

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

Taklong Island NMR: ‘Jewel of Guimaras’

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When one mentions Guimaras, an island province in Western Visayas, the first thing that would enter one’s mind is its sweet mangoes.

However, besides the fruit, the province also boasts of its other “hidden treasure,” the Taklong Island National Marine Reserve (TINMR), where one’s visit to it would be best defined by the phrase “communing with nature.”

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About 15 minutes away from the town proper of Nueva Valencia and another 30 minutes away by boat from the shores of the town, a visit to Taklong Island offers a unique travel experience.

Taklong Island is literally “off the grid.” The very few facilities found within TINMR are illuminated at night by battery-stored electricity generated by solar panels, albeit with a limited capacity.

Water is fresh as can be, having been harvested from rain and stored in huge concrete tanks or plastic containers.

At night, with the permission of the management of TINMR and University of the Philippines-Visayas, a limited number of visitors are allowed to spend the night at the UP-Visayas Marine Station.

TINMR is protected against commercial and destructive fishing. Handline fishing is the only fishing method allowed within the marine reserve.

The protection and conservation of the ocean's bounty to ensure sustainable fish catch and the survival of coastal communities will be highlighted by the DENR and the Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia as the Philippines plays host to the upcoming "East Asian Seas Congress 2018" to be held at the Iloilo Convention Center from November 27 to 30.

Para el Mar awardee

TINMR bagged the first place as Most Outstanding Nipas MPA in 2017, a new category in the Para el Mar (Spanish of For the Seas) Awards for protected areas with a marine component under the National Integrated Protected Areas System Act of 1992, making it the very first awardee for the category.

The awards were spearheaded by the Marine Protected Areas Support Network, in cooperation with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Coastal and Marine Ecosystem Management Program "Agos ng Buhay," in order to recognize best practices in (MPA) management and help strengthen and sustain current management efforts based on science.

TINMR bested a short list of eight sites chosen for the finals.

A protected area (PA) with a category of Protected Landscape and Seascape under the Nipas, TINMR is known as the "Jewel of Guimaras" because of its natural beauty and rich biological diversity.

Natural defense

The island is Guimaras's first line of defense against natural and man-made calamities. Because of its thick mangrove forest, which acts like a giant sponge, it cushioned the impact of the 2006 oil spill after M/T *Solar*, a bunker fuel vessel, capsized off the waters of island.

Taklong also prevents storm surge from severely affecting mainland Guimaras, particularly the coastal communities in Nueva Valencia.

“It is us here in Taklong first [who are protected against storms], before them in the mainland,” Rhett Arthur A. Diana, chief of Protected Area Management and Biodiversity Conservation Unit of the DENR and concurrent PA superintendent of TINMR, told the BusinessMirror in an interview last month.

“During strong typhoons, if it weren't for Taklong [TINMR], many areas could have been wiped out by the waves in Nueva Valencia,” Diana said in Filipino.

Sandbar, beaches and eco-trail

Taklong Island has a good number of ecotourism sites. Besides the white-sand beaches, sandbars and an eco-trail, there are several caves, where visitors are allowed to get into.

Besides the UP-Visayas Marine Station, other facilities within the TINMR include a watchtower, which gives the Bantay Dagat or Sea Guards a full 360-degree view of the island and islets and surrounding water body; an information center, Protected Area Office, a floating guardhouse, a boardwalk or eco-trail, a gazebo and a conference room.

A floating cottage also offers visitors a place to spend swimming in a shallow portion of the sea.

Fish sanctuary

Commercial fishing and other destructive fishing methods are not allowed in Taklong.

“The only fishing method allowed in Taklong is handline fishing,” said Vicente A. Sardina, Guimaras’s Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Officer in a separate interview.

He said the DENR and the local government units (LGUs) of Guimaras, from the provincial government to barangays, consider the Taklong Island MPA as a fish sanctuary.

It acts as a breeding and feeding ground of a variety of fish and other marine life that boosts the food security and self-sufficiency not only of Guimaras but also that of nearby provinces like Iloilo and Negros Island.

