

Coastal landscapes, sustainable consumption and peripheral communities: evaluating the Miramar resort controversy in Shanyuan Bay, Taiwan.

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Abstract

This paper elaborates challenges for sustainable development based on consumption of the coastal environment through tourism, through the case of the Miramar Resort in Taitung County, Taiwan. Thinking in terms of the blue economy and more sensitive forms of tourism and recreation that consider environmental protection have laid focus on the idea that the coastal environment may be ‘consumed’, yet that this consumption needs to fit with the principles of sustainability. The purpose of this paper is thus to evaluate what sustainable consumption of the coastal environment may (or may not) look like in a locality facing competing social, economic and environmental sustainability pressures, specifically Taitung County in Taiwan. We conduct in-depth interviews with key actors involved in the dispute over the construction of the Miramar Resort in Taitung, and assess these through the conceptual lens of sustainable consumption. Our study finds significant contestation over the developer and local government claims that the resort represents a sustainable trajectory for the local, with differing views on environmental impact, fairness of process, and distribution of economic benefit. In a wider context, these findings illustrate the importance of inclusive and meaningful decision-making processes, shared end goals, and good support for local-level coastal managers and planners if consumption-driven developments are to form part of sustainable local development in peripheral coastal regions.

Keywords: coastal landscapes; qualitative research; sustainable consumption; sustainable tourism; Taiwan.

Highlights

- Evaluation of Miramar Resort controversy in Taitung County, Taiwan;
- Consideration of tourism based on coastal landscapes for local sustainability;
- Complex relations between community, local government and national actors;
- Different views over extent to which project supports local sustainability;
- Findings yield insight for other peripheral coastal communities in Asia and beyond.

1. Introduction

The health of the seas and coasts and the sustainability of consumption practices represent two significant global sustainable development challenges, encapsulated in Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water) and Sustainable Development Goal 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production) respectively. This paper builds on emerging interest in the interface between these two challenges by evaluating one consumption-driven development project in a coastal environment facing concomitant development and environmental protection challenges – the Miramar Resort in Shanyuan Bay in Taitung County, Taiwan. Drawing on conceptual understandings of sustainable consumption and interviews with actors involved in the dispute, our study adds additional granularity to understandings of what the sustainable consumption of the marine and coastal environment might look like in an ecotourism context. Our findings suggest that equity and fairness in decision-making processes are critical in

ensuring the sustainability of consumption-driven developments in coastal regions, but also that local-level planners and coastal managers must be supported with the skills and resources to weigh up sometimes competing environmental and socio-economic imperatives.

The interface between sustainability and consumption in the marine and coastal environment has thus far largely been dominated by discussions on sustainable fisheries. However, a turn towards ‘blue economy’ approaches which consider ‘consumption’ in seas and coasts in a wider sense (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2019) emphasises the consumption of the coastal landscape through a broad range of processes including tourism and recreation (Partelow & Nelson, 2020). The possibility that nature can be both physically and intellectually ‘consumed’ is of course not new, stretching back at least to the emergence of industrial capitalism (Smith, 2010). Yet recent scholarship considering how recreation and tourism can be linked with environmental protection actions in a marine context (e.g. Pittman et al., 2019) arguably represents a turn towards thinking about how this consumption of coastal and marine landscapes can be undertaken sustainably.

Nonetheless, at the same time as thinking on a sustainable relationship with the coasts and seas is emerging, coastal communities in peripheral regions in east- and south-east Asia face socio-economic development (or re-development) pressures. The connection between the consumption of pure or unspoiled coastal landscapes and local socio-economic benefit through ecotourism has, for example, been argued in the cases of Nam Dinh Province in northern Vietnam (Tran & Walter, 2014); Penghu in Taiwan (Cheng & Wu, 2015); and Kushiro in Hokkaido, Japan (Hamman, 2018). The question this paper addresses is thus: where might some of the difficulties lie in attaining a sustainable form consumption of the coastal

environment through tourism in a peripheral region, facing competing socio-economic development and environmental protection pressures?

To evaluate these challenges, we work with a coastal tourist development in one peripheral coastal region – Taitung County in Taiwan – and with the conceptual framework of sustainable consumption. We understand sustainable consumption as “the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and foster a certain quality of life, while minimising environmental harm to ourselves and future generations” (Hobson, 2013: 1082). Practically, Cicin-Sain (2015) highlights the relevance of sustainable consumption to a marine setting by viewing sustainable consumption and production (Sustainable Development Goal 12) as helping to achieve sustainable oceans and seas (SDG14). Sharpley (2000) too argues that a genuine attempt to evaluate the ‘sustainability’ of tourism must address the overarching issues of consumption (and production) which are bound up with tourist practices. Conceptually, sustainable consumption becomes a useful lens through which to understand the balancing of potentially competing environmental, social and economic pressures if we follow Geels et al's (2015) understanding of sustainable consumption as a reconfigurative process, one involving changes in socio-technical systems and practices without the need to completely overthrow larger processes such as capitalism or consumerism. This reconfigurative approach argues that policy-makers cannot steer processes at will, as they are reliant on firms (for taxes and jobs) and wider publics (for legitimacy and consent), and hence fits well with our interest in peripheral coastal areas, where regional-level policy-makers still need to finely balance environmental sustainability and socio-economic imperatives (e.g. Bay-Larsen, 2012).

