

Alarming Benguet forest fires



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THERE have been altogether too many forest fires in the province of Benguet in the past two weeks. In a matter of days, there were six fires. Tublay, Kabayan, Bokod, Itogon and La Trinidad were the towns affected, including Baguio City with a fire on South Drive trees.

The Kabayan fire lasted more than eight days, damaging 165,620 trees and seedlings with an estimated value of P1.6 million.

WATCH : Fire broke out in Morayta Avenue

Particularly worrisome is that established tree plantations under the Expanded National Greening Program and natural pine forests were victims of the fires.

Mount Pulag Park, already a victim about two years ago of a massive forest fire started when trekkers brought a gas stove that exploded, had to close its access trail in the south to protect itself from another damaging fire threatening nearby.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Bureau of Fire Protection in the Cordillera Autonomous Region reported that the fires were difficult to put out due to acute natural slopes preventing fire trucks or even pedestrian access to bring water to put them out. Meanwhile, the wind conditions at this time (southeasterly) were an aggravating factor in the spread of the fires through forest floors of dry material. The Kabayan fire also spread to an inaccessible mountaintop, leaving firefighters looking on helplessly until a providential shower suppressed it.

While the damage figures in pesos seem less than what they should be, the damage to the ecosystem is almost unquantifiable. Plants and animals, which are precious environmental assets, are decimated. It also includes the oxygen-creating environments where trees are the engines that clear the air of pollutants, provide shade and cooler temperatures that mitigate summer heat, toxins in the air and other destructive effects of our current environment of climate change, fossil fuel use, unsustainable practices for short term livelihood gains. Certainly, 900 hectares ravaged by forest fire are a costly loss. This is the total area that has been affected by the forest fires.

In general, forest fires are caused by natural or human elements. Lightning can ignite forest fires in dry conditions (though as one observer put it, it is not yet the season for thunderstorms). A lighted cigarette thrown carelessly into

dry forest conditions can create havoc. Kaingin, the slash-and-burn planting technique used by indigenous people, can get out of control and turn into a destructive fire that ravages anything in its path. Aside from kaingin, another deliberate fire initiation occurs when cattle need new grass to feed on because after a fire new grass springs up, nature's first answer to keep alive.

While there have been no accusations made as of now regarding these spate of forest fires, their causes are under investigation. They may come up with natural causes i.e. lightning, or man-made causes, i.e., lighted cigarettes thrown carelessly, fires deliberately set for livelihood reasons. Vegetable gardens have been included as suspects, as farmers want more land to till. In these man-made circumstances, the short-term livelihood focus might be at fault.

Another suspicion aired to me by people in the area is that the DENR keeps paying for planting tree seedlings in its National Regreening projects but leaves it at that, failing to include nurturing them for further compensation which opens the seedlings to deliberate fire so as to again replant for a fee. I never thought of this angle until a person from the area that I respect as a decent civic-minded citizen asserted it as fact. Livelihood is a matter of life and death both for human beings and for the environment. The DENR's program should include a plan for nurturing the regreening project with

compensation for those who do. In that way, it will give livelihood to the community and protection for the environment. In truth, this is the tension in all natural environments today; they have to be protected by their communities rather than made short-term livelihood victims, which will in the long run affect everyone near and far negatively.

Furthermore, the environment must be protected by adequate means. Are there enough forest rangers to prevent the causes of fires? Is there enough equipment like fire trucks, water and trained personnel to respond to fire outbreaks successfully? Moreover, is there community support for all of the above?

In many of the fire outbreaks, the community helped in whatever manner they could under the circumstances. That is a comfort. But what is more necessary from the community is fire prevention, being alert as to not instigate fires by accident or otherwise, setting the example to the younger generation to value their natural environment.

Thanks to Rappler, CNN Philippines, Manila Bulletin, Philippine Star and Frank Cimatú for reporting on these fires. We must respond positively as government and nongovernment entities as well as the general public.

<https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/03/06/opinion/columnists/topanalysis/alarming-benguet-forest-fires/700590/>