nature

In the early 2010 s, when Instagram was in its infancy and *El Nido*'s tourism boom was just beginning, *El Nido* Resorts and *El Nido*'s tourism office debuted on the platform (@elnidoresorts in 2012 and @elnidotourism in 2014). Both used Instagram to communicate virtual representations of *El Nido* that they hoped would draw in certain tourists to particular attractions.

Until 2014, the images posted by *El Nido* Resorts furthered the eco-luxury branding that TKDC had been pursuing since the 1990 s, framing *El Nido* as a pristine paradise, an escape from reality, and a 'green resort.' A screenshot from its Instagram account in 2013 (Fig. 4)

[4] Ayala Land Corporation are a subsidiary of the Ayala Corporation, owned by one of the richest families in the Philippines. Jaime Zobel de Ayala is the 5th wealthiest man in the Philippines with a net worth of $3.6B (see https://www.forbes.com/profile/jaime-zobel-de-ayala/?sh=2250600a7490).

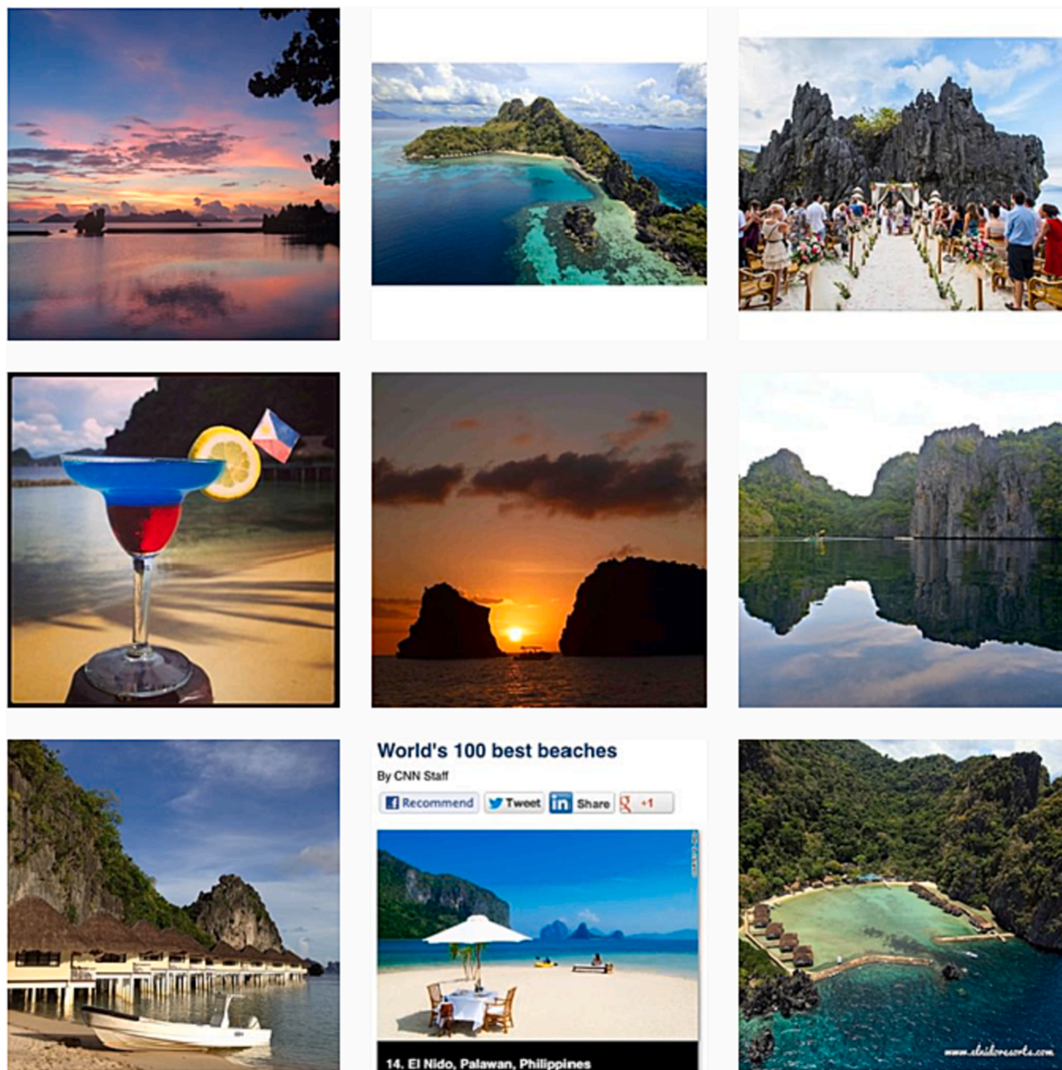

Fig. 4. Screenshot of posts by *El Nido* Resorts in 2013 (@elnidoresorts), accessed June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/elnidoresorts/>.