For additional analytical purchase on the extent to which ecotourism in a peripheral coastal region could be considered to constitute sustainable consumption, we bear in mind three

aspects of sustainable consumption proposed by Hobson (2013). These are the *central tenet* of the approach; the *methods* adopted; and the *end goal*. Hobson suggests that a ‘weak’ approach to sustainable consumption would have a central tenet of improved efficiency, a method of technological innovation, and an end goal of continued growth alongside wellbeing; whereas a ‘strong’ approach to sustainable consumption might entail a central tenet of de-consumption, methods based on grassroots movements, and an end goal of de-consumption alongside wellbeing. Bearing in mind Hobson’s assertion that one need not ‘pick a side’ of weak or strong sustainable consumption, we return to these three aspects in the discussion to consider (a) where precisely the barriers lie in adopting sustainable approaches to consumption of the coastal landscape in a peripheral region facing multiple pressures; and (b) what an appropriate form of sustainable consumption within ecotourism might look like in such contexts. With this in mind, we now turn to our case study – the Miramar Resort controversy in Shanyuan Bay, Taitung County, Taiwan.

2. Overview: the Miramar Resort dispute

Shanyuan Bay is a natural sand beach located on the coast of Taitung County on the eastern coast of Taiwan (see Figure 1). Taitung County, and indeed the east of Taiwan as a whole, is significantly less urbanised than the west of the country. Taitung is consistently ranked amongst the poorest counties in Taiwan, with a high proportion of low-income households (Cheng, 2017) and an increasing interest in tourism as a means of providing social and economic benefit (Xiong, 2017). Indeed, the eastern part of Taiwan is regarded as a ‘retreat’ for people from elsewhere in Taiwan, somewhere that is largely free from damage associated with development (Huang 2014). Shanyuan Bay is also home to the Amis people, a branch of

indigenous people in Taiwan - with the Tzu-Tung Tribe inhabiting the southern part of Shanyuan Bay (Tai et al. 2013).

In 2003, the Durban Group Limited Company proposed operations in Shanyuan Bay, where a public lido already existed. In 2004 the Taitung County Government announced a build, operate and transfer (BOT) project in cooperation with the private sector to develop and run the lido in Shanyuan Bay. The Durban Group Limited Company won this contract, and set up the Miramar Resort Limited Company to operate the project. Although the entire land area zoned for the resort reached 59,956m², in 2005 the Miramar Resort successfully applied to the Taitung County Government to create a separate land parcel of only 9,997 m², on which the main resort building would be constructed. Creating this separate land parcel allowed the Miramar Resort to circumvent the requirement for an EIA for the resort building itself, as under Taiwanese law an EIA is only required for developments over 10,000 m² (1 hectare). Construction of the resort building therefore commenced *before* the EIA for the whole resort area got underway the following year. Furthermore, in Taiwan different levels of impact assessment are required depending on how a hotel is classified. ‘General hotels’ are assessed locally, whereas ‘tourist hotels’ are conducted by the Environment Protection Administration of the central government. However, it is up to the developer to register whether their development project is ‘general’ or ‘tourist’ hotel. The Miramar Resort was registered as a ‘general’ hotel, despite having features such as spas and swimming pools not normally available in ‘general’ hotels.

In 2007, an NGO called Taitung Environmental Protection Association discovered the project had commenced construction without an EIA being completed, finding abandoned waste soil along the coast. Taitung Environmental Protection Association reported this to the local

