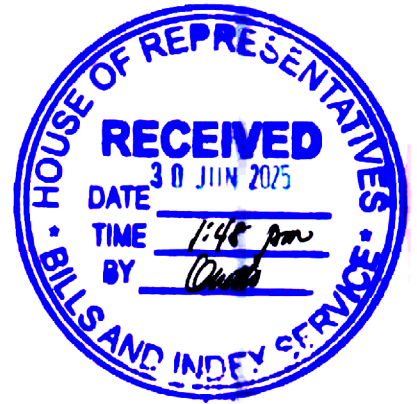


Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
 Quezon City, Metro Manila

TWENTIETH CONGRESS
 First Regular Session

HOUSE BILL NO. 407



Introduced by Representative **JESUS R. MARQUEZ**

EXPLANATORY NOTE

This bill seeks to declare the Bakhawan Eco-Park in New Buswang, Kalibo, Aklan as a Special Ecological Tourism Zone.

In the 19th Congress, this proposed measure was approved by the House of Representatives on 15 November 2022 and transmitted to the Senate the following day. Its reintroduction underscores our continuing commitment to sustainable development, environmental conservation, and community empowerment.

The declaration of Bakhawan Eco-Park as a Special Ecological Tourism Zone will spur inclusive growth in Kalibo by promoting the area as an ecotourism destination, drawing investments, and generating employment opportunities for local residents. With the anticipated increase in tourist arrivals, the Eco-Park has the potential to become a vibrant hub for sustainable businesses while maintaining the integrity of its natural ecosystem.

Ecotourism is a nature-based, educational travel experience that fosters environmental awareness and appreciation. The International Ecotourism Society defines it as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people.” These destinations are often remote or protected areas, requiring thoughtful stewardship to ensure long-term ecological balance. Ecotourism is not only a form of leisure—it is a powerful tool for education, conservation, and community development.

The Philippines, blessed with rich biodiversity and stunning landscapes, is poised to become a premier global ecotourism destination. Under Republic Act No. 9593 or the Tourism Act of 2009, tourism is recognized as an engine of national development. This measure aligns with the law’s vision of making tourism a strategic pillar of our economy, while advocating for ecological preservation and responsible travel.

“Bakhawan” is a Visayan term for mangrove. Located just a few kilometers from the town center of Kalibo—famed for the thud of drums during the Ati-Atihan Festival—the Bakhawan Eco-Park is a 220-hectare mangrove forest that stands as a symbol of environmental transformation. Once a barren mudflat prone to coastal flooding, it was rehabilitated over the last two decades by the Kalibo Save the Mangroves Association (KASAMA), the Local Government of Kalibo, and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Opened to the public in April 2008 in celebration of Earth Day, the Eco-Park is now a thriving sanctuary of biodiversity.

The park features a 1.3-kilometer bamboo boardwalk that winds through thousands of mangrove trees, offering visitors a serene encounter with nature. Alongside the whispering leaves and chirping birds, one can witness the mouth of the Aklan River flowing into the calm waters of the Sibuyan Sea. The mangroves host a wide variety of flora and fauna—including migratory birds, marine life, mudcrabs, and the endemic woodworm or tamilok. The Eco-Park’s palette of blues, greens, browns, and golden yellows refreshes both body and spirit.

More than a natural wonder, Bakhawan is a resilient model of environmental sustainability. The Mangrove Reforestation Project has not only protected coastal communities from storm surges and erosion, but also provided livelihoods to locals through fishing, guided tours, and sustainable harvesting. It has earned numerous national and international awards including recognition by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as one of the best-managed mangrove forests in Asia and the Pacific.

However, despite its potential, the Eco-Park’s growth is hindered by a lack of tourism infrastructure such as lodgings, transport services, and retail amenities. These limitations can be addressed through its formal designation as an Ecological Tourism Zone, which will prioritize it for development by the Department of Tourism (DOT) and other relevant agencies.

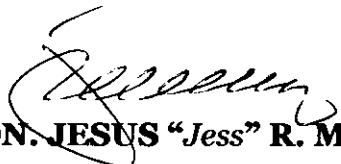
The bill envisions the promotion of community-based, environmentally sustainable tourism. It mandates the DOT to assist the municipal government of Kalibo in the implementation of the tourism development plan. This plan will balance ecological preservation with livelihood creation, emphasizing the participation of local communities in planning, managing, and benefiting from tourism activities.