shows a selection of typical posts during this period—spectacular sunsets, aerial shots of the islands, a beachfront wedding, waterfront cocktails, kayaking through lagoons framed by limestone cliffs, cottages on stilts over the ocean, and celebration of the resort's international fame. In 2013, while the town saw mass unplanned development to keep up with investors and tourist arrivals, these carefully curated images of *El Nido* as a relaxed, dreamy, and isolated paradise continued to draw more tourists.

The tourism office's Instagram account presented more views of *El Nido*'s coastal locations and people. Since 2012, the office aimed to promote community-based rural tourism to spread the benefits of tourism to the rural barangays and reduce congestion in the main town (No. 1, 31 July 2020). This included activities such as birdwatching, archaeological cave tours, cultural and heritage tourism in the rural barangay of Sibaltan. The strategy was adopted by the office's Instagram account, which, according to an official, attempted to show tourists that there was "more to *El Nido* than beaches and islands… Every rural community has a different story" (No. 1, 31 July 2020). Fig. 5, for example, shows a screenshot from the account's feed in 2014 that depicts islands and beaches as natural attractions juxtaposed with pictures of local people, cultural attractions and events, tours, archaeological work, locally made products, coastal clean-ups, and local festivities. According to one tourism officer, the hashtag #ruralelnido on these posts aimed to get rural areas trending and on the radar of coastal tourists.

6.1. *The attention economy*

In contrast to state and private sector actors using Instagram from 2012 to 2015 to generate imaginaries of eco-luxury and community-based tourism, the narrative would soon change in relation to these images' user engagement, popularity, and platform reach. These became particularly important in 2016, when Instagram introduced a new way of organizing users' feeds/homepages according to a murkily defined algorithm (Cotter 2019). At this time, Instagram's algorithm began placing images in users' feeds based on its prediction of the likelihood the user would engage with the content. This was based on the popularity of the image (how quickly likes were accumulated) and the users' previous activity (Leaver et al. 2020, 24). The number of likes a post captured thus became central to its influence and the representations of *El Nido*'s coastal people and places it contained. The images of local people and practices were soon 'liked out'.

The algorithm and the need for exotic virtualism in 2016 marked a significant change in the kind of images shared by the tourism office (see Fig. 6). Diverse, place-based images with people were replaced with abstract, highly filtered images without people. No longer the original content of the tourism office, these images are reposted from tourists, influencers, and travel-promotion accounts. They have no captions or

