

HEADLINES

SPECIAL REPORT

National policy to protect wetlands pushed

By: [Jheset O. Enano](#) - Reporter / [@JhesetEnanoINQ](#)

[Philippine Daily Inquirer](#) / 07:22 AM February 18, 2019

CRITICAL HABITAT The Las Piñas-Parañaque Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area is integral not only to wild bird species and mangroves but also plays a critical role for communities that depend on the coastal habitat for their catch. Experts have noted an alarming decline in waterbird population in the protected site by more than 60 percent. —EDWIN BACASMAS

(Last of two parts)

Loss and degradation threaten the Philippines' numerous wetlands, and both government officials and environment groups are calling for a national conservation policy — before it's too late.

ADVERTISEMENT

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has over the years crafted legislation to protect and conserve wetlands and pushed for its passage.

But changes in the national government, as well as in DENR leadership, has led to shifts in focus and priorities, resulting in the draft policy not coming any closer to becoming an actual conservation law.

In the absence of a national wetland policy, environmental officials and personnel rely on existing policies that cover various aspects of these ecosystems, said Joy Navarro, DENR senior ecosystems management specialist.

Such laws include the Forestry Code, Philippine Fisheries Code and Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act.

“With such a policy in place, efforts toward conservation may be harmonized, as well as the possible conflicting mandates of different agencies,” Navarro said.

Overlaps

Without a centralized law, government agencies exercising their mandates and roles on wetlands and wetland resources may experience overlaps in their jurisdictions, particularly for transboundary wetlands.

The focus of the draft national policy, which began as early as 2012, is the creation of a committee that will oversee and harmonize the different efforts and functions under the existing National Wetland Action Plan, Navarro said.

“It would be much better if it were institutionalized, in a sense that the presence of such a body would have legal basis,” she said.

ADVERTISEMENT

Under a law, there could also be provisions for prohibitions and penalties for violations committed against wetland areas, she added.

128 key biodiversity areas

At present, inland wetlands face greater challenges in conservation, as some measures for the protection of coastal wetlands, including coral reefs, are already in place.

In 2016, the DENR issued an administrative order for the implementation of the coastal and marine ecosystem management program.

There is no such program for rivers, lakes, marshes, peatlands and swamps, which number more than 2,600 nationwide.

In the race against time to save these habitats, current efforts on the ground will also protect the rich biodiversity that depends on these ecosystems to survive.

A national policy becomes even more crucial as many wetland ecosystems are now classified as sites critical for the conservation of globally important biodiversity.

In 2006, the DENR, along with Conservation International, Haribon Foundation and several scientists, identified 128 key biodiversity areas considered priority sites for conservation.

Among these are 41 wetlands, both inland and coastal, that host globally threatened and endemic fish, bird and other species.

‘Complete collapse’

With high concentrations of varying species in these ecosystems, the loss of wetlands may actually trigger the “complete collapse” of certain species dependent on these waters, said Arne Jensen, associate expert of Wetlands International and records committee chair of the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines.

According to the Global Wetland Outlook published by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in 2018, overall available data suggest that species relying on wetlands, such

as fish, waterbirds and turtles, are in serious decline, with a quarter already threatened with extinction, particularly in the tropics.

Since 1970, 81 percent of inland wetland species populations and 36 percent of coastal marine species have declined.

“We are generally concerned because the overall picture is not as good as it should be for a country like the Philippines, where wetlands play an enormous, important role for a large part of the population,” Jensen said.

Wetlands like rivers and lakes, for instance, are important areas for commercial fisheries, a means of livelihood and sustenance for coastal communities.

In assessing the health of these ecosystems, birds are “very good indicators” as they react quickly to changes in their habitats, Jensen said.

“If we look at the number of birds [in wetlands], the general picture is that the number is declining,” he said. “That is an indicator that these areas are not well taken care of.”

Drop in numbers

At the Asian Waterbird Census in Manila Bay, the country’s largest coastal wetland, in January, Wetlands International Philippines recorded a decline in waterbirds by as much as 14,000, compared to 2018.

Of the 105,000 waterbirds counted, 70 species were represented, with migratory birds comprising two-thirds of the population.

“Comparing further with the average of counts over 15 years, it is nearly a 30-percent drop in northern Manila Bay,” Jensen said.

But he noted that in Metro Manila, the decline in the Las Piñas-Parañaque Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area (LPPCHEA), a protected site under the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System Act, was even more alarming at over 60 percent.

Deemed integral not only to wild bird species and mangroves, the LPPCHEA also plays a critical role for communities that depend on this coastal habitat for their catch.

Its high value as an ecosystem has led to its recognition as one of the Philippines' seven Ramsar sites of international importance under the Ramsar Convention.

The six other internationally recognized sites are Agusan Marsh Wildlife Sanctuary in Agusan del Sur; Naujan Lake National Park in Oriental Mindoro; Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary in Cebu; Negros Occidental Coastal Wetlands Conservation Area; and Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park and Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, both in Palawan.

Habitat law necessary

But Jensen noted that even with its international status and high economic and ecosystem benefits, the LPPCHEA—and even the other Ramsar sites—may remain threatened by degradation and loss without a habitat law.

“Both national and local governments need to realize the high economic values of wetlands. We are not so sure at the moment that it is really appreciated,” he said.

Lacking a national policy, raising awareness of the importance of wetlands among communities may be the next big step in saving them.

“It all boils down to the recognition of these wetland ecosystems and the resources within,” Navarro said. “If we recognize and appreciate these, there would be behavioral changes among people at all levels, even the decision-makers.”

“We just really need to introduce the wetlands to them.”

Read more: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1086850/national-policy-to-protect-wetlands-pushed#ixzz5gghA1F8w>

Follow us: [@inquirerdotnet on Twitter](#) | [inquirerdotnet on Facebook](#)