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‘Wildlife Crimes Abound But Are Difficult To Curb’

“It is very important that enforcers are more intelligent than the ones committing the crime,” according to Department of Environment and Natural Resources Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon.

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Photo by The Philippine STAR’s Michael Varcas shows the Philippine Eagle named ‘Girlie’ at the Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau (PAWB) in Quezon City on World Wildlife Day on March 3, 2016. PAWB aims to conserve the country’s biological diversity through conservation of wildlife resources, among others.

Catching wildlife traffickers is one thing; sending them to prison is another. As environmentalists have learned, prosecution becomes much more difficult when people think it is a “victimless crime.”

One of the biggest challenges in prosecuting offenders is the issue of preserving and authenticating evidence gathered in raids by authorities, Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Undersecretary Ernesto Adobo Jr. said in a forum yesterday, March 3, the seventh celebration of World Wildlife Day at the Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Center in Diliman, Quezon City.

“The enforcement of wildlife laws is science-based. It’s not just the physical arrest of the perpetrator. We need to come up with an airtight case, and so we need enforcers who are well-trained,” Adobo noted.

Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon of the DENR’s Biodiversity Management Bureau pointed out that the identification of the seized items is “very crucial.” Prosecutors should be able to establish that these animals, plants or parts were really of an endangered or banned species.

He recalled one case involving an alleged haul of banned wood from the *kamagong* tree (*Diospyros blancoi*). However, he said the contraband was not ruled out to be of the *bolong-eta* tree (*Diospyrus pilosanthera*), a related species belonging to the same genus that was not banned. “Wrong identification can even lead to the dismissal of the case,” Calderon warned.

Calderon also explained the need to differentiate between banned ivory harvested by poachers from elephants they kill in Africa and ivory legally farmed from elephants in Thailand.

“It is very important that enforcers are more intelligent than the ones committing the crime,” Calderon said.

Adobo said wildlife crimes are as complicated to prosecute as illegal drug cases, in which the “chain of custody” – or every step of “handling from the scene of the crime to the submission to the court” has to be traced and guaranteed safe from tampering – has to be established to show the integrity of the evidence.

This would require law enforcers who are “highly trained and educated, disciplined to handle this special class of evidence,” Adobo pointed out.

There is no lack of trying. Adobo noted that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has donated X-ray machines to detect contraband and helps train wildlife law enforcers.



The X-ray machine donated by the United States Agency for International Development to the Biodiversity Management Bureau. Photo by Michael Varcas, The Philippine STAR

But he pointed to the “gaps between the enforcers and the prosecution” as some of their main challenges. He stressed that the cases could be dismissed by the courts for simple and avoidable reasons. There were cases in which the officers or the team who conducted the operations were not available to appear in the trial to testify about the apprehension of the wildlife traders and the confiscation of the evidence.

The illegal wildlife trade can be lucrative. The World Bank's Global Wildlife Program in November 2018 estimated the value of the illicit trade in the Philippines to be **as much as P50 billion a year**, or roughly \$1 billion. This is as much as 13 percent of the total global value of \$7.8 billion to \$10 billion.

If the payoff is as much as P49 million for smuggling 447 exotic birds to Indonesia, Calderon said people would be willing to risk the not-so-heavy penalties. In the said case, the court imposed a **two-year sentence and P30,000 fine** on the two traders arrested in an April 2019 raid on a warehouse in Mati City, Davao Oriental – a major hub of commerce with Indonesia.

On World Wildlife Day, Masungi Georeserve took the occasion to call for greater regulation and protection for biodiversity.

The conservation area in Baras, Rizal has become famous for its tourist activities revolving around its stark limestone formations. But the reserve called on the DENR to issue an order to address quarrying activities that threaten its unique plant, bird and snail species.

