

# Mountaineers can destroy—or save mountains

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As tens of thousands are drawn to beautiful beaches to beat the summer heat, a growing number of nature lovers are looking for other adventures, such as climbing some of the country's peaks.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) called on the public to have a worthwhile summer vacation by engaging in activities that promote the environment.

In particular, the DENR reminded nature trippers to be vigilant of activities that could cause disastrous forest fires, which could lead to a huge setback in the government's reforestation efforts, threaten human lives and bring massive damage to forest ecosystems and biodiversity loss.

## Tourist spots, biodiversity hot spots

Some of the country's mountain peaks are frequented by climbers, making them among the country's tourist spots.

However, these tourist spots are also "biodiversity hot spots" found within protected areas (PAs), such as the Mount Apo Natural Park (MANP) in Davao del Sur in Davao region and Mounts Banahaw-San Cristobal Protected Landscape (MBSCPL) that traverses Quezon and Laguna provinces in Southern Tagalog.

Mount Apo is known as home to the critically endangered Philippine Eagle, a national symbol, which is endemic to the Philippines. There are only around 42 pairs of these monkey-eating eagles, mostly occupying forested mountain peaks like Mount Apo.

A United Nations World Heritage Site, MANP is a key biodiversity area. It has one of the country's highest endemism in both flora and fauna.

According to the DENR-Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB), there are 800 estimated vascular and nonvascular plant species in Mount Apo. The DENR's BMB reported that actual resource inventory on five representative habitats indicated a total of 126 floral species, 50 of which are considered endemic to Mount Apo or the Mindanao Faunal Region.

Previous studies have identified 272 species of birds, 40 percent of these, or 111, are endemic to Mount Apo.

Besides the Philippine Eagle, Mount Apo is host to another critically endangered species, called *abukay* (*Cacatua heamatopygia*), while around 10 are endangered species—the Mindanao scops owl (*Otus mirus*), lesser eagle owl (*Bobu philippensis*), Mindanao lorikeet (*Tricoglossus johnstoniae*), whittled hornbill (*Aceros leucocephalus*); 20 vulnerable and 20 near threatened.

Ninety-six species were identified to have both cultural and economic importance to communities within MANP or nearby communities.

There are also 53 species of mammals recorded in Mount Apo, 49 percent of which are endemic.

Mount Banahaw and Mount San Cristobal, meanwhile, are home to several endemic fauna, which includes the Philippine pygmy fruit bat, Luzon fruit bat, small Luzon forest mouse and the Philippine warty pig.

The DENR-BMB said the forests of Mounts Banahaw and San Cristobal are inhabited by amphibians, such as the Banahaw forest frog, Japanese bullet frog and Naomi's forest frog.

The MBSCPL is home to a list of threatened and restricted-range bird population, including the Philippine Eagle, Philippine eagle-owls, flame-breasted fruit dove and the Philippine cockatoo.

Mount Apo and Mount Banahaw, considered as "sacred mountains" by local communities, were both devastated by forest fires in the past, prompting the DENR and their respective Protected Area Management Boards (PAMBs) to issue an order for their closure to allow faster recovery from environmental degradation and prevent further damage to their unique ecosystems.

The forest fire on Mount Banahaw in March 2014 destroyed around 50 hectares of forest, while the fire that hit Mount Apo in March 2016 affected more than 100 hectares. In both fire incidents, fingers were pointed at irresponsible mountaineers. Forests are prone to fire during summer, when the leaves and grasses are dried up, making them easy to catch fire.

### **Stricter rules and regulation**

As portions of these two mountains were reopened to the public recently, park managements are strictly enforcing rules and regulation to prevent a repeat of the disastrous fires.

On Mount Apo, the MANP-PAMB has limited the number of people at 50 per trail. This means that only 300 people are allowed to trek in a day.

It also ordered to ban on camping in the sites. Climbers should leave the camp sites by 2 p.m. They also have to pay higher entrance fees, including fees for tour guides—to discourage climbers from going to Mount Apo, said Franklin Buenaflor, public information officer of the DENR in Digos, Davao del Sur.

Meanwhile, as portions of Mount Banahaw, particularly its two popular pilgrim sites on the lower portion of the mountain, were also opened to pilgrims and tourists, camping is, likewise, prohibited in these areas and in other areas without prior approval by concerned authorities.

### **General policy**

Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim of the DENR-BMB said there should be stricter rules for mountaineers, especially when climbing within PAs covered by Republic Act 7586, or the National Integrated Protected Areas (Nipas) Act.