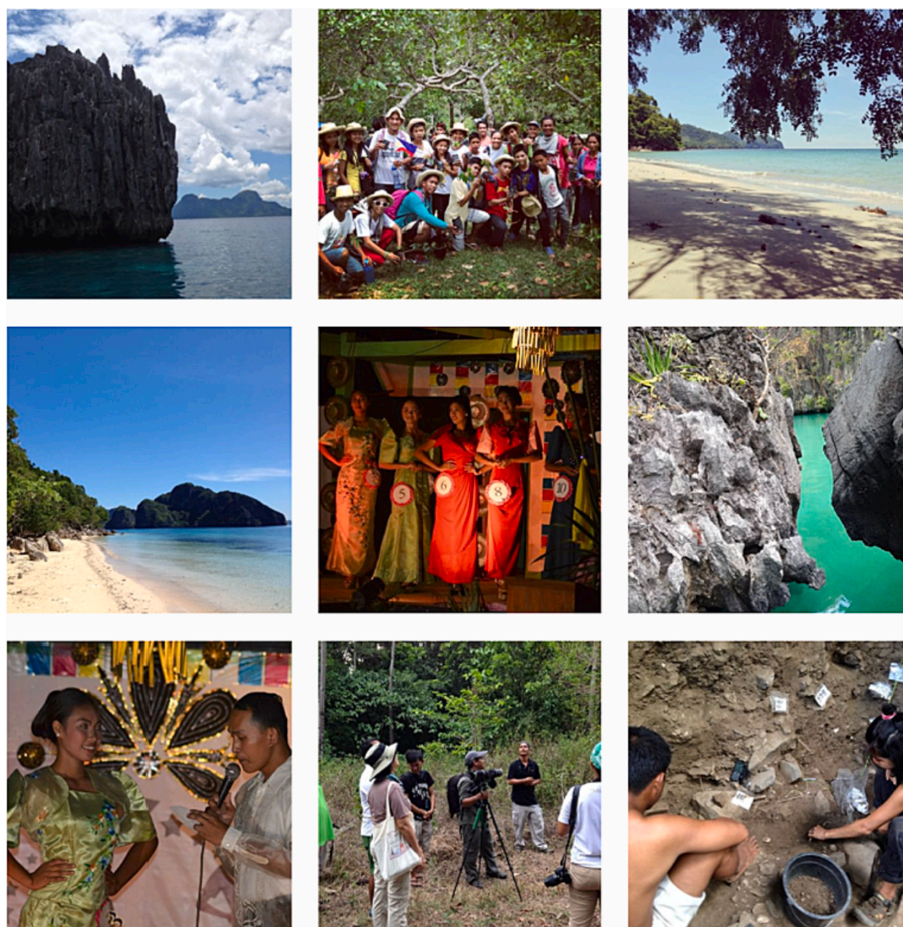

Fig. 5. Screenshot of posts from *El Nido* Municipal Tourism Office in 2014 (@elnidotourism), accessed June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/elnidotourism/>.

location tags, making it impossible to locate where the images were taken or the context of the site. The starkest change was the complete erasure of local people.

Informed by these algorithms, users with high follower counts and an understanding of what captures attention—generally travel bloggers and young Filipino celebrities and influencers—gained increasing power over *El Nido*'s virtual representation on Instagram. Acknowledging the success of those with large social media followings in promoting certain destinations and driving online traffic, partnerships with popular influencers were encouraged as a national-level tourism marketing strategy. Tourism Secretary Ramon Jimenez commented on one 2016 paid partnership with the Instagram travel influencer group, Beautiful Destinations (@beautifuldestinations), and its 16 million followers:

> *"As the social media landscape continues to develop at a rapid pace [….] Collaborating with Beautiful Destinations, which has already set the global standard for creating social content, is surely an effective way to make our country's presence in the digital space more felt by travellers who are highly reliant on social media"* (Department of Foreign Affairs, Republic of the Philippines 2016).

Governed by the algorithms and social codes of Instagram, both tourists and influencers took on the major role of promoting Philippine tourism by constructing popular images and sharing these with their networks. In *El Nido*, this manifested with tourism marketing being taken out of the hands of local governance actors. As an *El Nido* tourism official noted:

> *"Actually, we are no longer actively promoting El Nido. It's the tourists who are promoting for free on their own…every person takes a picture, uploads it to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, shares it and reaches so many people. Social media does the work alone"* (No. 1, 31 July 2020).

By the 2010 s, both the private sector and local government officials who had been branding the '*El Nido* image' were losing control of their own narratives (Cotter 2019) due to tourism influencers curating their own content to maximise opportunities for engagement with hyper-real and paradisaic imaginaries. Evidently, the top nine posts for *El Nido*—the most popular and discoverable images at the time of research under the #elnidopalawan hashtag (Fig. 7)—involved highly filtered photographs that again excluded all evidence of local people and appear to have been taken by drones capturing spectacular aerial views of seemingly 'pristine' coastal sites. The accounts behind these images are mainly travel blogs that appear to have no affiliation with *El Nido* itself. One such example is @palmtraveller, shown in Fig. 8. Their posts appear to be tailored to gathering user engagement, with captions prompting action such as "Do you miss the Philippines? Comment below…tag someone who would love this place" (Fig. 8).