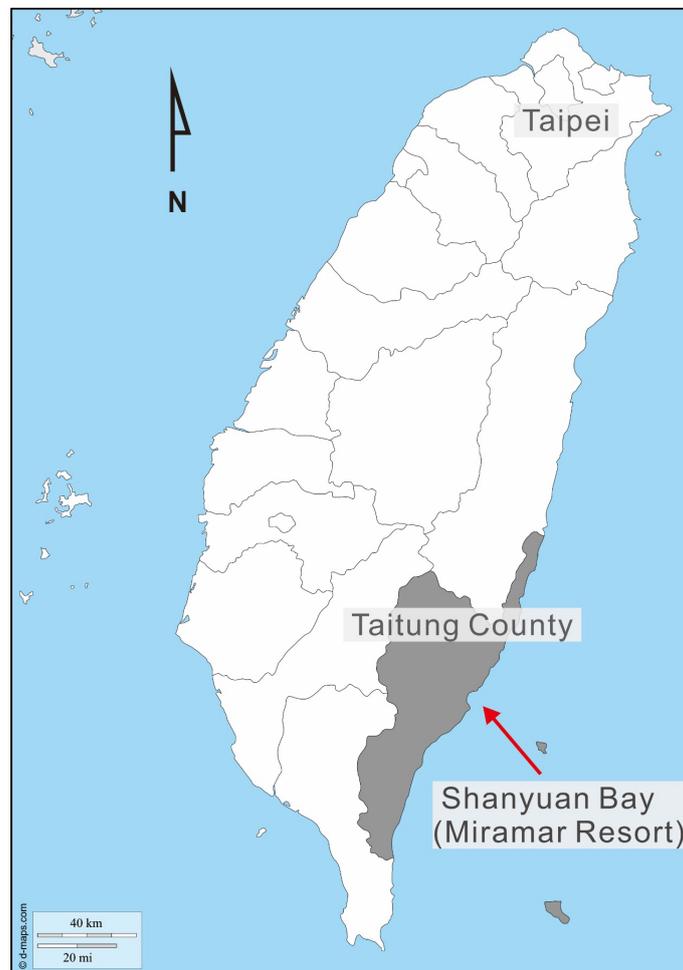
government, and filed a law suit against the invalid building permit for the resort building. In mid-2007 the Environmental Protection Administration of the Executive Yuan (Taiwan's national-level government) ordered the Taitung County Government to cease Miramar Resort construction and conduct an EIA correctly. Early in 2008, the Kaohsiung High Administrative Court judged that Taitung County Government should order Miramar Resort to stop all development works.

However, in response the Taitung County Government launched a new EIA meeting and passed the Miramar Resort proposal under conditions. After this decision had been ruled invalid by the Kaohsiung High Administrative Court in 2009, the response of the local government was then to issue the Miramar Resort with a new building permit with a view to progressing construction, and open a new EIA meeting. Over the next six years, both the Kaohsiung High Administrative Court and Taiwan's Supreme Administrative Court ruled against successive attempts by Taitung County Government and the Miramar Resort to pass an EIA and continue construction. In 2016, the Supreme Administrative Court made a final ruling against the construction and EIA, and the Miramar Resort company withdrew from the project. As of mid-2018, the resort building itself was still standing, largely completed but empty and unused.

Whilst both the Miramar Resort developer and Taitung County Government were both in favour of the development, the project – and especially the process through which the EIA was conducted – drew widespread opposition. In addition to Taiwan-wide environmental NGOs such as Citizen of the Earth and the Wild at Heart Legal Defence Association, some members of the Amis indigenous community and environmental lawyers with strong public profiles have expressed opposition (or at least strong concern) towards the project. Notably, this contestation

(a) comes from figures who have potential to shape public opinion across all of Taiwan with regard to the environment and sustainability; and (b) and stems as much from opposition to the planning process as it does from the physical environmental impacts of the development. As such, analysis of the Miramar dispute may offer insight into how sustainable tourism and the ‘consumption’ of nature are imagined in the Taiwanese context more widely.

Figure 1: location of Taitung County in Taiwan; and Miramar Resort and Shanyuan Bay within Taitung County (source: adapted from d-maps.com)



3. Method

This paper draws on in-depth interviews conducted with stakeholders related to the Miramar Resort controversy. Qualitative interview approaches have been utilised in the context of both sustainable consumption (e.g. Roy et al, 2015) and sustainability issues on coasts (e.g. Leith et al, 2014) as a way of understanding meaning, relationships, the workings of institutions, and the ways in which knowledge is used. The interviews were originally conducted as part of a wider project evaluating the contours of the controversy around the EIA process for the Miramar Resort. As part of this, this paper focuses on evaluating what interviewees' responses can tell us about what they understand sustainable consumption to mean in a coastal ecotourism context. In both cases, we are seeking to assess how different groups of people understand and make sense of a complex and contested issue - specifically, the sustainability or otherwise of a new coastal development. Accordingly, a qualitative interview-based approach with a focused sample was deemed most appropriate to obtain data appropriate to the topic.

