

DENR lays out plan to save Boracay

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In Photo: This March 22, 2012, file photo shows a polluted Bulabog beach on Boracay island.

Determined to save Boracay, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has laid out a six-month operational plan, starting in March until August this year, to address the problem besetting the country's top tourism destination in the municipality of Malay, Aklan Province.

Dubbed "Operational Plan: Regain Paradise," the plan—if properly executed—would eliminate the problems besetting Boracay, hence, allowing it to regain its status as the country's top tourism destination worthy of the tag "island paradise" by 2022.



Unidentified people cleaning White beach on Boracay island, March 1, 2013.

The DENR has started mobilizing its personnel from the central office in Quezon City and nearby regional offices to ensure that no stone is left unturned in addressing the environmental problems in Boracay.

A document obtained by the BusinessMirror bared the extent of the damage to Boracay's ecosystem caused by decades of neglect and failure to implement the 2008 master plan, which could have prevented further environmental degradation on the island, including the over and unplanned development that exerts pressure on its scarce resources.

“While some sewage and septage infrastructure was built, up to half of the used water remains untreated and discharged into the wastelands, aquifer and the sea,” the document said.

The solid-waste generation on the island is 2.25 kilos per person, totaling 90 tons per day. Only 30 tons, however, are collected and brought out of the island.

Boracay is a 1,006.64-hectare island. Around 268 hectares of the entire island are classified as forestland, while 628.96 hectares are classified as alienable and disposable lands. So far, only 109.65 hectares are titled, while 2.1 hectares belong to the Ati tribe as part of their certificate of ancestral domain title (CADT).

Currently, Boracay has a total population of 34,000 belonging to 7,000 households.

Tourists arriving on the island at any given time are estimated at 22,000.

On top of these, the tourism industry in Boracay employs a total of 17,208 individuals, based on records of the municipality of Malay.

The tourism industry is the main source of income and livelihood of the people on the island and mainland Malay. The hotel and restaurant, and other service-related industries, including transportation, rely heavily on tourist arrivals.

Last year the municipality of Malay generated around P400 million from various fees, while the provincial government of Aklan generated revenues of P150 million.

In 2014, according to the Department of the Interior and Local Government, tourism revenues attributed to Boracay reached P27 billion.

There are around 2,612 business establishments with permits on the island.

The encroachment on public lands on the island is massive and the island's carrying capacity had been exceeded since 2010, the document stated.

Biodiversity and ecosystem services of the island are now in dire conditions.

All these have resulted in the deterioration of the natural and tourism value of Boracay, the document stated.

Currently, around 20 million liters per day (MLD) are used and around 17.5 MLD become wastewater. Of the untreated wastewater, around 8 MLD go to the wetlands, the aquifer and sea. The high nutrient loads in the water are causing algal blooms.

The 2008 Boracay Master Plan, the document stressed, was not followed, with the total built-up area in forestlands reaching up to 60.7 hectares of the 268.7-hectare forestland. Encroachment on legal easement has reached a total of 23.94 hectares, according to the document.

Worse, the unbridled development in the area has severely threatened the island's biodiversity, as well. Around nine wetlands and three forest types on the island are now in peril.

It was also reported that the population of the flying fox on the island has declined by 86 percent in the last 28 years. Worse, coral bleaching has occurred. It affected from 21 percent to 79.8 percent of coral areas.

Among environmental laws, particularly the Clean Water Act; Presidential Decree (PD) 1586, or the Environmental Impact System law; PD 705, or the Forestry Code; and Republic Act (RA) 9003, or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act, have been grossly violated, according to the document.

Oplan: Regain Paradise bared that the interagency's mission is to rehabilitate the damaged ecosystem of Boracay Island and conserve its natural and tourism values.

The interagency task force, dubbed "Task Force Regain Paradise," will deploy teams to six designated areas to conduct inspections, then enforce and ensure compliance with various environmental laws.

"The first and most important stage is a rapid response that shall cover the six months from March to August 2018. A follow-through stage of one year and a way forward stage until 2022 will guide the succeeding operations," the document stated.

The six areas are Yapak 1, Yapak 2, Balabag 1, Balabag 2, Manoc Manoc 1 and Manoc Manoc 2.

During Phase 1 of the execution of the plan from March to April, the six teams will conduct inspections to strictly enforce the Clean Water Act and other environmental laws.

The tourism industry, from then on, will be regularly monitored to ensure compliance with environmental laws.

Among the objectives is to stop the illegal wastewater discharges into the sea and the aquifer, issue appropriate orders and elevate cases to the Pollution Adjudication Board (PAB), then file cases against violators if warranted.

During the period, the connection of establishments and residences to sewer lines will be implemented, and water lines of violators will be cut.

The plan also includes plugging of illegal connections into drains, closing open dumps and nonfunctional materials-recovery facilities, and installing functional ones in compliance with RA 9003.

During the said period, the DENR will also conduct water-quality rapid assessment and establish base lines.

To ensure compliance with environmental laws, there will be a moratorium on new construction and those who will defy the moratorium will be slapped with cases.

The Task Force Boracay has already put in place a six-month moratorium on new construction.

There will also be regular monitoring, and during the two-month period, illegal wastewater discharges into the sea and the aquifer will be stopped.