6.2. Redistribution through Instagram?

In *El Nido*, local officials and resort companies soon attempted to use social media to reduce pressure from increased tourism arrivals to 'viral sites' such as the Big Lagoon by encouraging tourists to explore new rural areas and reduce their environmental impact. However, officials' attempts to redistribute the power of skilled Instagram influencers by encouraging tourists to visit alternative areas were met with minimal success. For instance, the hashtag #ruralelnido never took off, with only 17 posts retrieved at the time of writing, with all but two by @elnido-tourism. To compare, #biglagoonelnido had 5,384 posts attached. One

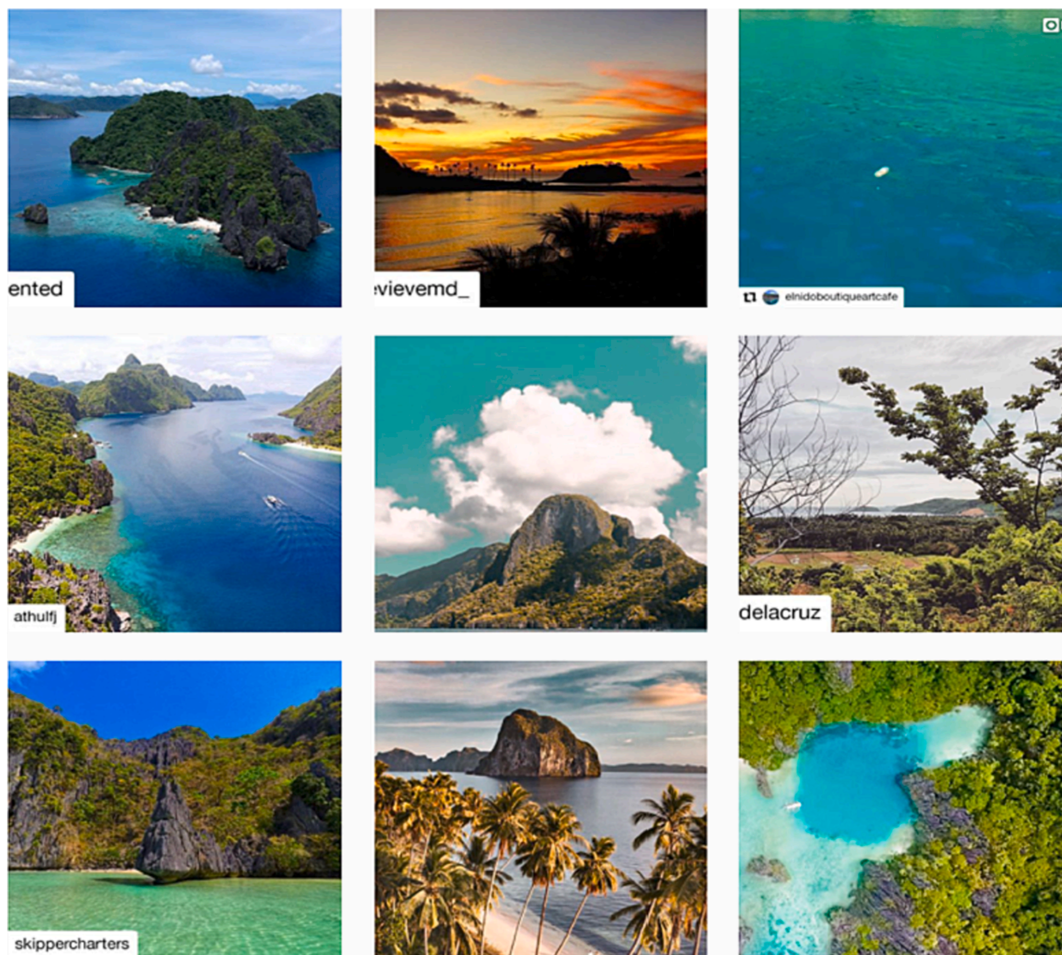

Fig. 6. Screenshot of posts from @elnidotourism 2018.

environmental specialist from a prominent resort company explained:

> *"Instagram has so much power in El Nido now. So, we are trying to harness that power to bring about the message of conservation and I know to some people that is immediately evident, but perhaps to a greater majority I am sad to say they are just there for the shot, for the 'gram"* (No. 3, 7 August 2020).

These shots are often predetermined, even before tourists arrive in *El Nido* based on the popular images they have consumed. The same respondent continued:

> *"Every-one wants a photo of themselves inside the Big Lagoon, regardless of what the cost is. Regardless of if they get there at the wrong time, like low tide, people will push their service providers to push the boat into the lagoon because they are leaving tomorrow and need to get the shot"* (No. 3, 7 August 2020).