It also directs the LGU to ensure the equitable use of resources such as water, food, and construction materials so that local residents' needs are met before expanding services for tourists. Tourism-related enterprises such as homestays, local restaurants, craft stores, and eco-guided tours shall be supported, with preference given to micro- and small-scale community businesses.

When enacted, this measure will empower the LGU Kalibo to implement infrastructure and tourism facilities in harmony with nature, enhancing accessibility while preserving the ecological integrity of the bakhawan eco-park. It will ensure that the socio-economic benefits of tourism are equitably shared and that environmental sustainability remains at the heart of development.

The Bakhawan Eco-Park is not only a gem of Aklan, it is a testament to the power of community-led conservation. Let us now take the next step in safeguarding and uplifting this national treasure.

Immediate passage of this bill is earnestly sought.


HON. JESUS "Jess" R. MARQUEZ

Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
 Quezon City, Metro Manila

TWENTIETH CONGRESS
 First Regular Session

HOUSE BILL NO. 407

Introduced by Representative **JESUS R. MARQUEZ**

AN ACT
DECLARING THE BAKHAWAN ECO-PARK IN BARANGAY NEW
BUSWANG, MUNICIPALITY OF KALIBO, PROVINCE OF AKLAN, AN
ECOTOURISM ZONE AND APPROPRIATING FUNDS THEREFOR

Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

1 **SECTION 1. Declaration of Policy.** — It is the policy of the State to promote a
 2 tourism industry that is ecologically sustainable, responsible, participative, culturally
 3 sensitive, economically viable and equitably beneficial to local communities.

4 **Sec. 2. Bakhawan Eco-Park Ecotourism Zone.** —The Bakhawan Eco-Park in
 5 Barangay New Buswang, Municipality of Kalibo, Province of Aklan is hereby declared a
 6 community-based ecotourism zone. As such, its development shall be prioritized by the
 7 Department of Tourism (DOT), subject to the rules and regulations governing the
 8 development of ecotourism zones.

9 **Sec. 3. Scope and Coverage.** — This Act shall cover the boundaries of the 220-
 10 hectare mangrove forest of the Bakhawan Eco-Park, Barangay New Buswang,
 11 Municipality of Kalibo, Province of Aklan.

12 The setting of technical boundaries of the ecotourism zone shall be undertaken by
 13 the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and other concerned
 14 agencies.

15 **Sec. 4. Definition of Terms.** — As used in this Act:

- 16 a) *Biodiversity conservation* refers to the practice of preserving the variety of
 17 species, habits and ecosystems, and genetic diversity of the place, including
 18 inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems, and the ecological
 19 complexes which they are a part of;
- 20 b) *Community-based tourism* refers to a form of tourism where the local
 21 community and its residents have substantial control over and involvement in
 22 the development and management of the local tourism industry and a greater
 23 portion of the economic gains remain within the community;

- c) *Ecotourism* refers to a form of sustainable tourism within a natural area where community participation, protection and management of natural resources, cultural and indigenous knowledge and practices, environmental education and ethics, as well as economic benefits are fostered and pursued for the enrichment of host communities and satisfaction of visitors;
- d) *Homestay* refers to a system of tourist accommodation where a tourist stays with local residents and experiences the day-to-day life of the residents of the Bakhawan Eco-Park community, Barangay New Buswang and the Municipality of Kalibo; and
- e) *Responsible ecotourism* refers to a form of sustainable tourism in which both the tourism sector and the tourists take responsibility in the protection, respect, and conservation of the natural environment and the local culture and ways of life, and where community participation as well as economic benefits are fostered and pursued for the well-being of the local people in Barangay New Buswang and visitors.

