

Wednesday, March 14, 2018

6

Boracay will recover from its problems

IN May, 2016, Thailand closed one of its most popular tourist island attractions – Koh Tachai, said to be the most beautiful island in Thailand – because heavy tourism was destroying the environment and natural resources.

“We have to close it to allow the rehabilitation of the environment both on the island and in the sea without being disturbed by tourism activities before the damage is beyond repair,” the Department of National Parks, Wildlife, and Plants Conservation said. Soon afterwards, another three islands off the coast of Phuket – Koh Khai Nok, Koh Khai Nui, and Koh Khai Nai – visited by 4,000 tourists a day, were also closed down for the same reason. They were reopened in October, five months later.

The closures have not affected Thailand’s tourism. Thailand was Asia’s No. 2 destination for international tourists, second only to China, in 2016, when it recorded over 32 million arrivals. This was followed by over 35 million in 2017. The closure of some of its top tourist attractions in 2016 have obviously not affected the country’s tourism program.

We have cited these figures in the wake of our own problem at Boracay, our top Philippine tourist destination today. President Duterte threatened to close down Boracay whose environmental problems, he said, have turned it into a “cesspool.” He directed the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to clean up Boracay in six months.

It appears that over 800 establishments had violations of various kinds, including construction of facilities without building permits, operating

without Environmental Compliance Certificates from the DENR, and serious sewerage problems. Secretary Wanda Teo of the Department of Tourism and Office-in-Charge Eduardo Ano of the Department of Interior and Local Government proposed the closure of Boracay for six months, but Secretary Roy Cimatu of the DENR said tests on the sewerage problems could not be held if all the establishments were closed.

Senate President Aquilino Pimentel III expressed support for the proposal to close down Boracay while rehabilitation work is undertaken, but other senators led by Sen. Cynthia Villar, chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, were for closing violating establishments and allowing compliant ones to continue operating during the rehabilitation process.

Some people have expressed fears that Boracay may begin to lose its attraction to visitors because of the “cesspool” findings and the continuing debate as to whether it should be closed down totally or in part. The experience of Thailand, which closed some of its top tourist islands for up to five months, should reassure us that we will recover from the present setback.

The important thing is that we act decisively on the problems that have been discovered – the many violations of building, environmental, and other regulations. We are confident that after the period of rehabilitation, Boracay, which has become known worldwide for its beautiful white sand beaches, its leisure and sports activities, its food, nightlife, and other amenities, will be back as the top tourist destination and pride of the country.

* TOURISM