At the same time, orders will be issued to owners of erring establishments. Cases will also be filed against the violators of various environmental laws.

The document, in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, was supposed to be presented during the recent Senate public hearing on Boracay.

For Phase 2, or from July to August, there will be a review and subsequent revision of the Boracay Master Plan, which will now include updated carrying capacity of the entire island.

Oplan: Regain Paradise is also pushing for a review of local ordinances and the issuance of appropriate amendments, particularly on solid-waste management.

During the period, the illegal structures constructed in timberlands and the 30-meter easement will be demolished. Charges will also be filed and corresponding fines will be imposed on violators.

From September 2018 to August 2019, the DENR will conduct rapid land tenure appraisal for possible titling, identify and recommend for the proclamation of resettlement sites in mainland Malay, strictly enforce the master plan and other local ordinances.

The DENR also recommends an amendment to Proclamation 1064, or the law that classified Boracay Island into forestland and agricultural land, pursuant to Presidential Decree 705 or the Philippine Forestry Code. Specifically, the amendment will focus on the provision allotted for roads on the island.

Under Proclamation 1064, all existing roads, trails and pathways and a 15-meter buffer zone on each side of the centerline of roads and trails, which are reserved for right-of-way, shall form part of the area reserved for forestland protection purposes.

The plan also aims to promote the use of biodegradable waste to produce compost for food production.

As a way forward, the DENR aims to rehabilitate a total of 377 hectares of forest on the island, including nine inland and coastal wetlands.

The resettlement of affected settlers will begin during the period.

The DENR will engage the Ati tribe on the island to maintain the forestlands and the development of tourism options with strict regulation.

As a strategy, Oplan: Regain Paradise will also engage the business sector and intensify community engagement.

Evidence and science-based decision-making will also be used. To do this, a multidisciplinary team will be deployed from the DENR's forest management, land management, biodiversity management, mines and geosciences, and environmental management bureaus.

Interviewed by the BusinessMirror, Environment Undersecretary for Policy, Planning, International Affairs and Foreign-Assisted Projects Jonas R. Leones said saving Boracay will require drastic measures that may even lead to a moratorium on tourism activities.

"The Boracay case is unique because of the severity of the problem," said Leones, Environment Secretary Roy A. Cimatu's designated spokesman.

A bitter pill to swallow

Leones said he personally favors temporarily stopping tourism activities to hasten the implementation of corrective measures and the rehabilitation of the damaged ecosystems.

"In other countries, it has been proven and tested. Some countries have successfully rehabilitated beach resorts by stopping tourism activities for one year," he said.

He said curing the ills of Boracay will require a strong political will on the part of the DENR, likening the ongoing crackdown, as well as preventive measures in other tourism destinations, as the bitter pill to swallow for the country's tourism sector.

"We really need to exert all effort and exercise political will to address the environmental problems in Boracay. Otherwise, we will not be able to comply with President Duterte's six-month deadline," the official said.

During previous meetings of members of the interagency task force for Boracay, there was a consensus that closure of erring establishments on the island will be enforced.

Recommendations, such as the imposition of a moratorium on tourism activities and declaration of Boracay under a state of calamity, cropped up. While a six-month moratorium on construction of new establishments is in effect, the DENR hopes to temporarily stop tourism activities so as to allow faster recovery from environmental degradation.

Cimatu himself said he is not in favor of a moratorium on tourism activities on the island.

Cimatu, who is leading the interagency task force that was specifically given six months by Duterte to fix Boracay's woes, however, maintained that the crackdown on erring establishments will continue.

No less than the President has threatened to shut down Boracay, which he described as the country's biggest "cesspool."

Eye opener

Meanwhile, Leones said the crackdown on tourism destination extends to other areas, too, such as Panglao Island in Bohol, El Nido in Palawan and other potential tourism destinations.

"What happened in Boracay should never happen again. That is why the secretary [Cimatu] has already ordered our [DENR] offices to ensure compliance with environmental laws in tourism destinations," he said. "There are instructions to all DENR regional offices to list potential tourism destinations. The assessment will include the carrying capacity of the areas."

Bay watch

The DENR, through Environmental Management Bureau (EMB), will also intensify a program called Bay Watch or Beach Watch.

Director Metodio U. Turbella of the DENR-EMB told the BusinessMirror that Bay Watch is a regular activity of the DENR-EMB and its regional offices.

Activities under the program focus on monitoring the water quality of beach resorts, particularly those that are frequented by local and foreign tourists.

The EMB, he said, monitors all water bodies, including coastal waters.

Turbella said discharge of untreated wastewater directly into water bodies, whether inland or coastal or marine areas, is a violation of the Clean Water Act of 2004.

Establishments found discharging untreated wastewater, especially water that is contaminated with hazardous or toxic substances, face severe penalty and fines under the law.

Violation of the Clean Water Act, such as in Boracay, he added, will be dealt with accordingly.

Fines for violating the Clean Water Act range from P20,000 to P200,000 per day until corrective measures are institutionalized. There is a separate penalty to be imposed for each or every violation of the Clean Air Act, the Forestry Code of the Philippines, Ecological Solid Waste Management Act, Caves Act and Wildlife Act.

The next target, he said, is El Nido, Palawan.

“The secretary [Cimatu] already has in mind priorities. But we already have a plan. It is up to the secretary,” he said.

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