Seven interviews were conducted in total, as laid out in Table 1 below. Interviewees were identified through analysis of online media coverage relating to the Miramar Resort, which clarified the main stakeholders and their viewpoints, and subsequently recruited via email contact. Whilst a sample of this size is not intended in any way to be statistically representative, sampling was targeted towards identifying key informants (Lewis, 2003, cited in Gross, 2007), supported by 'snowball sampling' to identify additional respondents with relevant insights (O'Leary, 2004, cited in Gross, 2007). Participants were accordingly recruited to represent the main sectors (e.g. developer, local government, environmental NGOs, local indigenous activists) and opinions relating to the conflict. The interviews were semi-structured and conversational (Bryman 2012), with follow-up questions being asked to probe further and

flexibility to focus on the issues interviewees themselves deemed to be significant. Each interview aimed to cover: (a) the respondents' general views towards the Miramar Resort and the EIA process; (b) the history and context of their relationship to the issue; (c) their perceptions of fairness within the project; (d) their thoughts on how environmental assessment ought to proceed in such socially-complicated situations like the Miramar dispute; and (e) their own personal environmental values to understand the wider context of the respondents' views towards the Miramar issue. The prompts used to steer the discussion are attached as Supplementary Data. All interviews were undertaken in Chinese by the lead author, and were conducted either virtually through online conference calling or over email, with the discussion being recorded and/or notes taken during the interview. Interviews took place in spring and summer 2013, while the dispute was still live. Consent was obtained from all interviewees to participate in the research.

Table 1: interviewees and relation to conflict

| Respondent | Relationship to conflict |
|--|--|
| Miramar Resort Management Representative | Employee of developer, section manager, responsible for official statements and public-facing opinion pieces. |
| Taitung County Government / Taitung Tourism Bureau | Taitung County Government is the Miramar Resort Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) project collaborator; issuer of construction license; and organiser of EIA meetings. Taitung Tourism Bureau is a division of Taitung County Government. Its role is to issue the certification for the Miramar Resort to operate, and the promotion organisation of this project. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Local indigenous activist | Opponent to project from indigenous community. |
| Opposition group administrator | One of the managers of an online group opposing the Miramar Resort; author of academic paper on EIA in Taiwan. |
| Hualien and Taitung Office of environmental NGO | Core environment protection group boycotting the Miramar; also participated in national news programme: <i>Let's Talk</i> . |
| Environmental educator | Attended sixth EIA meeting. |
| Social observation project student | Student who visited Tzu-Tung tribe and wrote a report discussing the cultural conflict from the Miramar issue. |

Interviews were analysed through directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), reading for statements which (a) showed the speaker's overall standpoint towards the conflict; (b) indicated their perceptions of the impact assessment dispute, including their views of both the impacts themselves and also the assessment process; and (c) showed values towards the environment (e.g. economic, aesthetic, spiritual value). A directed content analysis means that the interviews were read and coded primarily for the themes and elements that the researchers had identified beforehand as being relevant to the research aim, but also remaining open to the possibility that new or additional elements may be uncovered during the coding process and allowing these to be noted and added during the analysis. Taking a directed content analysis approach of this nature allows for relatively structured analysis between cases, but also allowing room for the researcher to note new themes and material emerging during the reading, which may provide additional analytical or explanatory insight.

In Section 4, the interview in which the observations reported were raised is stated in brackets. Where appropriate, interview findings are supported by reference to policy documents and/or news media reporting which provide additional contextual background and show how the dispute has evolved subsequent to the main fieldwork period.

4. Findings

To evaluate claims to the sustainability or otherwise of the Miramar Resort as a consumption-driven development on the Taitung coast, we structure the findings around the three common pillars of sustainable development, as elaborated in a coastal management context by Cicin-Sain (1993): environmentally appropriate development, economic development to improve the quality of life of people; and equitable development.

4.1. Environmentally appropriate development

Cicin-Sain (1993: 16) defines environmentally appropriate development in a coastal context as “development that is environmentally sensitive and makes appropriate use (and sometimes non-use) of natural resources.” Indeed, at first sight, the key point of contention around the Miramar Resort debate appears to be whether the project can be considered an environmentally appropriate development. The key premise of the EIA process, around much of which the Miramar debate circles, is the identification, evaluation and mitigation of ecological and social effects of developments ahead of making decisions on whether to proceed. It would hence be logical to expect that debate over the planning and construction process for the Miramar Resort would start from the question of if the project could be considered sustainable from the perspective of the ecological impact it has on nature.

