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250 environment leaders sign manifesto underscoring biodiversity conservation

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Assailing ineffective governance for the alarming rate of environmental destruction, various stakeholders have recently signed a manifesto calling for the consolidation of all efforts in protecting the country's rich biodiversity.

The manifesto was signed by around 250 leaders and members of nongovernment organizations, grassroots and indigenous peoples' movement, youth and women's groups and small farmers and fishermen's cooperatives. They attended a recent four-day Small Grants Programme (SGP) National Conference in Tagaytay City.

Together with national government agencies and local government units (LGUs), national and international development agencies, media, academe and the business sector, conference participants pitched the call for a livable, healthy and climate-resilient environment as a human right.

The manifesto, a copy of which was furnished to the BusinessMirror, said biodiversity conservation must be viewed within the framework of inclusive development, social equity, justice and human rights.

"The use of natural resources must not only be sustainable but everyone must equitably benefit from the blessings of nature. Biodiversity conservation and sustainable development are for all and by all recognizing that the rights of the people must be accompanied by their responsibilities as citizens of this country and as custodians of the planet for the next generations to come," it said.

The manifesto called for, among others, the effective and full implementation and enforcement of Republic Act (RA) 11038, or the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System Act of 2018 (E-Nipas), and RA 9147, or the Wildlife Conservation Management Act, by the national government agencies and LGUs.

It said these government offices should guarantee the rights of indigenous and local communities to the management of their conservation areas and to participate in the management of E-Nipas.

The manifesto also cited the importance of Biodiversity-Friendly Enterprise (BDFE) as a social enterprise model that promotes the sustainable use of biological wealth.

The manifesto said it must be supported through the provision of free assisted developmental-recognition scheme, which incorporates support on value-chain development, feasibility/valuation study, marketing linkage and policy development.

The manifesto also underscored the importance of government's increasing investments in biodiversity-friendly livelihoods to support communities in biodiversity conservation areas.

“A simpler and free certification scheme will boost community-based BDFEs,” the manifesto added. In particular, the government should increase investment in research, studies, projects and programs on biodiversity assessment, conservation, ecosystem goods and services, among others.

Presidential Proclamation 489 (2018) declared a portion of the Philippine Rise within the exclusive zone of the Philippine Sea. It said the northeastern coast of Luzon Island, to be known as the Philippine Rise Marine Resource Reserve, is a strict protection zone covering 49,684 hectares.

Meanwhile, an integrated marine biodiversity strategic sustainable development plan should be put in place and implemented immediately.

The four-day biodiversity-focused conference aimed to encourage and sustain interaction among local stakeholders, especially the civil society, and help forge partnerships on technological and information exchanges, skills enhancement and policy development.

The event was co-organized by the Biodiversity Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the Global Environment Facility-Small Grants Programme of the of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The document cited both the richness of Philippine biodiversity and the serious extent of its degradation.

The Philippines is a megadiverse country that holds some of the richest terrestrial, coastal and marine environments in the world in its 7,641 islands and 36,000-kilometer coastline, the fifth longest in the world and the second-longest coastline per unit area. It hosts 52,177 described species of which more than half is found nowhere else in the world.

These vast resources provide the services and goods that the Filipinos are enjoying everyday—including food, water, medicine, irrigation, clean air. The value of benefits from biodiversity is worth at least \$24 trillion per year globally and \$44 million for the Philippines.

On the other hand, the Philippines is also known as a biodiversity hot spot. Deforestation overexploitation, unsustainable practices, encroachment in forested and coastal areas, pollution, over-fishing, poor land management and natural disasters exacerbated by climate change all contribute to the alarming rate of biodiversity degradation.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has categorized in its Red List of Threatened Species 540 animal and 245 plant species in the Philippines—as vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered—as of 2018.

The country's total forest cover is estimated at over 6.846 million hectares, or 24 percent of the original forest cover in the 1900s. It has only 1 percent of total coral cover remaining in excellent condition as of 2018.

Meanwhile, less than 5 percent of coral reefs remain in excellent condition and 30 percent to 50 percent of Philippine seagrass beds have been lost, according to Philippine Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2014-2022.

The country's national bird, the Philippine eagle, and other iconic flora and fauna—such as the tarsier, dugong, green turtle, Philippine hornbill; and the lauan and mangkono (ironwood) trees, and Rafflesia—are included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

The manifesto also cited the inequitable distribution of wealth, a profit-driven economy, unemployment and the lack of livelihood opportunities, a consumerist lifestyle, ineffective governance and corruption as exacerbating factors.

It noted that those who belong to the marginalized sectors of society like subsistence farmers and fisherfolks, the urban poor and indigenous peoples who depend most but receive the least benefit from the bounty of the natural resources, bear the most the brunt of disasters resulting from environmental destruction like flooding and landslides, and the impacts of climate change.

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