Bats, ducks and mangrove forest

The mangrove forest within TINMR is teeming with biodiversity. Philippine ducks and giant island fruit bats are frequently seen.

According to Diana, the ducks and the bats are ecosystem indicators. “Their presence here means the ecosystem is healthy. That there is food and that it is ideal for them to feed and roost here,” Diana said.

According to a profile of TINMR provided by the DENR, there are 70 species of trees, 11 species of shrubs, 10 species of herbs and grasses and 26 species of mangroves in the marine reserve.

There are also nine species of seagrasses and 77 species of seaweeds in the area.

A total of 66 species of birds, including migratory birds, were recorded in TINMR together with six species of mammals, including long-tailed macaque, wild cat, fruit and insect bats and at least 16 species of reptiles, including snakes, lizards and sea or marine turtles.

Partnership

Behind TINMR's success in bagging the Para el Mar award is the strong link among the various stakeholders, led by the DENR through the DENR Western Visayas Region, the Guimaras Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Office, the Community Environment and Natural Resources Office and the strong support of the LGUs, led by the provincial government, down to the municipal LGUs, barangays, the nongovernment organizations (NGOs), people's organizations (POs) and community-based organizations.

Among the supportive community-based organization is the La Paz Fisherfolk Resources and Mangrove Management Inc. (Lafarma), led by its chairman, Nelson Celson.

“We have partnered with several POs and fisherfolk organizations. We provide them with livelihood, training and facilitate support from the LGU and other agencies. In return, they help us protect and manage TINMR's resources,” Diana said.

The NGOs and POs in Guimaras also benefit from increased tourism in Guimaras, including TINMR.

But Diana said they intend to strictly follow the various development plans developed by stakeholders and approved by the TINMR, Protected Area Management Board, including limiting the number of tourists within the island's carrying capacity.

At any given time, only 30 people are allowed to visit the TINMR, except in very special cases where the DENR and TINMR managers approve.

Benefits

For his part, Celson told the BusinessMirror there are other organizations in Guimaras besides from Lafarma. But his group is one of the pioneers and active supporters of the DENR and LGUs in the protection and conservation of the MPA.

When fishing activities are off during the typhoon season, small fishermen were able to get by because of the livelihood projects of the DENR and LGUs.

Lafarma is a partner of the DENR in implementing the National Greening Program and has been into mangrove forest rehabilitation since 2011. Under the program all of the group's 32 members, as well as other NGP partners, get paid on a "no work, no pay" basis.

"After planting mangroves, we make sure that they grow. We maintain the area, and we ensure a minimum of 85-percent survival rate," he said in Filipino.

According to Celson, fishing is a way of life in Guimaras. As tens of thousands of people directly and indirectly benefit from the ocean's bounty, they recognize the need to protect it from abuse and all forms of threats.

"We benefit from the protection and conservation work we do here in Taklong [TINMR]. The ocean is also important to us who are living in the coastal barangay. Even those who live in upland areas go here to fish," Celson said.

"We are also trained to protect threatened species, which fishermen are not allowed to catch. This includes stingrays, sharks and some seashells that are already critically endangered," Garmay told the BusinessMirror in Filipino.

For Garmay and other protectors of TINMR, the day starts as early as 5 a.m. and ends at dawn.

"Our POs here no longer join our routine patrols because we understand the danger. Those into illegal fishing sometimes threaten or harass them. Even us experience threats and harassment every time we leave TINMR and go to the mainland," he said.

Rolen G. Segovia, a fisherman-turned-protection officer of TINMR, admitted that they used to do illegal fishing but they were later convinced that it is bad.

Now an active protection officer patrolling the coastal areas, including the mangrove forest to prevent harvesting of wood for charcoal, Segovia said he is now part of the crew that regularly talks to fellow fishermen to convince them of the benefit of protecting and conserving their source of income and livelihood, their way of life and, more important, the Jewel of Guimaras.

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