Both proponents and opponents of the project make claims about the ecological sustainability of the resort. Taitung County Government and the Miramar Resort operators were quick to state that the project did not harm the environment, and that the quality of the natural environment around the resort was a necessary precursor to a viable business model:

‘A good condition of environment is the selling point and demand of our resort’s aim. Furthermore, the project had signed a 50 year contract, the Miramar Resort will not kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.’ (interview with Miramar Resort management)

‘The environmental groups said this project will bring harms to the environment. Yet, it actually does not.’ (interview with Taitung Tourism Bureau)

Chapter Eight of the Miramar Resort's Environmental Impact Statement, titled “Environmental protection measures and alternatives,” proposes the development project to promote ecotourism. The statement aims to encourage travellers to deeply understand and experience the local natural environment, alongside the continuation of Taitung's culture and local traditions. From the perspective of proponents, then, an ecologically ‘sustainable’ development is somehow a precursor to realising any kind of economic development.

On the other hand, those in opposition to the resort development raised both immediate concerns about environmental degradation, and also broader issues about whether preservation of environmental quality was sufficient to guarantee ecological sustainability. For example, the Hualien and Taitung Office of the NGO Citizen of the Earth claimed, based on coral reef examinations and onshore surveys, that buried construction waste from the resort caused metal pollution. These claims to soil contamination were refuted by Miramar on the basis of formal

soil testing undertaken in collaboration with Cheng Shiu University. Environmental NGOs also stated their opposition in interview on more emotive grounds:

'I have to admit that even though the Miramar Resort's construction could be demolished, it still cannot return to the original beauty in my memories.' (interview with environmental NGO representative)

Another social media-based coalition of opponents to the project similarly argued the development would somehow 'de-value' the environment on which humans' lives depended (interview with opposition group administrator). These concerns relate not to the aesthetic value or even the environmental 'impact' of the development, but more about the intrinsic value of the natural landscape and the possibility that development within the landscape – even if premised on enjoyment and appreciation of nature – is not compatible with the environmental integrity of the locale. Moreover, in much more practical terms, it was also noted that as construction of the resort had reached a very advanced stage – and hence the local environment had been altered – while the EIA process was still ongoing, the environmental assessment process had virtually no value in protecting the ecological integrity of the area around the Miramar Resort (interview with environmental NGO representative). As we now discuss, it is these concerns around procedure and process which form the substance of many people's concerns with the Miramar development.

4.2. Equity

Cicin-Sain (1993: 16) defines equitable development as “equity in the distribution of benefits from development” across groups in society including respecting the rights of indigenous peoples, across generations, and across nations. As per the previous sub-section, the

argumentation around the Miramar Resort is in part related to the environmental effects of the development. However, arguments around the sustainability or otherwise of the development also reflect questions relating to equity. We understand equity in this context to mean not only fairness in distribution of benefits across space and society (Ikeme, 2003) but also fairness in the *processes* through which decisions influencing these distributions are made, along the lines of procedural justice (Walker, 2012).

Indeed, much of the Miramar debate has focused on whether the way the resort was envisaged and its environmental assessment conducted is itself ‘sustainable’ from an equity perspective. Perhaps unsurprisingly, both the developer and the local government portrayed the distribution of benefits from the project and its development process as being equitable:

‘Over 90% local people support this project under the condition of not damaging the environment, they consider that they should develop tourism and create job opportunities to let people return to their hometown.’ (interview with Miramar Resort management)

Yet in a petition against the project, the Hualien and Taitung Office of Citizen of the Earth criticised the actions of both the developer, for commencing construction ahead of the EIA, and the Taitung County Government, for misinterpreting laws and ignoring the judgment from a higher-level court. Notably, Citizen of the Earth’s Hualien and Taitung Office explicitly stated in their petition that these procedural factors went against principles of sustainable development. Locally-located project opponents too heavily emphasised a perceived lack of fairness in process as grounds for opposition:

‘Taitung County Government is supposed to be neutral, but they covered the Miramar issue’s illegality and kept telling lies. The central government is essential to do mediation, but the central government is shirking the responsibility’ (interview with local indigenous activist).

The above illustrates how the processes through which decisions about the allocation of benefits are made can contribute to the ‘sustainable’ consumption of nature alongside outcomes and ultimate environmental effects. Whilst interviewed opponents stated a desire to protect the intrinsic value of the environment was the ultimate reason for their opposition to the project, they spoke in depth about the environmental consultation *process* relating to the resort to justify and contextualise this standpoint. A key point of contention was that participation in the exercises became very difficult for the people living in the immediate vicinity of the resort. Reasons for this included that citizens were arguably only informed of consultation events a matter of days before, and were unable to contribute to the meetings unless formally ‘recognised’ as a claimant or defendant (interview with local indigenous activist); and claims that consultation meetings were held in Mandarin, thereby preventing participation from older indigenous people who may be more vulnerable to changes in the environment and society but are unable to communicate in Mandarin (interview with social observation student). The range of possible outcomes which could tangibly be achieved through participation in the decision-making process was also questioned, given that it was unlikely to be possible to ask the developer to deconstruct the building work (interview with local indigenous activist).