Instagram has not only amplified the virtual spectacle surrounding *El Nido*, driving increases in tourist arrivals, but also conditioned the capturing and sharing of coastal places. Such viral virtualism ultimately influenced how developers, tourism providers, and tourists would both socially and physically consume those sites and their surroundings, threatening the very basis of *El Nido*'s virtual nature with violent consequences.

7. The violence of El *Nido*'s virtual reality

Tourism arrivals increased by over 30 percent annually from 2013 onwards, creating problems with overcrowding, waste management, and water pollution (Llanto 2018). Catering to the acceleration in tourist numbers, *El Nido* hosted "205 hotels and other lodging places, 111 tour operators, 24 spa clinics, 92 restaurants, 62 buildings being constructed, and 40 establishments without business permits" (DENR, 2018, 1). However, the municipality still lacked a sewage disposal system, and pollution concerned officials and visiting tourists alike (Llanto 2018). In 2018, the DENR and local government assembled a task force to 'clean-up' *El Nido* following the DENR national secretary Roy Cimatu's call to "act now and ensure that the sewerage system and waste disposal throughout the country are in order, especially for the influx of tourists" (DENR, 2018, 1).

7.1. Rupturing the virtual

Efforts to restore *El Nido*'s pristine image became even more urgent when a picture of washed-up trash in Miniloc islands' Secret Lagoon was shared on social media and quickly went viral. A tourist shared a photograph (Fig. 9) and video of herself surrounded by plastic waste on Facebook and YouTube in August 2018 (*El Nido* News 2018). The image was shared on Facebook more than 20,000 times in the following two days and the video footage gained over 1 million views (Monde 2018). Rupturing the virtual image of *El Nido*'s 'pristine paradise', this viral post demanded a quick and decisive response from the local government. One local official noted:

> "*How you handle it [negative images on social media] is very crucial. It's okay if it goes viral, it's social media you cannot control it, but you can handle it well so that it is also a marketing strategy…for the garbage issue we issued an official statement with other agencies and created the island*

