

PHL biodiversity sustainable action plan launched

By Jonathan L. Mayuga

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In Photo: Mount Apo Natural Park

Various Philippine stakeholders echoed the call for the protection and conservation of the country's unique wildlife and ecosystem, amid threats that lead to the rapid rate of biodiversity loss.



Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim (right), of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources-Biodiversity Management Bureau, presents a book on biodiversity in the Philippines, a token of appreciation to keynote speaker Sen. Cynthia A. Villar during the First National Biodiversity Congress last week.

In celebration of the International Day for Biological Diversity, various stakeholders, led by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), gathered at a hotel in Ortigas, Pasig City,

last week for the First National Biodiversity Congress to highlight the importance of the country's natural wealth. The Philippines is considered as one of the 18 mega-biodiverse countries in the world.

The three-day event, with the theme "Upswelling of Lessons, Sustaining Community Benefits in the Conservation of Landscapes and Seascapes", paved the way for sharing of models and lessons on conservation initiatives in large territories and small communities.

It also featured interactive plenary and breakout sessions on five thematic themes covering a wide array of topics related to biodiversity management, namely, Managing Protected Areas, Biodiversity-friendly Enterprises, Landscapes and Seascapes, Biodiversity Financing and special topics that include building an inclusive biodiversity community; and participation in biodiversity conservation of people's, women, youth and communities in conflict-affected areas.

Biodiversity action plan

The congress paved the way for the launching of P334-billion Philippine Biodiversity Sustainable Action Plan (PBSAP), the country's blueprint in managing its natural wealth.

Developed through extensive consultations with various sectors at the national and local levels, the PBSAP identifies and aims to address priority global and domestic needs for integration into the plans and programs of various government agencies, including local governments.

The PBSAP has identified and estimated Philippine Ecosystem and Biodiversity Values in terms of Ecosystem Service at P2.3 trillion. According to the PBSAP, timber and fuelwood production is worth around P1.1 billion; water, P50.9 billion; ecotourism, P157 billion; carbon offset, P453 billion; flood prevention, P41 billion; soil erosion; P10 billion; fishery production, P111 billion; crop production, P1.4 trillion; coral reef, P62.1 billion; and mangrove, P7.4 billion.

To implement the PBSAP until 2028, the government will need at least P337.9 billion to P393.3 billion, with the component to prevent habitat loss and overexploitation of protected areas (PAs) having the lion's share at 39 percent.

Expanding protected areas

In her keynote address, Sen. Cynthia A. Villar, chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources, underscored the importance of managing the country's PAs.

Incidentally, the Senate passed on third and final reading the Expanded-National Integrated Protected Areas System (E-Nipas) bill authored by Villar. It added 92 PAs to the 13 PAs currently backed by legislation.

Several similar bills are being deliberated at the House of Representatives. The proposed E-Nipas Act of 2017 in the Senate, which seeks to amend the Nipas Act of 1992, or Republic Act 7586, recognizes conservation areas and the management regimes of local government units (LGUs), communities and indigenous peoples (IPs).

According to Villar, the E-Nipas also ensures that the State shall establish "the institutional mechanism for the mobilization of resources and for adequate scientific and technical support for the conservation of biodiversity and integrity of the ecosystem".

“Preservation, maintenance and sustainability are key considerations when it comes to Nipas. The Philippines is also known as one of the 35 world’s biodiversity hot spots or regions containing exceptional concentrations of plant endemism, but experiencing high rates of habitat loss. Hot spots have lost around 86 percent of their original habitat and are also considered to be significantly threatened by extinctions induced by climate change,” she said.

Villar said time has always been of great essence when it comes to the preservation and protection of the country’s biodiversity.

Underprotected

Villar said many areas in the Philippines remain underprotected. “Many wetlands, marine sanctuaries, tropical forests and others are underprotected and also lack resources to deal with various threats,” she said.

Together with the DENR-Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB), Villar is pushing for the passing of E-Nipas bill that would include the remaining PAs requiring congressional enactment.

The Nipas covers 240 PAs—170 of which are terrestrial or land-based, and 70 are marine-protected areas (MPAs).

Of the 240 protected areas, 113 have been established through presidential proclamation, as of March 2017. These comprise 29 MPAs and 84 terrestrial PAs. Of the 113 protected areas established through presidential proclamation, 13 have been legislated by Congress.

Of the 92 protected areas to be added to E-Nipas, some are internationally recognized.

These are Asean Heritage Sites Mount Timpoong-Hibok-Hibok and Mounts Iglit-Baco; Malaysia-Philippines Heritage Parks, Turtles Islands Heritage PAs; and Ramsar Sites Agusan Marsh, Olango Island and the Las Piñas-Parañaque Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area.

“The proposed E-Nipas Act will allow for greater involvement of communities and LGUs, as well as indigenous people and other sectors, especially the marginalized ones. It will also revise the prohibited acts and updates penalties for easy evidence gathering and prosecution,” Villar said.

Preventing biodiversity loss and conservation of landscapes and seascapes are included in the United Nations’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly No. 15.

