

Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City

TWENTIETH CONGRESS
First Regular Session

HOUSE BILL NO. 698



Introduced by **REP. JAVIER MIGUEL "JAVI" L. BENITEZ**

EXPLANATORY NOTE

Presidential Proclamation No. 895, Series of 2005, declared the Northern Negros Forest Reserve a protected area to be known as the Northern Negros Natural Park (NNNP). The vast forest is home to 140 endemic bird species, including threatened and endangered species like the Negros Bleeding Heart Pigeon and the Visayan Tarictic Hornbill.

Many areas within the NNNP can benefit from revenues from ecotourism activities, revenues that can fund biodiversity conservation and reforestation.

The Gawahon Eco-Park, a 162-hectare forest land in Victorias City, is one of the areas within the NNNP that have great ecotourism potential. The local government of Victorias City first developed the area in 2000 and entered into a co-management agreement with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in 2004. Already, the Gawahon Eco-Park draws 8,000 visitors annually.

The local government of Victorias City has outlined plans to market the Gawahon Eco-Park as a birdwatching destination. Of the 140 endemic bird species documented within NNNP, 106 species have been spotted in the Gawahon Eco-Park, including the Southern Indigo-Banded Kingfisher, Flame-Templed Babbler, Spotted Wood Kingfisher and Critine Canary Flycatcher. The Eco-Park also has an apiary, where native stingless bee species *Tetragonula carbonaria*, locally known as "takpal", propagates and is source of organic honey.

Victorias City is also aiming to make Gawahon Eco-Park a model for community-based tourism. The United Nations Development Programme defines community-based tourism as "a tourism management model that puts

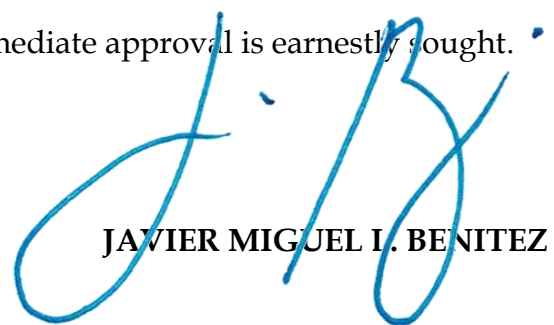
local communities at the center of the process: tourism by the local communities for the benefit of the local communities themselves.” Illustratively, the City Government is partnering with the Victorias Integrated Social Forestry Farmers Association to implement an agritourism program. Victorias City is also set to ink a partnership with the University of the Philippines – Visayas to establish the Gawahon Park Research Station and Community Science Center which will capacitate locals to become citizen scientists and agents of biodiversity conservation.

The City Government is committed to align development of the Gawahon Eco-Park with ecotourism standards and the community-based forest management strategy (CBFMS) of the DENR. Community engagement in the development of the Gawahon Eco-Park builds on a strong history of community-based tourism in the area. In fact, residents in the area had been granted Certificate of Stewardship Contract under the Integrated Social Forestry Program of the DENR, a precursor of CBFMS.

Indeed, Gawahon Eco-Park is a prime example of sustainable tourism development – tourism that addresses “the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.” But its continued success is predicated on adequate funding for biodiversity conversation, sustainable infrastructure and sustainable livelihood. Declaring the area as a tourist destination will mobilize resources for these crucial interventions.

The return of investment in Gawahon Eco-Park is clear and certain. Investing in ecotourism will drive inclusive economic development in Victorias City but more importantly, investing in ecotourism is investing in the future, ensuring that future generations will benefit from the beauty and bounty of nature.

In view of the foregoing, the immediate approval is earnestly sought.



JAVIER MIGUEL I. BENITEZ

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Introduced by **REP. JAVIER MIGUEL “JAVI” L. BENITEZ**

AN ACT DECLARING GAWAHON ECO-PARK LOCATED IN THE CITY OF VICTORIAS, PROVINCE OF NEGROS OCCIDENTAL A TOURIST DESTINATION, PROVIDING FOR ITS DEVELOPMENT AND APPROPRIATING FUNDS THEREFOR

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

SECTION 1. The Gawahon Eco-Park in the City of Victorias, Province of Negros Occidental, is hereby declared a tourist destination. As such, its development shall be prioritized by the Department of Tourism (DOT) and shall be subject to the rules and regulations governing the development of tourist destinations.

SEC. 2. Within one (1) year after the approval of this Act, the DOT, in coordination with the local government of the City of Victorias and concerned agencies of the government, shall prepare a tourism development plan involving the construction, installation, and maintenance of appropriate infrastructure and facilities that shall enhance tourism in the area, including an information center, a view deck and a multipurpose hall: *Provided*, That said development plan shall ensure the preservation and conservation of the natural ecosystems and resources of the area: *Provided, further*, That any activities and developments to be carried out in the area should conform with the concept of ecotourism as provided in the national ecotourism strategy jointly issued by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the DOT.

SEC. 3. The DOT and its concerned attached agencies shall take immediate steps to implement the tourism development plan that will suit the

natural characteristics of Gawahon Eco-Park, and shall incorporate the same in its tourism development program for the ensuing calendar year. It shall also include Gawahon Eco-Park in all its national, regional and local promotion programs.

SEC. 4. The Secretary of the DOT shall include in the Department's program the implementation of this Act, the funding of which shall be included in the annual General Appropriations Act and from internally generated funds of the DOT.

SEC. 5. The DOT shall transfer the management of the facilities to the local government of the City of Victorias within two (2) years after construction through a memorandum of agreement.

SEC. 6. Within sixty (60) days from the effectivity of this Act, the Secretary of the DOT, in consultation with the local government of the City of Victorias, shall promulgate the necessary rules and regulations for the proper implementation of this Act.

SEC. 7. If any provision of this Act or any part hereof is declared unconstitutional, the same shall not affect the validity and effectivity of the other provisions.

SEC. 8. All laws, rules, regulations, proclamations and executive orders, or parts thereof, contrary to or inconsistent with this Act are hereby repealed or modified accordingly.

SEC. 9. This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after its publication in the *Official Gazette* or in a newspaper of general circulation.

Approved,