Moreover, questions were raised about the extent to which the development and EIA process considered indigenous peoples’ relations with the land and sea, and whether the exploitative

consumption-driven nature of the project runs against indigenous understandings of sustainable environmental management:

'aboriginal people often regard the mountains or the ocean as our mother, you can say you love your mother, you are a child of the ocean, but only share the environment, not possess it' (interview with local indigenous activist)

'the problem of the Miramar Resort's environmental value is that they changed the land from natural to unnatural and made the land become money or a space for earning money [...] the original nature's value will be lost, this value could probably not come back anymore.' (interview with opposition group administrator)

It is also notable that whilst the Miramar developer's environmental statement plans to preserve local indigenous culture and cooperate with indigenous peoples to promote ecotourism, the impact statement (and government registry on which it is based) states this area is a hillside. Within the dispute, there are hence differing views on the who has the right to 'consume' the coastal environment, in what ways, and how claims of affiliation to the land are understood.

The above indicates that opposition to the Miramar Resort development came not only from concern for the effects on nature, but also through questions over the adequacy of the processes through which decisions relating to the development were made (perhaps even more so than the ultimate distribution of benefits from the project) and the extent to which these considered the views of those affected. Consumption of nature in a 'sustainable' manner may thus have to encompass sustainable decision-making *processes* (in the sense of being perceived as fair

and/or socially equitable) as well as equitable and ecologically sustainable *outcomes*. Related to this is the question of whether the development brings economic sustainability, and to whom.

4.3. Economic

Cicin-Sain (1993: 16) defines economic sustainability in the context of sustainable coastal management as “economic development to improve the quality of life of people.” In both the ‘ecology’ and ‘equity’ spheres outlined above, the Miramar Resort debate becomes entangled in bigger discussions about the role of the consumption of nature – and of tourism generally – in the future of Taitung County and on Taiwan’s east coast. It is however in the economic sphere that debates over the value of resorts such as Miramar to improve the quality of life for people living in the Shanyuan Bay area become most pointed.

The Miramar Resort development was portrayed by the developer and also the Taitung County Government as being critical to sustaining local economic development. After the resort was finally declared illegal and the subsequent withdrawal of the Miramar Company from the development, Taitung County Mayor Huang Chien-ting was reported as stating that the majority of opposition to the project had come from people outside the local community, and that the impact of the dispute could have negative effects for Taitung’s coastal areas by deterring investment from enterprise (UDN News 2018). The idea of Taiwan’s east coast as being the country’s ‘back garden’ features heavily in Taitung County’s own promotional material. The county is, for example, introduced thus:

‘Taitung has high mountains, a rift valley, and ocean; here you can wander through a borderless natural classroom, forget your troubles and fully experience all this

beautiful land has to offer, including a slower pace of life!’ (Taitung County Government 2018).

Nature-based tourism – in cases aided by resorts like Miramar - hence comes to be positioned as key to the economic ‘sustainability’ of peripheral coastal regions of Taiwan. When such socio-economic development imperatives – and the apparent potential of initiatives such as Miramar to meet these challenges - are considered against the ecological and justice concerns described in the previous sections, the question of whether the Miramar Resort could constitute a case of sustainable consumption may suddenly appear less clear-cut. Nonetheless, returning to the question of equity as understood as the distribution of environmental goods and services across people and space (Ikeme 2003), questions may be asked of the extent to which developments such as Miramar actually do bring economic benefit to improve the lives of people locally. Whilst it was claimed that the local community were by and large in favour of the project (interview with Taitung County Government representative), some of the project’s more vocal opponents were sceptical of whether these economic benefits would materialise locally. Environmental lawyer Chan Shun-Kuei, for instance, argued that the Miramar Resort was an “exclusive, predatory economic development,” in which localised employment opportunities were restricted to lower-level jobs and the majority of the benefits accrued to a small proportion of people (PeoPo Citizen Journalism, 2012). Scepticism was also raised about whether a large private sector developer – based in the national capital in Taipei – would indeed act in the interest of providing public good, as opposed to purely generating profit:

‘the operation of Miramar Resort is based on capitalism, they are aiming to rob land and resources to gain the greatest benefits’ (interview with opposition group administrator)

As far as economic dimensions of sustainability are concerned, nature and its consumption play a challenging role in Shanyuan Bay and Taitung County. On one hand, it is true that the eastern coast of Taiwan remains a peripheral region which has seen less socio-economic development than the west coast, and that appropriately-managed ecotourism offers an opportunity to close this gap and sustain the local economy in the face of population decline and out-migration. At the same time, however, questions may also be asked as to who exactly may benefit from any economic benefit generated by the Miramar Resort, and how this may be balanced against the other kinds of ‘value’ (e.g. the intrinsic value of nature) tied up in the landscape and raised in Sections 4.1. and 4.2.

