

**FAMILIARITY WITH ECOTOURISM DESTINATIONS IN NUEVA ECIJA AND
ITS INFLUENCE ON DESTINATION PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIORAL
INTENTION OF FOURTH-YEAR BS TOURISM STUDENTS
FROM CENTRAL LUZON**

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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Reyes. She dreamt to be part of the military when she was in high school, however, she was not fit to be a soldier and decided to pursue her childhood dream, Tourism Management. She competed in beauty pageants, dance competitions, and singing contests. She is part of CHSI's dance group called "SKLB". She has 2 Shih Tzu dogs named Killua and Gon. She graduated as an honor student from Saint John School in junior high and St. Mary's College of Baliuag in senior high. She is a consistent Dean's Lister and a College Scholar during her stay at Central Luzon State University, she had her on-the-job training at Rajah Travel Academy and OMNI Aviation and was able to get all the special awards for evacuation drills, safety demonstrations, and in panel interview during the recognition. She passed three National Certificates in Tourism Promotion Services NC II, Front Office Services NC III, and Events Management NC III.

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ABSTRACT

Agunoy, Marry Joy V., Cancelo, Giselle C., De Vera, Rosalinda C., Reyes, Alexis Claire E., Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, College of Home Science and Industry, Central Luzon State University, Science City of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija, Philippines, June 2023, **FAMILIARITY WITH ECOTOURISM DESTINATIONS IN NUEVA ECIJA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON DESTINATION PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTION OF FOURTH-YEAR BS TOURISM STUDENTS FROM CENTRAL LUZON**

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The purpose of this study was to determine the familiarity level of the 4th year tourism students of Bulacan State University, Gordon College, and the University of the Assumption affiliated with the League of Tourism Students of the Philippines - Central Luzon on ecotourism destinations in Nueva Ecija and how it influences their perception and intention to visit, recommend, and revisit the province using a survey questionnaire. The collected data were statistically analyzed using descriptive statistics and Spearman's Rho Correlation. Descriptive Statistics was used in describing the demographic profile of the respondents that includes frequency and percentages while mean, standard deviations and weighted mean were calculated for quantitative data. Spearman's Rho Correlation was employed to determine the three variables' relationship.

The result showed that the overall familiarity level of the respondents was moderate. Their perception of Nueva Ecija was very high and their behavioral intention was strongly positive. Moreover, the results showed that there is a significant relationship between familiarity and behavioral intention, there is no significant relationship between familiarity and destination perception and there is a significant relationship between destination perception and behavioral intention. The findings of the present study have

some beneficial implications for the province, especially for the ecotourism destinations of Nueva Ecija. The provincial government of Nueva Ecija can develop a marketing plan that will promote Nueva Ecija as an eco-tourism destination which will make it locally and globally competitive in the tourism market.

Keywords: Familiarity; Destination Perception; Behavioral Intention; Ecotourism Destinations

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to critically assess the familiarity of 4th-year tourism students with ecotourism destinations in Nueva Ecija and to evaluate its influence on their destination perception leading to their intention to recommend, visit or revisit the ecotourism destinations. As discussed in the literature review, this study has been done based on significant and related topics. Nevertheless, the main problem of familiarity with ecotourism, destination perception, and behavioral intention remained unanswered before this study.

Ecotourism is a type of tourism that is “responsible when visiting natural areas, maintaining the environment, sustaining local community well-being, and involving interpretation and education” (International Ecotourism Society, 2015). Research from Mary (2022), concluded that ecotourism is a travel that creates an optimistic impact on both the ecology and economy of a particular destination. Thus, the Philippines started to improve awareness about the potential of ecotourism and use it as an alternative way to the development of the economy and encourage the local government leaders to support related activities. World Tourism Organization illustrated that ecotourism is thought to be the tourism sector’s fastest-growing segment with a 5% annual growth rate globally, and represents 6% of the world’s gross domestic product. According to the Department of Tourism, the Philippines’ natural attractions are valuable assets. The department developed a plan to promote ecotourism in many of its tourist attractions.

Moreover, Nueva Ecija takes pleasure in being the location of several wonderful ecotourism destinations. Tourists can experience the breathtaking view, and serene beauty of waterfalls, rivers, mountains, and landscapes as Vigilia (2020) concluded that the

ecotourism spots in Nueva Ecija considerably captivated the tourists in terms of their naturally unique beauty and natural resources. Tourists, in short, can enjoy the fun of traveling and adventures while protecting the environment.

Tourists are drawn to this province for a variety of reasons, including its natural beauty and friendly people. Nueva Ecija is teeming with natural resources and offers breathtaking scenic views of the mountains, undulating hills, agriculture, rivers, and much more (Nueva Ecija Tourism, 2021). Nueva Ecija seeks to show tourists that it is more than simply endless rice fields indeed it also offers existing and emerging ecotourism destinations and activities. Tourists can explore Nueva Ecija's ecotourism destinations like Gabaldon Falls at Gabaldon, Binbin Falls and Pajanutic Falls at Carranglan, Palasapas Falls at San Jose City, Pantabangan Lake at Pantabangan, Burburayok Spring and General Luna Falls at Rizal, Mt. Olivete at Bongabon, Minalungao National Park at General Tinio, and Barrio Puncan "Little Baguio" at Carranglan. These ecotourism destinations mentioned are accredited by the Department of Tourism.

However, based on the 2021 Report on the Regional Distribution of Travelers, Department of Tourism Region III Office (DOT), there is an overall total of 2,060,964 tourist arrivals in Central Luzon. In terms of Nueva Ecija, the data illustrates that the province is listed as the third least visited in Region III with a total number of 98,003 tourists. Even though Nueva Ecija offers a wide land area and different attractions, it is still listed as one of the least tourist destinations in terms of the number of tourists arriving (See Appendix 1).

To increase the number of tourist arrivals, familiarity with ecotourism destinations has to be studied. Familiarity, destination perception, and behavioral intention play an

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