In a PA, Lim said the PAMB, the highest environment policy-making body in the area, makes the rules and decides which area should be declared open or off limits for tourism activities.

“PAMBs are given the freehand to make their own rules because we believe they know more about the local situation,” Lim said. She added that mountaineering is not per se detrimental to environment or biodiversity conservation.

“There are mountaineering organizations that set their own rules against environmental destruction or degradation. There are some that makes it a point not to leave behind wastes,” Lim said.

She said there is a policy under the Nipas Act which PAMB should follow in coming up with policies for implementation in a PA.

“I am hoping that our mountaineers will be more proactive and responsible. As ecotourists, mountaineers should be able to help the communities in such a way that they will help protect the mountain,” she said.

### **Ecotourism sites**

PAs, she said, are being promoted as ecotourism sites, because ecotourism per se is not a destructive human activity. In fact, it promotes revenue generation, which can be used to manage the PA.

“Protecting the PA should be inherent to any ecotourism policy because if the natural beauty or aesthetic beauty of the PA is destroyed, it will no longer attract tourists,” Lim says.

PAMBs, she said, should come up with a comprehensive management plan geared toward protecting the PAs against unregulated tourism.

Under the Nipas Act, hunting, destroying, disturbing or mere possession of any plants or animals or products without a permit from the PAMB is prohibited.

Likewise, the law prohibits dumping of any waste products detrimental to the protected area, or to the plants and animals or inhabitants; use of any motorized equipment without a permit; mutilating, defacing or destroying objects of natural beauty, or objects of interest to cultural communities or anything of scenic value; damaging and leaving roads and trails in a damaged condition; leaving in exposed or unsanitary conditions refuse or debris, or depositing in ground or in bodies of water; and altering, removing destroying or defacing boundary marks or signs.

The penalty for violating the prohibited acts range from P5,000 to P500,000, and possibly, a jail term of at least six months to one year.

### **Mountaineers: Nature lovers**

Gregg Yan, a mountaineer and environmentalist, said mountaineering could be a potent tool in protecting and conserving the country’s rich biodiversity.

With their passion for climbing, mountaineers can be part of the solution, rather than the problem, in protecting the environment and conserving the country’s rich biodiversity.

“Mountaineers are some of the most passionate nature lovers on Earth,” said Yan, member of the Philippine Skyrunning Association and Loyola Mountaineers.

However, he said mountaineers should ensure that trekkers do not leave mountains worse-off than when they climbed up.

One way of doing this, he said, is by designating a “Green Climber” or environmental officer for each trip.

“The Green Climber continuously reminds the group to cleanup trails and bring down what they haul up. He or she should be equipped with an easy-access garbage tote bag where nonbiodegradable litter, like candy wrappers or plastic bags, can be stuffed in. In return, he or she should be spared from carrying bulky items, like tent bodies or ground sheets.”

Yan said that by designating an officer to guide the group, the “leave-no-trace” principle will become second nature for mountaineers.

### **Climbing tips**

A graduate of the Jungle Environment Survival Training (JEST) Camp, Yan, who has climbed over 120 mountains in Asia, has some important tips for mountain climbers.

“Never build campfires except in survival situations, for they can be difficult to extinguish. Stoves should also be used with great care, as they have been responsible for scarring many of the Philippines’s top mountains, including Mounts Apo, Kanlaon and Pulag. Hold off smoking for cigarette butts smolder long after being snuffed out. Keep to established trails to limit your group’s impacts,” he said.

According to Yan, climbers should always secure food and leftovers. “Wild animals might associate campsites with leftovers, increasing the chance that you’ll run into a ravenous rodent or snake when you want to pee-pee at night. Obviously, don’t feed, catch or kill wildlife,” he said.

In helping reforest mountains, Yan said climbers should plant the right kind of trees, quickly adding that it is important to know which trees are native to the area.

“Not only will they bring back biodiversity better than invasive trees, like mahogany or paper trees. They are usually tougher and able to survive to maturity,” he said. Last, Yan said it pays to give back to the local community.

“Don’t simply treat them as guides, porters or scouts. We’re their visitors, so please teach them what you know and they’ll likely share important tips, like which plants have medicinal uses and where the best photo-op spots lie,” he said.

Yan added that there is more to mountain climbing than conquering mountains and experiencing the thrills of ecotourism mountains offer.

“Mountaineers shouldn’t just be tourists. They should be the defenders of Philippine mountains,” he said. “Who better to do this than those who love peaks the most?”