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New threat to wild plants: Ornamental gardening

Renewed interest in gardening during the quarantine gave rise to ‘plantitos, plantitas’

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Endangered plants are targeted by collectors of rare plants, many of which are endemic to the Philippines. Among these are coral plant, Wade's pitogo or Wade's cycad, Greeniopsis megalantha, kamraj or tunjuk-langit fern, Malaysian Grapes or Malaysian orchid and pitcher plant.

Massive destruction of habitats caused by mining, quarrying and land-use conversion from forest to other purposes are not the only threats to biological diversity.

Amid the threats of the new coronavirus disease (Covid-19), the hazards to wildlife intensified as the community quarantine put in place by the government since March saw a renewed interest in urban gardening. Sadly, the gathering of rare and wild plant species with high commercial value from the forests is being resorted to.

During quarantine, the country's forests, including protected areas and national parks, are left with very little protection against enterprising Filipinos who saw the opportunity for quick cash.

Rise of ‘plantitos, plantitas’

With businesses closing up shop, many Filipinos who lost their jobs were compelled to start their own little business.

While some resorted to online selling of cooked food and other wares, enterprising Filipinos have started making money from what started as quarantine stress reliever—planting ornamental plants, earning them the tag “plantitos and plantitas.”

They are now selling online their plants, pots, while some have even opened shops, selling and reselling garden products—from plants and pots, garden soil, tools to fertilizers and pesticides.

Sadly, the popularity of urban gardening or home gardening made rare and wild plant species in forests easy targets by those who find the venture financially rewarding.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is well aware of the growing threat posed by this threat to wild plants.

DENR Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon expressed alarm that the illegal harvesting of plants may be happening in protected areas, and collectors may be unaware that the species they are collecting are endangered or already on the brink of extinction.

Haven for rare plants, too

Protected areas and national parks are not only a haven for threatened animals. They are also home to some of the country’s unique but threatened plant species, an official of the DENR said.

Unlike animals who can escape captivity, plants are easy targets.

With the growing demand for rare plants, their prices went sky-high, making harvesting plants in the wild more enticing, said Don Guevarra, chief of the Regional Public Affairs Office of DENR Region 3.

He cited the case of Mount Arayat National Park (MANP) in Pampanga, where a new plant species—*Pyrostria arayatensis*—was recently discovered.

The discovery, Guevarra said, only proved that Mount Arayat has sustained its biological diversity, and the more reason for the DENR to communicate the importance of protecting the area against wild plant thieves.

Extinction before discovery

Many plants species are in fact becoming extinct even before they are being discovered.

Gueverra said in Mount Arayat, there are more plant species that have not been discovered or recorded.

Dr. Marlon Suba, discovered *Pyrostria arayatensis*, along with his teammates Dr. Axel Arriola, Dr. Grecebio Jonathan Alejandro, Nicolas Raphael Arcangel, Jomari Jalipa, Joaquim Gerardo Jurilla, and Jose Manuel Villasenor in the lowland forest of MANP while conducting a botanical study in 2017.

The newly discovered species belongs to the family Rubiaceae and is endemic to the Philippines.

Their report, as part of Suba's dissertation in the University of Santo Tomas, was published in the international scientific journal *Annales Botanici Fennici* on August 10.

It took three years for the discovery to be published in a scientific journal and be recognized as a new plant species because of several factors.

In his case, Suba his first attempt to publish his report upon the plant's discovery was met with a lot of questions during the peer review process.

"I also have to focus on work, and this year there's the lockdown. Finally, it got recognized," Suba told the *BusinessMirror* via telephone interview on September 17.

Suba said Mount Arayat is so rich in biodiversity that the area may be home to still undiscovered plant species that may eventually become extinct if they remain unprotected.

Not typical garden plants

The wild plants, like animals, are likely to die when taken out of their natural habitat, said Calderon, concurrent director of the DENR's Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB).

"There are [environmental] conditions that [make] these plants survive. Like ferns, these species require specific elevation on which to thrive," Calderon explained to the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview on September 17.