Sec. 5. Development Strategies. — To accomplish the development of the Bakhawan Eco-Park as an ecotourism zone, the State shall:

- (a) Develop and promote responsible "community-based ecological tourism" as the core management strategy in the development of the Bakhawan Eco-Park;
- (b) Ensure the conservation of the biodiversity and the preservation of said Eco-Park;
- (c) Develop tourism products and programs that shall generate employment and livelihood for the local residents and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned, consistent with the preservation and maintenance of the mangrove forest;
- (d) Guarantee that the financial and economic benefits of the tourism industry are equitably shared by and distributed among the local residents and NGOs concerned, by giving preference and support to community —and home-based micro and small tourism enterprises, such as local inns, lodges and homestays, restaurants, food and fruit stands, and other similar tourism-oriented industries and businesses;
- (e) Ensure that the quality of local tourism programs and activities are educational and enriching for tourists and visitors through the provision of orientation, educational and tour programs by local tour operators, NGOs, the municipal government of Kalibo and the DOT; and
- (f) Guarantee that, in the development and promotion of the local tourism industry, the municipal government of Kalibo ensures the adequate provision of water, food, energy, and local construction materials to residents.

Sec. 6 *Tourism Development Plan for the Bakhawan Eco-Park.* — The municipal government of the Municipality of Kalibo shall, in coordination with the DOT, DENR and concerned agencies of the government, prepare the Tourism Development Plan for the Bakhawan Eco-Park that shall be complemented by a set of guidelines for a responsible community-based ecotourism.

The Tourism Development Plan shall ensure the preservation of the area and shall include the following components:

- (a) Determination and description of the carrying capacity of the Eco-Park;
- (b) Specific site assessment;
- (c) Identification of strategic priorities;
- (d) Product development plans for local income generation;
- (e) Capacity-building for the local community so residents therein can ably manage economically viable and responsible, community-based ecotourism business enterprises;
- (f) Strategies to promote the formulation of local production groups and networks, including the marketing and pricing of products; and
- (g) Marketing strategies that uphold the natural, social and environmental integrity of the Bakhawan Eco-Park and its local residents. The process of formulating the Tourism Development Plan for the Bakhawan Eco- Park shall be participatory, with the framework to be provided by the DOT and the DENR, in consultation with the local governments of the Municipality of Kalibo and Barangay New Buswang.

Sec. 7. *Formulation of Guidelines and Standards.* — The concerned Protected Area Management Board of the DENR shall assist the local governments of the Municipality of Kalibo and Barangay New Buswang in the formulation of local tourism standards to ensure that environmental protection is integrated in the development of ecotourism plans.

These local tourism standards shall:

- (a) Raise the capacity of all stakeholders and ensure that best practices are followed;
- (b) Ensure optional use of water and energy;
- (c) Reduce waste and pollution through environmentally-sound waste management disposal schemes;
- (d) Prevent vandalism in the facilities of the Eco-Park; and

(e) Encourage the use of local produce and services, and support the employment of local people.

SEC. 8. *Role of the DOT.* – The DOT shall assist the municipal government of Kalibo in the implementation of the tourism development plan by providing technical assistance in tourism capacity building. It shall also include the Bakhawan Eco-Park in its national and regional promotion programs.

Sec. 9. *Coordination with National Agencies.* – The municipal government of Kalibo shall likewise coordinate with the regional offices of DENR, Department of Labor and Employment, Department of Public Works and Highways, Department of Transportation, Department of Agriculture, Department of Education, Department of Trade and Industry, Department of Interior and Local Government, Philippine National Police, Maritime Industry Authority and other line agencies of the government in the implementation of this Act.

SEC. 10. *Appropriations.* – The funding for the implementation of this Act shall be included in the annual budget of the Municipality of Kalibo. The DOT may augment such allocation with internally-generated funds.

SEC. 11. *Implementing Rules and Regulations.* – Within thirty (30) days from the effectivity of this Act, the municipal government of Kalibo shall, in consultation with the DOT, DENR and concerned agencies of the government, promulgate rules and regulations to implement this Act.

SEC. 12. *Separability Clause.* – If, for any reason, any provision of this Act is declared unconstitutional or invalid, other provisions hereof which are not affected thereby shall continue to be in full force and effect.

SEC. 13. *Repealing Clause.* – All laws, decrees, executive orders, proclamation and administrative regulations, or parts thereof inconsistent herewith are hereby repealed or modified accordingly.

SEC. 14. *Effectivity.* – This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after its publication in the Official Gazette or in a newspaper of general circulation.

Approved,