

Let the ‘sacred’ mountain heal itself

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Business Mirror, APRIL 9, 2017



In Photo: Locals beat the summer heat by taking a dip in one of the coldest waters in the Philippines at Majayjay Falls, located at the foot of Mount Banahaw in Laguna. Others call it the Taytay Falls or even Imelda Falls, because former First Lady Imelda R. Marcos financed the promotion of tourism in this place.

Some portions of Mount Banahaw are now open to tourists and pilgrims this Holy Week, an official of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said.



Mount Banahaw, with Dolores, Quezon, in foreground.

According to Salud Pangan, protected area superintendent of the Mount Banahaw-San Cristobal Protected Landscape (MBCSPL), a limited-access policy has been allowed in lower portions of Mount Banahaw, which, she said, is on its way to full recovery.

These are pilgrim sites in Barangay Santa Lucia and Pinagbuhayan in Dolores, Quezon, and the Tanaw Highlands in Barangay Tala, Rizal town, Laguna

Other areas frequented by pilgrims and campers are still closed, Pangan added, to allow Mount Banahaw to continue to heal itself.

“The trails are already covered with vegetation. There are no more trails to its peak. Animal and plant wildlife are back in Mount Banahaw,” she said.

The birds and monkeys are back, and there are new dipterocarp trees in the forest, Pangan said.

“We also found a rafflesia,” she said, referring to a rare flowery plant, “which means that the forest is on its way to full recovery”.

Off-limits

The DENR, through the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) of the MBSCPL, first declared a five-year ban on all human activities in the park in 2004 to prevent further environmental degradation caused by the unregulated mountaineering activities in the area.

The ban was extended in 2009 and in 2012. Last year the PAMB again extended the ban for another three years, making it “off-limits” to human activities until 2019.

While most areas on Mount Banahaw remain closed to mountaineers and pilgrims, the park management of the MBSCPL is mulling over the opening of more portions of the sacred mountain for tourism activities.

Local government units (LGUs), on the other hand, are supportive of the ban imposed by the PAMB.

“The PAMB met on March 25, and they are supportive of the ban,” Pangan said.

Tourism magnet

“The PAMB is studying the possibility of opening to the public certain areas for tourism activities,” Pangan added.

She admitted, though, that Mount Banahaw is a tourism magnet, especially for those living in Metro Manila, because of its proximity.

Even with the pronounced ban on human activities within the MBSCPL, entry to lower portions, she said, is allowed for “walk-in” visitors who do not intend to stay overnight.

“Walk-ins continue. We can’t stop all of them. What we can do is regulate. But their activities are limited to lower portions and designated areas of the park only,” Pangan said, adding they only allow a maximum of 15 persons for those wishing to stay overnight in camp sites in Dolores. For pilgrims, a maximum of 25 persons are allowed at a time.

The PAMB charges only P20 as entrance fee to those entering the park’s premises.

The strict protection zone, she said, is completely “off-limits” to campers, pilgrims and tourists.

Scientists wanting to do research, she said, are required to secure a permit from the park management or the PAMB one week prior to their activity.

Holy ground

Campers and pilgrims used to frequent Mount Banahaw for nature tripping and religious retreats.

Despite the ban, the peak of Mount Banahaw remains a magnet for nature trippers and campers who are able to slip through “checkpoints”.

In 2014 the peak of Mount Banahaw caught fire, destroying some 50 hectares of forest trees and vegetation, prompting the DENR to consider the idea of permanently closing the park to the public.

Hunting and logging activities within the MBSCPL are also a challenge for the park’s protectors.

The MBSCPL is divided into two zones—the strict protection zone and the multiuse zone. The multi-use zone, Pangan said, includes areas that may be opened for tourism.

Protecting the MBSCPL is a big challenge. An active volcano, Mount Banahaw is just one part of the MBSCPL. The park has a total land area of 10,900,590 hectares.

It straddles over 10 towns in Quezon and Laguna provinces.

Covered by the MBSCPL are the towns of Lucban, Tayabas, Sariaya, Candelaria and Dolores, all in the province of Quezon, and in the municipalities of Rizal, Nagcarlan, Liliw, Majayjay and San Pablo City.

During the Holy Week, hundreds go on a nature trip and religious pilgrimage on Mount Banahaw, which is known for its healing powers, to take advantage of the long holiday break.

Key biodiversity area

According to the DENR-Southern Tagalog, the MBSCPL is a biodiversity-rich area. It is home to 358 species of trees, 19 species of vines, 15 species of palms, 39 species of ferns, 15 species of grasses and 42 species of fungi.

It is also home to 93 species of birds, eight of them endangered and over 20 are classified as rare bird species.

There are also 68 species of mammals, the Southern Luzon giant cloud rat, Philippine warty pig, Malay civet, common palm civet, lowland forest mouse, common short-nosed fruit bat, Philippine forest roundleaf bat and Banahaw gulantang; 38 species of reptiles in the area; 43 species of amphibians; 188 species of insects; and 76 species of butterflies.

The diversity of wild flora and fauna makes the MBSCPL a key biodiversity area (KBPA).

The National Biodiversity Conservation Priority Setting Project—jointly undertaken by the DENR-Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau (PAWB—now known as Biodiversity Management Bureau), UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, and Conservation International-Philippines—declared the MBSCPL high priority for biodiversity conservation.

Mystical rivers, falls

The MBSCPL provides valuable ecosystem services and is economically important for the people living within and around the park.

It is the source of freshwater to many communities. Seven major rivers traverse the park, namely, Talong Ambon, Balayong, Maimpis, Dalitiwan, Malinao, Nagcarlan and San Diego.

The rivers provide water for domestic, irrigation and recreational purposes.

Water from some of these rivers is believed to have curing powers, such as the Kinabuhayan River in Dolores, Quezon.

It is widely believed that a dip into the water of Kinabuhayan cures illnesses.

It was also believed that even the Katipuneros cleansed themselves in the waters of Kinabuhayan before going into major battles.

The Santa Lucia, Suplina and Kristallino falls, also in Dolores, Quezon, are also believed to cure illnesses.

The most famous of the falls in Mount Banahaw near the crater of the volcano is the Talong Ambon, which is most visited by pilgrims even during ordinary days.

Revenue generation

Pangan admitted that preventing campers and pilgrims from entering the MBSCPL is difficult.

“Sometimes, we can see Facebook posts bragging about entering the park without our approval. We can’t do anything about it because the faces are covered and we have no way of knowing who they are,” she said.

There are many natural attractions and religious sites in MBSCPL, including Balon ni Santong Jacob; Prisentahan; Kuweba ng Inang Awa; Yapak or Bakas; Pinaggapusan; Pinagburulan; Suplinang Tubig; Kuweba ng Dios Ama; Malagaylay Falls; Alitao River; Tumloy Falls; Hermano Puli Shrine; and Kilangin Falls.

While measures are being taken to enhance the management of these historical, religious or famous ecotourism sites, the DENR-PAMB is not discounting the possibility of opening certain areas to generate revenue to help maintain the park.

Like other protected areas in the Philippines, the MBSCPL has very limited resources for its development, rehabilitation and protection against various threats, including campers and pilgrims who have the habit of leaving behind tons of garbage as they descend from the mountain.

But MBSCPL is a protected area, portions of which are supposed to be opened, as a way of promoting environmental protection and biodiversity conservation while generating much-needed revenues for its operation.

“The PAMB is studying all these. But definitely, not to the extent of compromising the integrity of the park’s ecosystem,” she said.

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