A forestry expert, Calderon said some plants survive only under conditions that the forest can provide.

The DENR-BMB issues a special permit for those wishing to collect, gather animals or plants in the wild.

The gratuitous permit, however, is only for scientific research and not for commercial purposes.

Calderon explained that those who are collecting wild plants without proper training or knowledge may be gathering critically endangered plants, hence, the need to carefully evaluate the application for a collector's permit.

Similar to animals, the plant collectors can gather upon issuance of a permit but they can only sell the propagated plants or progeny, he said.

"We have already filed several cases against those who were caught collecting rare plants," Calderon said.

He cited as example the bantigue mangrove that is being collected in the wild and is being sold in bonsai form.

High commercial value

Calderon said rare and unique plant species in the forest have high commercial value which entice collectors to violate the law, face criminal raps and even go to jail.

He noted that in the time of the pandemic, many have resorted to gathering plants in the forest.

“We could not say these plants have no commercial value because they have. These unique plants, when placed in a pot, command high prices,” he said.

According to Calderon, *plantitos* and *plantitas* are now in the radar of the DENR.

“We are reminding the public that protected areas are not only for animals, but also for plants. And the law protects both plants and animals,” he said partly in Filipino.

He said they have alarmed the DENR regional offices about the poaching of plants in the forest.

Jail term and penalty

In Mindanao, DENR-9 Executive Director Crisanta Marlene Rodriguez has publicly warned those into “plant parenting” that illegal collection of wild plants, particularly those threatened and in areas that are set aside for conservation, is punishable by law, specifically Republic Act 9147, or the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act.

Rodriguez said Department Administrative Order 2017-11 states that “collection and trade of threatened species are prohibited unless such acts are covered under a permit issued by the DENR and the species are found in areas under a valid tenure instrument or a parcel of land covered by a title under the Torrens System.”

Besides possible jail terms of from six to 12 years, those found guilty of poaching critically endangered plants may be slapped with a fine of P100,000 to P1,000,000.

The DENR-9 Office said the giant staghorn fern or Capa de Leon, and waling-waling are critically endangered.

Other threatened species are the green velvet alocasia, kris plant and the zebra plant.

Lucrative trade

Leon Dulce, national coordinator of the environmental group Kalikasan-People's Network for the Environment, said it is much more lucrative to forage the country's remaining forests for unique ornamental flora instead of planting food plants.

“A piece of ornamental goes for P2,500 a pot while vegetables range from P25 to P100 a kilo.

But *plantitos* and *plantitas* may be causing harmful tradeoffs in the long run by depleting the biodiversity in our last remaining forests, Dulce said in an e-mail interview on September 29.

“Facing an exponential increase in demand for ornamental plants, the amount of biomass extracted from our forests may disrupt the balance of its ecosystems,” he warned.

According to Dulce, environmental authorities should launch a widespread public information campaign on the dangers of unregulated forest-plant trade.

“The current crop of *plantitos* and *plantitas* are mostly new in the trade during this pandemic season. We must educate the public on which plants are endangered and must be protected, and the ecological consequences if they are uprooted from their natural habitat,” he said.

Likewise, besides enforcement of the country's plant protection laws, there should be an incentives for the propagation of more sustainable and useful alternatives to forest flora, he said.

Growing plants is good, but...

Emerson Sy, a researcher at the wildlife traffic monitoring network Traffic, said the renewed interests in growing plants among urban dwellers in the Philippines brought about by the pandemic is a welcome development.

However, he said those who found a new hobby, or a way of life in growing plants, should avoid illegally harvested plants.

“Many wild plants are not suitable in urban settings and will just die,” he told the BusinessMirror via Messenger on September 29.

Sy agreed to the call to review current policies and regulations on plant propagation and trade.

“Law enforcement should focus on those who are involved in large-scale plant poaching and trafficking,” he said.

“Smuggling should also be addressed since plants could be carrying harmful insects and diseases that can significantly affect our agricultural sector,” he said.

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