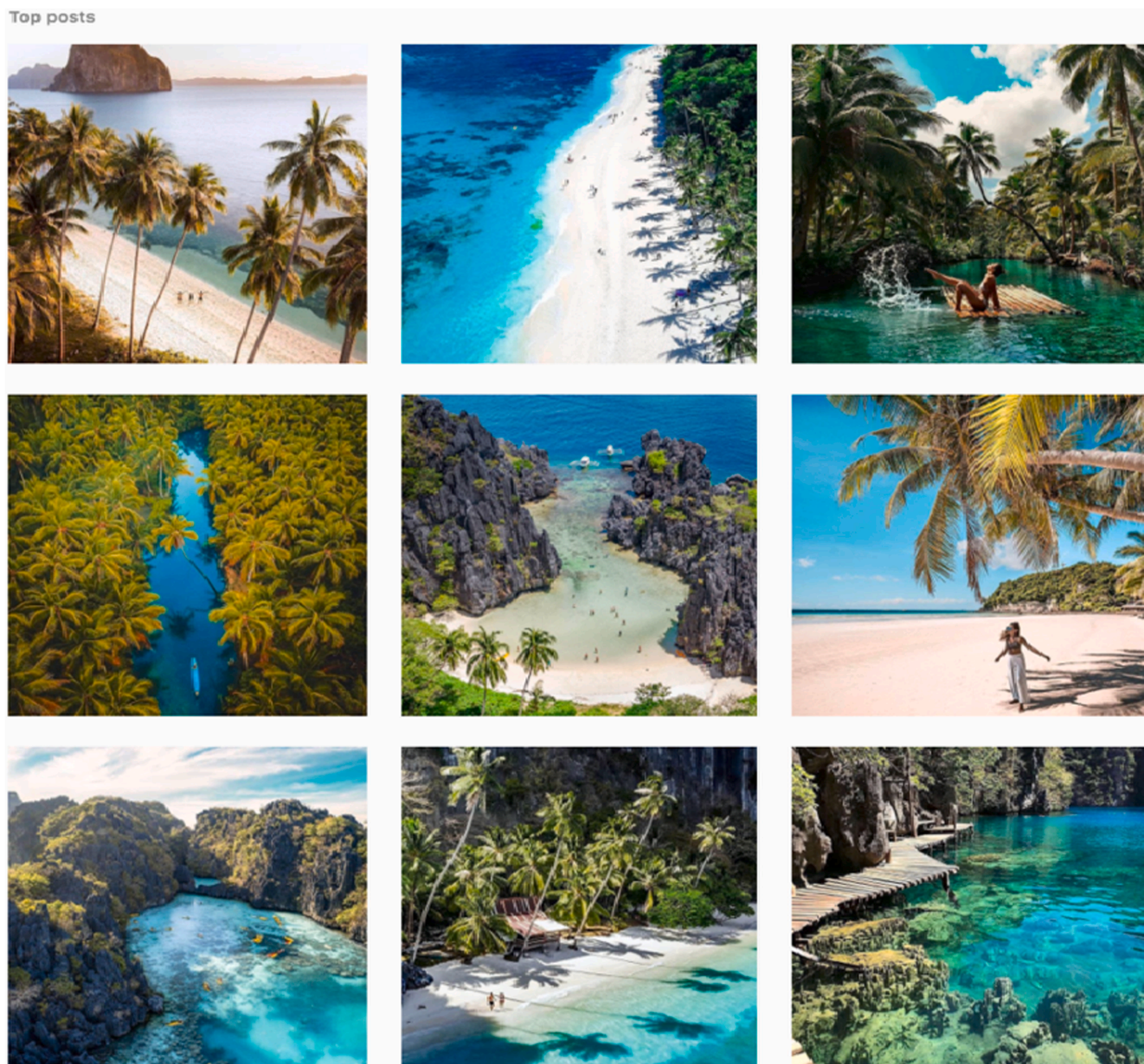

Fig. 7. Top 9 posts under #elnidopalwan, accessed 1 June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/elnidopalawan/>.

management board to check island hopping boats for plastic" (No. 1, 30 July 2020).

Part of this statement involved clarifying that such plastics were not from *El Nido*, but had floated over from Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia during the south-western monsoon. Local news sites such as *El Nido News* came to the town's defence by showing images on Facebook of plastic bottles with foreign labels, arguing that "viral videos and pictures can [unjustly] break tourism in *El Nido* town" (El *Nido* News 2018). After this 'polluted' viral image, extensive online efforts tried to revitalise *El Nido*'s pristine virtual reputation.

7.2. Displacements

Although some fishers have benefited from ecotourism through ancillary activities (Aguilla et al. 2015; Añonuevo 2019), many more have faced exclusion, marginalisation, and eviction due to the physical manifestation of the virtual tourism boom.[5] In March 2018, as part of the DENR's 'clean-up' for tourism 'renewal' in *El Nido*, 24 poor Visayan and Cuyonon fishing families were forcefully evicted from their homes along the Corong-Corong beachfront (Rey 2018). *Palawan* News (2018) reported that the families had lived in this area for between 20 and 40 years, "but now the government wanted them removed from the area for various environmental violations, among which are encroaching on the coastal easement zone and disposing their wastes directly in the sea, affecting the beach's water quality.".

Despite occupying coastal areas for decades, these families lacked secure land/marine titles because coastal property rights in the 1960s and 1970s were based on "informal land tenure arrangements and customary claims" rather than formal property ownership (Knudsen 2012, 486).[6] The influx of tourism, the lucrative nature of beachfront property and pressures to maintain pristine beach aesthetics thus left them vulnerable to eviction. A Palawan NGO worker who had spoken to the evicted fishers recalled their frustrations and fear for their livelihoods:

[5] According to El *Nido*'s ECAN report for 2015, 55.3% of households in El *Nido* have income below the food threshold and 67.5% below poverty threshold (Aguilla et al. 2015, iv).

[6] This was partially because of inconsistent monitoring and enforcement of the use of the easement zone technically classified as 'public lands' under the Water Code of the Philippines 1976. Formal titles to these areas could not be granted therefore their use and occupation was informal and based upon navigating social and political relationships (see Knudsen 2012, 485).

Fig. 8. Post by Palm Traveller 2019 (@palmtraveller) accessed 1 June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/palmtraveller/>.

Fig. 9. A 'viral' picture of trash washed up in Secret Lagoon (Monde 2018).

