

- [Features](#)
- [Biodiversity](#)

Public urged: Help rescue wildlife

By

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In Photo: This juvenile Philippine eagle was turned over to the office of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources in Dingalan, Aurora province, to the Biodiversity Management Bureau in June last year. The eagle was rescued from a forested area in Barangay Diteki in San Luis, Aurora province.

If you see stray dogs or cat in your neighborhood, call the city pound. But if it's a wild animal like an eagle, a python, or by chance, a monkey or a marine turtle, whether it is roaming free or locked in cage, it is best to call wildlife experts.

Help rescue wild animals and be a biodiversity champion, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) urges the public.

To protect the country's threatened wildlife, the DENR is appealing to the public to help protect and conserve the country's rich biodiversity by reporting illegal wildlife trade.

Better yet, call the DENR's Wildlife Rescue Center (WRC). For those living in Metro Manila, the DENR-Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) receives call through the following numbers: [\(02\) 9246031](tel:029246031) to 35, local 239 or 245.

For those outside Metro Manila, the WRC advises the public to call the nearest DENR satellite office.

Illegal wildlife trade

Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim of the DENR-BMB said illegal wildlife trade remains a serious threat to the country's rich biodiversity.

Republic Act 9147, or the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act, defines wildlife trade as “the act of engaging in the exchange, exportation or importation, purchase or sale of wildlife, their derivatives or by-products, locally or internationally.”

The DENR, through the BMB, is the primary agency tasked to implement and enforce the law, which includes running after illegal wildlife traffickers and rescuing threatened wildlife.

The Philippines, one of the biologically diverse countries in the world, is also a biodiversity hotspot because of the rapid rate of biodiversity loss caused by several factors, including massive habitat loss, human encroachment of wildlife habitats, pollution and rampant illegal wildlife trade.

The illegal trade of wildlife involves harvesting, transporting, selling or buying wildlife—whether plants or animals—for food, medicine, hide or shells, or derivatives, including internal organs for medicinal use.

Buying and selling animals for pet is prohibited without permit from the DENR-BMB.

Rich biodiversity, poor law enforcement

Illegal wildlife traders target the Philippines because of its rich biological diversity—and poor enforcement of environmental laws.

Just last July, elements of the Philippine National Police (PNP) encountered a boat loaded with 70 dead marine turtles. The hawksbill marine turtles are targeted for their shells, fins, internal organs and meat. Even their eggs are not spared in some areas, like Tawi-Tawi, an area considered to be Southeast Asia’s largest marine turtle conservation site.

Illegal wildlife traders also catch rare species of birds—including falcons and eagles, lizards and spiders, which are sold for pets in gross violation of the Wildlife Act.

According to reports, illegal wildlife trade for pets has become a way of life and is a lucrative business for erring businessmen.

It was learned that rare animals caught in the wild can cost up to P100,000.

A sparrow hawk and falconet, or young falcon, costs P10,000. A baby eagle costs around P15,000. A Sulcata tortoise can be bought up to as high as P100,000, a red iguana at P15,000, while a tiger cub costs P300,000. A myna is sold at P4,000, while a civet, or musang, is sold at P3,000.

The sale of any of these animals can provide food for the table for upland farmers or mountain dwellers, and the demand is increasing—including the cost—depending on the “pet’s” conservation status.

The harder to catch, the more expensive the animals are.

Despite the efforts to fight illegal wildlife trade, lack of budget and resources to finance operations, including manpower to monitor areas prone to wildlife trafficking, such as Tawi-Tawi, Palawan and remote islands and hard-to-reach mountainous areas, remain a major problem.

Patrolling the vast ocean to deter poaching of marine wildlife, like marine turtles, require gasoline for motorized bancas and allowance for Bantay Dagat (Sea Patrol) volunteers who act as multipliers of law enforcers, such members of the Philippine Coast Guard and PNP-Maritime Group.

No let up

Lim told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview last week that the campaign against illegal wildlife trade in the Philippines has no let up, despite the difficulties encountered.

Last year the DENR, then headed by Regina Paz L. Lopez, has pushed for the creation of the National Anti-Environmental Crime Task Force (NAECTF) to launch a campaign against large-scale environmental crimes, including illegal mining, logging, fishing and wildlife trade.

With the rejection of Lopez’s appointment by the powerful Commission on Appointments in May, the NAECTF, headed by former Undersecretary Arturo

T. Valdez, became inactive. Lopez's successor, Environment Secretary Roy A. Cimatu, has yet to name a replacement for Valdez.

Illegal wildlife trade, whether large scale or small scale, is rampant because of poor law enforcement.

The DENR-BMB has its own small wildlife law-enforcement unit but, despite having no badge and guns, they rely on the help and support of the PNP, National Bureau of Investigation and other law-enforcement agencies to combat illegal wildlife trade.