5. Discussion

We return to the issue of sustainable consumption of the coastal landscape, and ask: to what extent is the Miramar a reconfiguration of consumption towards sustainability (Geels et al, 2015), that will balance Taitung’s socio-economic development imperatives with the need for environmental sustainability? And if not, how might other ecotourism developments in the name of sustainability for peripheral coastal regions become so? We structure the discussion around the three aspects of sustainable consumption outlined by Hobson (2013).

First is the *central tenet* of the approach. As a development which purported to have a limited impact on the coastal environment, the Miramar Resort is – if one follows the developer’s rhetoric – an ‘efficient’ engagement with a natural resource and thus a ‘weak’ form of sustainable consumption. Perhaps more significant, however, is that what a development or initiative stands for may count for more than its environmental effects or ecological

sustainability. The area of the Miramar Resort is not large, no more than five storeys at its highest point and less than two hundred metres in length, and thus on paper fits within the criteria for a more light-touch EIA as explained in Section 2. This is not to justify the development, merely to illustrate that the environmental impact of the development may be confined to a relatively small part of the coastline. Moreover, prior to construction of the resort building, the land was already used for recreational and tourist purposes, albeit at a much smaller scale, through provision of a public lido.

Despite the contestation over the Miramar Resort being focused on the EIA process, a much wider set of concerns are raised in addition to the claims made by environmental NGOs of environmental damage. These include recognition of indigenous rights and land claims; the ability of the project developer to override environmental protection legislation; and the perceived willingness of the local government to support a private sector organisation in circumventing regulations and acting against judgements from higher legal levels. This broad set of concerns reflects the importance of equity in outcome, process *and* recognition for sustainable coastal management laid down by Cicin-Sain (1993). The idea of claims to injustice in a site-specific controversy as representing much wider societal trajectories of unsustainability has been demonstrated elsewhere in the Taiwan coastal context by Fan (2017) on indigenous land issues in relation to nuclear waste storage, and the planned building of National Glory petrochemical complex (Lee, 2014). On the other hand, in the case of Sjunghatten in Norway, Bay-Larsen (2012) illustrates how it may be possible to reach a ‘win-win’ compromise balancing tourism, traditional activity and environmental protection through a meaningful and extensive participatory planning approach. The Miramar case and these analogous examples hence indicate that for a tourist development to form part of the sustainable consumption of the coastal environment, it is vital to get buy-in for the central tenet of the

approach through decision-making processes affording attention to questions of who benefits, who is recognised and included in the decision-making process, and whether measures to protect the public good are respected as the initiative is developed.

Second is the *method* of the approach, specifically technological innovation versus grassroots movements. ‘Method’ of sustainable consumption understood in this way appears to be a key faultline in the Miramar dispute. The resort – a new construction built by a major private sector developer located in Taiwan’s capital city – is promoted as a model of sustainability for the locality based on new infrastructure and new industry. The most vocal opposition to the resort seems to be based on local grassroots organisation. However, our findings to an extent problematise an assumption that ‘local’ or bottom-up approaches will lead to more sustainable consumption forms. The Miramar build-operate-transfer project was initiated at the local level by the Taitung County Government. It was also the local government in Taitung who arguably helped the Miramar developers to start construction without an EIA by re-assigning land packages, and appeared to work with the developer to get their environmental assessments approved by re-opening assessment meetings and issuing fresh building permits. By contrast, it was authorities operating at larger spatial scales and/or greater distances from the project – the Kaohsiung High Administrative Court in south-west Taiwan and the national-level Supreme Administrative Court – who ruled the construction to be illegal; and NGOs with a Taiwan-wide reach who acted to engage with legal contestations and shape public opinion through campaigning.

At the same time, however, it is perhaps important not to be excessively critical of local-level actors such as Taitung County Government trying to push towards consumption of the coastal landscape. Taitung County is consistently ranked amongst the poorest counties in Taiwan,

along with a high proportion of low-income households (Cheng, 2017). Tourism has had a positive effect on the local economy in recent years (Xiong 2017). Taitung's situation thus reflects very well the challenge identified by Geels et al (2015) of policymakers being unable to steer processes at will, due to reliance on both industry for taxation and employment and the public for legitimacy and consent. Both in Taiwan (Tang, 2002; Tu, 2012) and internationally (Creamer et al, 2018), such local complexities have led to critiques of 'outsiders' imposing their views on what sustainability ought to look like in a locale. 'Outsiders' in the Miramar case are the environmental protection NGOs or opponents of the project coming from outside the Taitung area.