*"They said to me: 'We have stayed here for more than 20 years, we live here, our livelihood activity was fishing but we can't because we are not allowed'" (*No. 2, 23 July 2020).

The evicted families were offered minimal compensation by the government and a site upland to which to relocate far from beach access. However, the compensation was insufficient to cover the costs of both relocating and building a new home:

"Some were provided with a bit of land, but they will have to pay also. They say we don't have enough money to pay for the land where we can stay, so some they go to their relatives and look for places to stay." (No. 2, 23 July 2020).

With the increased cost of land due to the tourism boom, many of the coastal families were forced to relocate upland, away from their source of livelihood (Palawan News 2018). As shown in the Instagram images

above, fishers were never featured in *El Nido*'s virtual nature and were quickly removed from the beachfronts when increasing reports of pollution began to threaten paradise imaginaries.

7.3. Violence in paradise

The virtualism of *El Nido* has also concealed and contributed to an even darker side of the tourism boom. In 2017, a member of the Palawan NGO Network, Inc. (PNNI), Ruben Arzarga, who was also a barangay captain in Villa Libertad, *El Nido*, was killed by illegal loggers after requesting police backup to assist with the confiscation of illegal timber near *El Nido* town (Global Witness 2019, 21). In September 2019, after the *Global Witness* report was released, another environmental officer, Bienvinido 'Toto' Veguilla Jr., was also brutally murdered while confronting loggers during a regular patrol for the Community Environment and Natural Resources Office in the *El Nido*-Taytay Managed Resource Protected Area (Formoso 2019). These two dramatic incidents were not anomalies, escalating violence shapes the everyday lives of environmental activists; the regional DENR reported that the office "continuously receives reports about illegal logging being perpetrated in the forests of *El Nido*, especially because [hotel] construction is everywhere in the town" (Formoso 2019).

The rapid increase in tourist arrivals in *El Nido* over the previous decade had triggered a significant rise in illegal logging for the timber needed to construct luxury resorts and hotels in the coastal spaces already long claimed by shadowy politicians (Global Witness 2019, 21). Although logging was banned in 1992 with the passing of the SEP, the vested interests of Palawan's political elite in the hotel industry had allowed illegal extraction to continue largely unbated and without penalty (Dressler, 2021; Global Witness 2019). According to Global Witness (2019), illegal timber was seen entering the construction site of Maremegmeg Beach Club, owned by a prominent Palawan political figure. NGOs such as PNNI have assisted in enforcing the logging ban, tracking illegal loggers, and using citizen's arrests to confiscate guns and chainsaws (Dressler, 2021). Taking on this role, however, places enforcers' lives at risk.

8. Discussion

This paper has critically explored how social media platforms converge with and facilitate the rise of ecotourism through virtual spectacle and the implications of these dynamics for local people and places. Bridging research on ecotourism, virtual natures and platform capitalism, we have shown how the evolving and intensifying power of social media intersects with and dramatically accelerates (eco)tourism through enclosure, privatization and commodification, with violent outcomes for Palawan's coastal peoples and ecologies. We have shown how powerful virtual constructions of nature and people manifest tangibly through discursive and physical violence, presenting misrepresentations, displacing livelihoods, and even precipitating murder (Igoe 2010; West & Carrier 2004). In doing so, we have demonstrated that analysis of how social media and virtualism construct tourism destinations from coastal settings must include, but also go beyond the "images", to examine how political economic histories come to intersect and influence governance, representations, and local impacts over time and space. We have offered detailed empirical and conceptual insights into how histories of (mis)representation underpin, but are also eclipsed by, social media-driven virtual realities in terms of: 1) making a spectacle of coastal places and peoples to facilitate ecotourism booms; 2) mediating the production and consumption of the spectacle via platform capitalism; and 3) intensifying the pressure to materialise this spectacle in violent ways.

Virtualism generated via platform capitalism thus intersects with and reinforces long-standing coastal political economies that partly define violent impacts and outcomes today. Virtualism, as "the tendency to see the world in terms of idealised categories, a virtual reality," articulates with past and present coastal realities, with often destructive outcomes (Carrier and Miller, 1988, 5). Virtual ecotourism imaginaries are far from benign, particularly as they intensify through new social media platforms. Yet, the violent spectacle from platforms like Instagram are unique in how they compress time and space through instantaneous mediations. In the process, new inequalities are produced just as older ones are deepened in coastal (tourism) destinations as the virtual popularized on these platforms materializes, feeding into environmental destruction and violence (West & Carrier 2004).