Pet registration

The DENR encourages registration of pets in the wake of the intensified campaign against illegal wildlife trade.

Buying of pets, whether native or exotic animals, according to the DENR, should only be done by the public in registered pet shops that have animals registered with the DENR.

Acquisition, possession, transport and trade of species are subject to permit from the DENR, in accordance with the provisions of the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act of 2001.

There are corresponding fees for nonthreatened species. This includes any species that is not at the brink of extinction for the issuance of Certificate of Wildlife Registration, depending on the number of pets involved.

The DENR also issues permit called Wildlife Local Transport Permit, which can be secured also from the DENR, for the transport of pets from Metro Manila to other areas.

Bringing wildlife outside of the country also need a Wildlife Export Certification for Non-Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and CITES Export Permit for CITES-listed species.

Potential threat

Meanwhile, the DENR-BMB caution pet lovers from releasing their pets—especially exotic pets that are imported—into the wild without proper permit.

Exotic animals can become invasive alien species and cause harm not only to the environment but to other animals, potentially causing imbalance in an ecosystem.

The Convention on Biological Diversity defines invasive alien species as species whose introduction and/or spread outside their natural past or present distribution threatens biological diversity.

Invasive alien species is a major driver of biodiversity loss.

In the Philippines, a DENR news release cited that 170 invasive alien species or nonendemic species of plants, animals and insects have been recorded as causing damage to agriculture and local biodiversity.

These include water lily, golden apple snail or golden *kubol*, *tilapia*, janitor fish and, lately, the dreaded knife fish that has invaded the Laguna de Bay.

Pet lovers are known to release their exotic pets after some time. This, according to the Lim, can cause potential harm to the environment and other native species.

Invasive alien species—whether plants or animals—in the end overcome and cause the extinction of native species, such as in the case of *tilapia*, janitor fish and knife fish.

Ninoy Aquino Park

The DENR-BMB maintains a Wildlife Rescue Center (WRC) within the Ninoy Aquino Park and Wildlife Center (NAPWC) along the Elliptical Road in Quezon City. The 22.7-hectare zoological and botanical garden is one of remaining patches of green in Quezon City.

The park houses indigenous plants and animals—such as monkeys, water monitors or bayawak, Philippine deer, wild pigs and several varieties of birds—and a couple of rescued tigers.

For a weekend getaway from the everyday traffic, pollution and noise associated with city living, the park in the heart of Quezon City, one of Metro Manila's busiest cities, offers a place where people can commune with nature.

It has a man-made lagoon, an aquarium, a playground, botanical garden and, interestingly, a place for a variety of animal wildlife, including those classified as critically endangered or in the brink of extinction.

Wildlife Rescue Center

The WRC is a temporary shelter where confiscated, retrieved, donated, sick, abandoned and injured wild animals—mammals, reptiles, birds, including raptors—are given care by experts.

There are 1,142 animals currently under its care. Among them are injured animals rescued from illegal wildlife traders and pet shops.

There are also instances when pet lovers voluntarily surrender their exotic pets—including monkeys and pythons—to the WRC for safekeeping.

“Most of the animals there are monkey and pythons,” NAPWC Protected Area Superintendent Nelson Castillo told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview last Sunday.

At the park, some of the animals form part of the attraction and can be viewed by visitors.

“Not all animals are open for public viewing. Some are in the quarantine area and some are simply off limits,” Castillo said.

The animals are being fed by 18 trained wildlife keepers and are regularly checked by veterinarians.

According to Castillo, it costs around P100,000 a month to feed the animals at the WRC.

This means the DENR's annual budget requirement to run the rescue center—for food alone—costs around P1.2 million.

“The operational costs goes up as more animals come in. Naturally, we need to feed them. If they get sick, we have to treat them,” Castillo said.

Those that can be released back into the wild are being rehabilitated and transported to an area where they are fit to be released, he said. Those who will not survive, sadly, will have to stay longer, or worse, “put to sleep” for good.

“Recently, we hired two more veterinarians to take care of our animals. Before, we only have one veterinarian, now, we have three to make sure that our animals are properly attended,” Castillo added.

Lim is battling for the establishment of wildlife rescue centers in various parts of the country. Currently, she said the DENR partners with private sector or non-governmental organizations for the care of rescued or confiscated wildlife to accommodate more animals.

The DENR-BMB, according to Lim, recognizes biodiversity champions for their contribution in the protection and conservation of wildlife.

“We encourage the people to help fight illegal wildlife trade and inform authorities to rescue trapped or captured wildlife,” she said.

Reporting to authorities, she added, can help save the lives of threatened wildlife and, eventually, from the extinction of the species, she said.

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