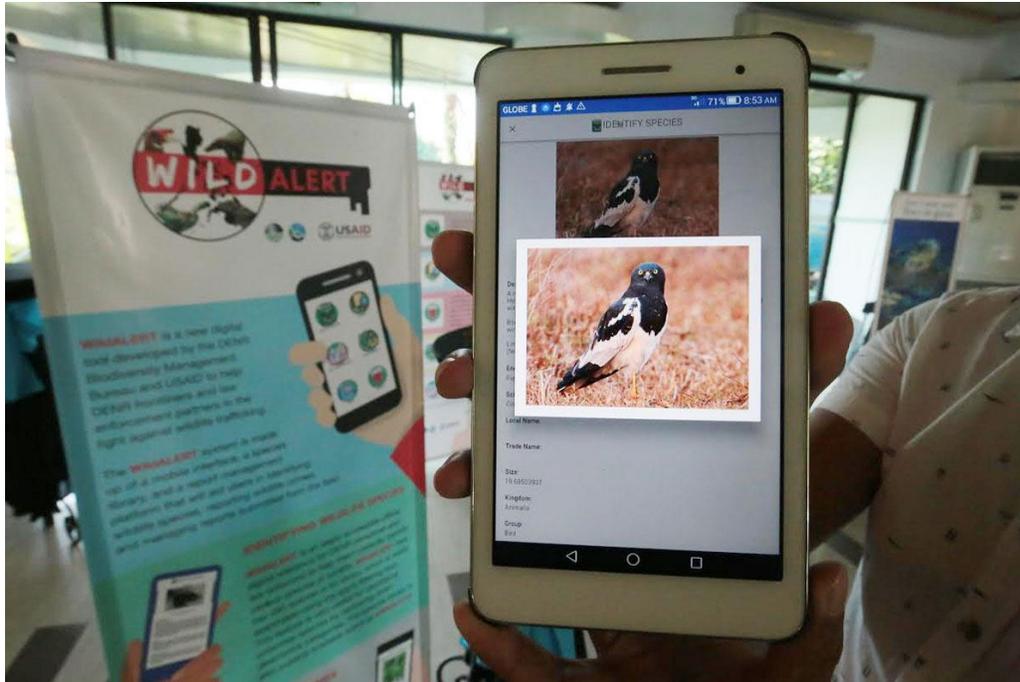
“We are hopeful that the Central Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) will **finally release an official order on the quarry**, and implement the laws that protect Masungi and the wildlife that call it home,” it said in a Facebook post.

Another issue that has to be addressed, according to Adobo, is the “common notion of every man in the street” that wildlife crime is “a second-class offense.”

“They’re really not giving much attention to it, when in fact... humans, we would be soon victims if we don’t arrest the proliferation of the illegal wildlife trade because we’re defiling the ecosystems... which perpetuate human lives,” Adobo said.

This is similar to the lament of United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. He issued a reminder that “by overexploiting wildlife, habitats and ecosystems, **humanity is endangering both itself and the survival of countless species** of wild plants and animals.”

“All human civilizations have been, and continue to be, built on the use of wild and cultivated species of flora and fauna, from the food we eat, to the air we breathe,” Guterres said. “It seems that humanity has forgotten just how much we need nature for our survival and well-being.”



The

‘WildALERT’ developed by the Biodiversity Management Bureau and the United States Agency for International Development to aid the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and law enforcement agencies in the fight against wildlife trafficking.

Stricter enforcement

Calderon said the DENR and other law enforcement agencies including the Philippine National Police, National Bureau of Investigation and Bureau of Customs are focusing on the enforcement of laws concerning wildlife.

According to Calderon, even eating or consumption of exotic wildlife species will also be covered since this is a criminal act punishable under the law. This is important amid the coronavirus disease 2019 or COVID-19 outbreak as the virus reportedly came from wild animals.

“There is a need to influence consumer behavior as well as reduce demand for illegally sourced wildlife and their products,” the official said.

“We, in fact, already elevated the problem of illegal wildlife trade to the category of a transnational crime – the same level as that of trafficking of persons, illegal drugs and money laundering. The penalty now should be higher and more serious compared to what has been imposed before, which is imprisonment of six months to one year,” Calderon said, noting that people can still afford to risk committing the crime given the short period of punishment.

Calderon said they are now working on amendments to the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act or [Republic Act No. 9147](#) as the “fight against illegal wildlife trade is now at a level higher than it used to be.”

“Our law enforcement agents will be more visible and vigilant in our seaports and airports,” Calderon vowed.

He added that the Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) is also coordinating with the Department of Budget and Management regarding increased funding for their personnel in the frontline enforcement units, including the Protected Area Management Office, for better management of conservation habitats.

Calderon unveiled a new digital tool called “WildALERT,” which was developed by the DENR-BMB and USAID to help DENR frontliners and law enforcement partners in the fight against wildlife trafficking.

The WildALERT system consists of a mobile interface, a species library and a report management platform that will aid users in identifying wildlife species, reporting wildlife crimes and managing reports submitted from the field.

It is an easily accessible offline digital reference for DENR personnel and law enforcers to help them correctly identify various species of wildlife.

According to the USAID, WildALERT now has 480 species in its library, which is easily searchable using the app’s filtering tool.

“Wildlife law enforcers can report poachers, trafficking and illegal trade of wildlife using WildALERT. Through the app’s reporting feature, photos and key information can be recorded, geotagged and submitted to the WildALERT report management platform,” it said.

<https://www.onenews.ph/wildlife-crimes-abound-but-are-difficult-to-curb>