In the context of *El Nido*'s rapid rise in tourism numbers, state actors scrambled to address contradictions between Instagram-famed 'pristine paradise' imaginaries and the increasingly visible grim reality of tourism's impact on the coastal environment via plastic-free campaigns, crackdowns on environmental violations, and highly publicized clean-up interventions. Under the perverse guise of a 'clean-up recovery' of *El Nido*, Visayan and Cuyonon fishing families were evicted from their coastal homes with minimal or no compensation from the government (Palawan News 2018; Rey 2018). In part, the objectification and commodification of coastal features, such as clean, empty beaches, and the erasure of local realities, values, and meanings enabled the removal of fishers and other coastal dwellers from their coastal areas, thereby violently bridging the configuration of virtual to real paradises.

According to Srnicek (2017, 4) the role of platform capitalism is key here: in placing value on aesthetic imaginaries of so-called coastal paradises, those who engineer platform capitalism move beyond local governance strategies to govern the potential for socio-natural interactions, a reordering of social lives by influencing online connections. This immense power and influence held in platform codes, rules and algorithms are obscured and left unquestioned in and through the representation of platform imaginaries as natural and authentic (Van Dijck 2013, 144). Through their encoded pushes for users to produce spectacular, attention-grabbing images, platforms intensify the reconfiguration of destinations to align the 'real' and 'hyper-real' to conform with tourists' own imaginaries and in turn drive consumption, markets, and profits within and beyond destinations. This process is virtual, material, and cyclically violent.

In *El Nido*, this contributed to exacerbating historical and existing local inequalities in ways that served, and then undermined, the interests of a burgeoning 'ecotourism' industry. Whereas resort owners with the capital and power to create 'Instagrammable' attractions and draw tourists benefitted, small-scale fishers obscured from the viral imaginings of *El Nido* were further marginalised. The rise of illegal logging and the murders of environmental defenders further highlight the violent, contradictory impacts that Instagram enabled eco-branded mass tourism has brought to *El Nido* as it intersects with and intensifies pre-existing coastal political economies. As the violence of sustaining tourism profits has been accelerated by the town's (and region's) social media boom, the dominant images featured on platforms like Instagram continue to shield tourists "from the more complex and problematic web of connections and relationships in which they are actually enmeshed" (Igoe 2010, 389). These trends are far from exclusive to *El Nido*. Across Southeast Asia and beyond, scholars have pointed to the annexing of coastal spaces to maintain virtual-local aesthetics for touristic consumption and associated infrastructure expansion, often with violent consequences (Edensor & Kothari 2003; Kothari & Arnall 2017). We have shown how these dynamics are increasingly caught up with the growing popularity and power of social media platforms.

9. Conclusion

This article has highlighted the importance of considering the role of social media platforms like Instagram in intersecting with and influencing processes of coastal change through, and for, intensifying ecotourism and development in uneven coastal political economies. As ecotourism expands and takes on different forms across the Philippines and Southeast Asia in general via policies, investment and

representations, social media platforms have also expanded in popularity and function, controlling how their growing network of users view and act upon the world (Zulli 2018). Not only do these platforms interact with other governance strategies and brandings to increase the reach of ideas, images and thus representation, they also now govern and direct the representation of people and locations *in situ* with dramatic discursive and material consequences. Although it is difficult to ascertain clear social media-driven impacts and outcomes, the growing use of Instagram and other social media has powerfully influenced the rise of eco-branded tourism in ways that interact with and violently reconstitute past and present coastal change dynamics.

Future research must therefore closely examine the social media-driven virtualism that unfolds as the global tourism industry begins to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Opening the black box of algorithm-governed interactions with places and people reveals how the virtual and material are linked, and how these platforms are, in fact, insidious systems of power, control, and violence (Büscher, 2020). Only in this way can we examine how local people in coastal tourism destinations and beyond are challenging 'virtual paradise' fantasies and reclaiming greater control of coastal territories and livelihoods that were never ceded in the first place.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Naomi Parris-Piper: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis. **Wolfram Dressler:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources, Supervision. **Paula Satizábal:** Conceptualization, Supervision. **Rob Fletcher:** Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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