“The SDGs aim to conserve and restore the use of terrestrial ecosystems, such as forests, wetlands, drylands and mountains by 2020.... Urgent action must be taken to reduce the loss of natural habitats and biodiversity, which are part of our common heritage.... The clock is fast ticking away, let us act faster.... Let us continue working together so we can ensure that a still mega-diverse country awaits the future generations of Filipinos,” she said.

Voluntary commitments

The congress also adopted the Philippine government’s voluntary commitments to the SDG 14 on Life Below Water, which will be presented to the Ocean Conference in New York in June. The international conference from June 5 to 9 aims to be the “game changer” that will reverse the decline in the health of the world’s oceans.

Dr. Vincent Hilomen, project manager of Marine Key Biodiversity Areas (MKBA) of the DENR-BMB, summarized these commitments into three main thematic areas, namely, governance socio-economic and ecological.

For governance, the commitments are: by 2024, the proposed E-Nipas Act is passed and LGUs have complied with the 15 percent of municipal waters as declared marine reserves under the fisheries code, with penalties for noncompliance.

By 2020, the competency standards for management of PAs are established.

By 2019, convergence areas for the Department of Agriculture and the DENR are mapped for coordination and complementation efforts; the importance of biodiversity and sustainable use of marine resources are mainstreamed in the education system.

Socioeconomic commitment targets by 2020 for sustainable financing scheme for the management of MPAs are established in pilot coastal communities. It will use biodiversity-friendly enterprise and promotion of co-management agreements and increased generated income from sustainable fishing for coastal communities are increased.

Also during the same period, the impact of investment are implemented in pilot areas around the country to support rights-based fisheries management.

The ecological commitments by 2020 state that marine pollution in coastal areas are significantly reduced, 10 percent of municipal waters are under effective zone management and 2 percent are managed by organized fishing communities.

Also by 2020, MPA networks are established in MKBAs, and around 17,000-hectare portion of the Benham Bank and 2-million hectare of the 25 million hectares of the entire Philippine Rise (formerly Benham Rise) is declared an MPA.

Coastal and marine ecosystem management

The DENR's Coastal and Marine Ecosystem Management Program (2017-2028) was also unveiled at the congress. It is a 12-year national program and the country's response to manage, address and effectively reduce the drivers and threats to degradation of the coastal and marine ecosystem.

It aims to come up with a road map that will expand and deepen civil society's participation in designing and implementing Global Environment Facility (GEF) programs, and contribute to its environmental protection and sustainable development goals.

According DENR-BMB Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim, there will also be special forums to explore funding opportunities to support the biodiversity conservation initiatives of civil-society organizations, as well as LGUs.

The DENR-BMB envisions a Philippine biodiversity that provides natural resiliency and sustained benefits for all.

Its mission to conserve and sustainably manage the country's biodiversity is anchored on the strengthening of the Nipas and fostering other effective area-based conservation measures, promotion of biodiversity-friendly livelihoods; and mainstreaming across all sectors of the government the biodiversity management.

Biodiversity Museum

As part of the biodiversity celebration, Lim and Sen. Loren B. Legarda, an environmental advocate, launched an initiative to establish the Museum of Philippine Biodiversity, and inaugurated Luis Junyee E. Yee Jr.'s installation art at the Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Rescue Center in Quezon City.

A former BMB office building, the Salakot Building at the parks and wildlife center will be refitted into a museum, which will feature the beauty of Philippine biodiversity. It will highlight a number of PAs representing the different and unique terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

“The museum will be an experimental and interactive venue that aims to impart the richness and importance of the country’s biodiversity, as well as the threats it faces and the repercussion of its loss,” Lim said.

Yee, an artist who is a pioneer of installation art in the Philippines, has built the first permanent installation art in the country found within the parks and wildlife center. Called “Ugnayan”, the artwork made use of big pieces of recycled hardwood pillars and metal to visualize the unity and cooperation of the 21 nations comprising the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in pursuit of common goals in different fields.

Rich biodiversity

The Philippines, an island archipelago with 7,641 islands and islets, according to the latest count of the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority, harbors more diversity of life per hectare than any other country in the world.

According to the DENR-BMB, protecting and conserving the country’s rich biodiversity offers tremendous benefits if put into good use. The country’s watersheds and aquifers could supply 479 billion cubic meters of water annually for domestic, industrial and agricultural uses. It also has huge potential in developing plant pharmaceuticals for common illnesses, such as cough, pain and dental problems.

Every square kilometer of coral reefs can supply up to 30 tons of edible and economically important fish every year.

It can boost ecotourism through development that safeguards the integrity and diversity of the country’s rich natural resources.

Hot spot

While the Philippines is endowed with rich biodiversity, it is also considered among the world’s biodiversity hot spots. Threats to the country’s rich biodiversity, include over exploitation and unsustainable practices, encroachment in forested areas, pollution, overfishing, poor land management practices and natural disasters exacerbated by climate change, according to the DENR-BMB.

Image Credits: ACB, Office of Sen. Cynthia Villar