

Features
Biodiversity

World Wildlife Day: Zooming in on illegal wildlife trade

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A Philippine eagle rescued in 2017 from a trap intended for monkeys was rehabilitated and ready for release back into the wild in the forest of Aurora province.

World Wildlife Day is a time to celebrate the immense biodiversity which allow man to continuously survive and live. However, the unrestrained activities leading to habitat destruction coupled with overexploitation of natural resources have paved the way for acceleration of species' extinction.

Environment Undersecretary Ernesto Adobo gave this statement at a news conference highlighting the Philippine celebration of the recent World Wildlife Day.

Given the extraordinary biodiversity of the Philippines, Adobo said protecting and conserving the various species is an immense mandate, hence, making World Wildlife

Day a great opportunity to raise awareness to the threats the species face amid deforestation and degradation, overexploitation of wildlife habitats and ecosystems, and the illegal wildlife trade.

With the theme: “Sustaining all life on Earth,” the UN World Wildlife Day 2020 embraced the “biodiversity super year,” encompassing all wild animal and plant species as a component of biodiversity, as well as the livelihoods of people, especially those who live closest to nature.

Championing wildlife protection

During the news conference, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) awarded special recognition to 98 wildlife law enforcers, who, throughout the year, played a crucial role in combating illegal wildlife trade that continuously decimates the country’s wildlife population.

“Be it not forgotten, lest we disregard their valiant efforts in risking their lives to protect our wildlife resources from poaching, trafficking and overexploitation so that the future generations to come would be able to see the rich biodiversity we still enjoy today,” he said.

The DENR, while mandated to implement the various environmental laws, still has no law enforcement unit tasked to combat wildlife and environmental crimes.

“Stopping illegal wildlife trade is one of the most important and urgent part of our work to be able to protect iconic and threatened wildlife,” Adobo said.

Forging strong partnership

Rogelio Demelletes, a DENR-Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) wildlife law enforcer, highlighted the partnership forged by the agency with the Philippine Operations Group on Ivory (Task Force Pogi) and Illegal Wildlife Trade, which work with various law-enforcement units.

The strong partnership, he said, has resulted in successful operations and “big scores” as far as the war against illegal wildlife trade is concerned.

“I would like to thank our heroes in protecting our wildlife. This award is very important in giving recognition to them. We usually work with various law enforcement unit and we work as a team,” Demelletes said.

Evolving technologies, social media

Over the years, illegal trade in wildlife has evolved with new technologies.

From mere short messaging system or text messaging, transactions are now done through the Internet using tablets and smartphones in different social-media platforms, making the reach of their illicit activities almost limitless and borderless.

The protectors of the threatened animal and plant species, Adobo noted, are equally under threat, extolling their effort in combating illegal wildlife trade, considered the fourth-largest transnational crime next to illegal drugs, and human and arms trafficking.

Intensifying effort

During the seventh Wildlife Enforcement Awards held as part of the celebrations, Adobo said the DENR will further intensify the campaign against illegal wildlife trade in partnership with the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), Philippine National Police (PNP) Maritime Group and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR).

“Our endemic species face the threat of extinction if we do not intensify our law enforcement to crack down illegal wildlife trafficking and other environmental crimes,” he said.

Moreover, he said the DENR is closely working with Congress to establish an environmental protection and enforcement bureau that will provide the DENR stronger powers and full authority to police wildlife traffickers, illegal loggers and other environmental criminals.

Following the money trail

The DENR and its partners in wildlife and environmental law enforcement are also working closely with the Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC) to pin down criminal syndicates involved in the multibillion-dollar illicit activity.

Last year, the AMLC has successfully frozen several bank accounts of a local subject. It is also looking at a dozen more cases of money laundering involving the illegal trade in wildlife.

Currently, the value of illegal wildlife trade in the Philippines—identified as a source and consumer of wild-caught animals and by-products, including plants species—is conservatively estimated at P50 billion a year.

This include the market value of wildlife, their ecological role and value, damage to habitats incurred during poaching, and loss in potential ecotourism revenues.

Interviewed at the sidelines of the celebration at the Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Center in Quezon City, Maria Ivy B. Jovellanos-Lanuevo of the AMLC secretariat Compliance and Investigation Group said each case is potentially leading to suspects' foreign contacts.

“We are also working with our counterparts in the other country to effectively stop illegal wildlife trade,” Jovellanos-Lanuevo said.

Hunger and poverty

The Philippines is not oblivious to big scores when it comes to apprehending suspects involved in the illegal wildlife trade.

On April 18, 2019, Task Force Pogi led the confiscation of over P50 million worth of live exotic animals in Mati City, Davao Oriental, reportedly smuggled into the country from Indonesia.

Illegal wildlife trade, whether for food, medicine, health and wellness, or some bizarre belief that animal parts make amulets for protection against bad spirit or can bring good fortune, are often associated with and driven by business opportunity.

Supply and demand

The huge demand for pangolin scale, meat and parts now make the animal as the most-trafficked on Earth.

In the Philippines, Adobo said while there are successful operations with the help of the communities, he acknowledged the fact that hunger and poverty prevails in the countryside, where illegal wildlife traders operate, taking advantage of and, eventually, exploiting the economic situation of the communities.

He said the community are forced to capture exotic animals for easy money everytime the need arises.

“Most of the time, the illegal wildlife traders are not from the community, but are only exploiting the community,” he said.

The DENR, he said, is addressing the problem through various programs that provide livelihood opportunities, such as the National Greening Program (NGP), wherein the DENR taps the community-based organizations as reforestation partners, forest managers and protectors of wildlife.

A toothless campaign?

Under the Wildlife Act, also known as Republic Act 9147, the penalty depends not only on the act committed but also on the conservation status of the wildlife.

The highest penalties for critically endangered species is six years to one day, to a maximum of 12 years imprisonment and/or a fine of P100,000 to P1 million for killing wildlife.

For hunting and trading, the penalty range from two years to four years of imprisonment and a fine of P30,000 to P300,000 for hunting, and/or P5,000 to P300,000 for trading wildlife.

For the mere transport of wildlife, the penalty is six months to one year imprisonment and/or P50,000 to P100,000 fine.

Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon, concurrent DENR-BMB director, said while protection and conservation of the country's rich biodiversity is anchored on the strength of the protected area management, he acknowledged that there is a need to strengthen law enforcement, and add more teeth to the law to effectively deter environmental and wildlife crimes.

"We are now working with Congress to amend the law and impose a stiffer penalty and higher fines," he said.

A 'no letup' campaign

Nevertheless, Calderon said the DENR-BMB's campaign is no letup as they also continue to enhance the capacity of environment and wildlife law enforcers.

Often, a suspected illegal wildlife trader, he said, is able to avoid prosecution on mere technicality, because of failure to establish or identify the species.

He said species identification requires training on the part of the law enforcers. Some species may be covered by law and others are not.

"That's why sometimes, a case is dismissed because the evidence was a wrong species," he said.

Also, he said there is a need to further improve the chain of custody, which is being addressed through various training.

A few years back, he noted that the DENR-BMB developed a manual for law enforcers, which, has led to better prosecution and eventually, higher conviction rate that has put illegal wildlife traders behind bars.

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