Accordingly, a sustainable mode of consuming the coastal environment may require a more nuanced 'method' in peripheral coastal regions facing multiple challenges than a simple distinction between 'technical' or 'grassroots' approaches. Useful principles to follow in this regard may be the approach taken by Wabnitz et al (2018) for marine ecotourism in Palau, which suggests the use of scenarios to stimulate discussion on the sustainable growth of tourism within a wider set of environmental pressures and stresses the importance of ensuring revenues accrue to the local economy. Given the indigenous understandings of land and sea in the Miramar dispute, the principles of Stocker et al (2015) for linking Aboriginal and 'Western' ways of knowing in sustainable coastal management in Australia, which create a third space for balancing different perspectives by thinking through human-environment relations, family and societal relations, and differing knowledge systems, may also be valuable.

Third is the *end goal* of the approach to sustainable consumption, which may lie along a spectrum from continued growth plus wellbeing to deconsumption plus wellbeing. Again, the stated goal of the Miramar Resort is to facilitate socio-economic development for a peripheral

part of Taiwan. If one buys into the claims of the developers, this approach enhances wellbeing through continued growth and places the development at the ‘weak’ end of the sustainable consumption spectrum at best. Yet linking back to both Cicin-Sain (1993) and our observations around the central tenet of sustainable consumption, the question is perhaps not only what the end goal of the development is, but also whose wellbeing this end goal supports. For Miramar, the local government and developer end goal of economic development of Taitung County through the provision of local jobs and tourist revenue was questioned by opponents of the project over issues such as lack of consideration of indigenous views on rights to natural resources, limited opportunity for high-skilled and well-paid jobs to accrue locally, and even the inclusivity over how decisions were made. For the Miramar Resort, the end goal of the project is therefore contested, with the clear account of normative approaches, principles and objectives that Neumann et al (2017) see as vital to coastal sustainability lacking. There is little consensus on whether the end goal of the project constitutes sustainable consumption. By contrast, Lin and Liu (2016) evaluate the case of ecotourism initiatives involving indigenous areas in Tongmen, Hualien County, Taiwan (also on the east coast but to the north of Taitung County). Whilst ecotourism development in Tongmen has not been without difficulties, Lin and Liu note that the presence of a common goal among different actors – a sustainable environment and Indigenous culture to enable local resilience – has helped ecotourism develop in a way amenable to all sides.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we evaluated the controversy over the Miramar Resort in Taitung County, Taiwan, through the lens of what sustainable consumption may mean for coastal and marine environments and in particular ecotourism. Our interest in the sustainable ‘consumption’ of the

coastal landscape through tourism reflects a broader turn towards the interface between sustainability and consumption in the coastal and marine policy literature, but also speaks to the challenges faced in peripheral coastal regions in east- and south-east Asia (and indeed globally) where socio-economic development imperatives need to be balanced with environmental protection. Through interviews with key informants and reference to supporting documentation, we found that there is significant contestation to the idea – put forward by the developer and also the local authorities – that the Miramar Resort constitutes a sustainable development for Taitung County based on consumption of the coastal landscape. Key points of contestation include differing views on the environmental impacts of the development; concerns over the equity of the project regarding not only to the distribution of benefits, but also the processes through which decisions have been made; and questions over the extent to which economic benefits from the project promote the wellbeing of those local to the development. Our findings build on existing international literature in areas such as blue economy and the integration of sustainable recreation and tourism into marine environmental protection initiatives by adding additional granularity to what sustainable consumption may (or may not) look like in a coastal setting. In this regard, key learnings for coastal and marine policy are: (a) the importance of early, inclusive and meaningful decision-making processes which facilitate broad-based buy-in for specific projects and what they stand for more widely; (b) a more nuanced understanding of the relations between ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches, including equipping local and regional government planners and coastal managers with the capabilities and resourcing to evaluate and be able to say ‘no’ to developments deemed unsustainable; and (c) the value of a common, coherent and well-articulated vision of how consumption of the coastal landscape fits into an end goal of sustainability for the locality.

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Supplementary Material – List of Interview Prompts

1. What do you think is the environment?
2. What does the environment mean to you?
3. How do you determine the value of the environment?
4. Can the value of the environment be hierarchical?
5. What do you think about sightseeing to the environment?
6. What do you think is the beauty? What does beauty mean to you?
7. How do you view the relationship between development and environment?
9. Do you think people are part of the environment or separated?
10. What is your opinion on the Miramar Resort issue?
11. During the construction of Miramar Resort, did the Resort communicate with local residents?
12. During the construction of Miramar Resort, is there a platform for everyone to express their opinions or participate?
13. If there are no legality issues about EIA of Miramar Resort development project, will you support it?
14. What are the main constituents of the opposition? Is it the majority locally?