

# Earth Day 2020: Greening is part of fight vs pandemics



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Trees felled within the watershed forest of Kasibu, Nueva Vizcaya.

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As the world marked the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, at a time when a global pandemic continues to grip every corner of every country in the world, what are the challenges and opportunities people face now?

In a statement marking the Philippines's celebration of Earth Day 2020 on April 22, Secretary Roy A. Cimatu of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said it is the perfect time to ponder the need for "long overdue" collective action.

## **Global pandemic**

The country's environment and natural resources' chief steward said this is especially so as Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus that originated from Wuhan City in Hubei, China, continues to grip many countries around the world, including the Philippines.

The disease has so far infected more than 2.5 million people worldwide and has claimed the lives of more than 180,000 people.

In March, Philippine President Duterte placed the entire country under a state of public health emergency and placed the entire Luzon under enhanced community quarantine (ECQ).

The ECQ which was supposed to end on April 14 was extended until the end of the month.

Cimatu said no one knows how long this pandemic will persist, and how many more lives will be lost.

"Already, it has virtually paralyzed many nations, forcing them to impose lockdowns and quarantines, reducing economic and other activities to a trickle," he said.

## **Destruction and chaos**

According to Cimatu, a member of Inter-agency Task Force on Covid-19, coronavirus and climate change bring about destruction and chaos to any nation.

"On the one hand, with Covid-19, we are faced with immediate gripping fear of losing more lives. On the other hand, with climate change, we are faced with rising sea levels, saline intrusion into aquifers, droughts, floods, and the results will impact billions of people, as well as biodiversity. However, with climate change, adaptation and mitigation responses are not as immediate because its impacts appear to be just merely creeping," he said.

## **Filipinos' survival at stake**

In both Covid-19 and climate change, he said the Filipino people's survival is at stake.

“The urgency of the need for concerted and comprehensive action, without waiting for the problem to peak or to impact millions more of people is the same,” he said.

He noted that, on a positive note, because of the lockdown, the world has a much clearer sky, more breathable air, cleaner seas and more vibrant wildlife.

“For climate-change mitigation and adaptation, our responses may be less drastic, as they generally require only lifestyle changes. But we must invest in and institute the necessary concerted reforms speedily and extensively before it becomes too late,” he said.

“With the help of the mass media, let us challenge all nations, including ours, to take decisive climate action. After all, this has long been overdue,” he said.

## **Batting for ‘greener’ watersheds**

Environmental advocates, meanwhile, are drumming up the urgency of “greening” watershed areas and cityscapes to build the resilience of millions of Filipinos against the coronavirus.

“Restoring watershed forests and rewilding urban scapes are both immediate and long-term solutions to Covid-19 and future risks of pandemics. We will win half the battle against emerging infectious diseases if we live in sustainable environments, and address the ecological imbalances, such as water depletion, pollution and climate disruption that will exacerbate the pandemic’s impacts,” said Leon Dulce, national coordinator of Kalikasan People’s Network for the Environment (Kalikasan PNE) said in a webinar that gathered Filipino environmental advocates in cyberspace amid the extended ECQ.

Held from April 18 to 22, the series of Earth Day 2020 webinars organized by Kalikasan PNE, the Center for Environmental Concerns-Philippines, and the Ibon Foundation gathered experts and advocates to weigh in on the ecological aspects of the global pandemic.

## **Ecosystem integrity**

In her lecture on April 18, Dr. Marilen Parungao-Balolong, a public health expert and a microbiologist, said, “Environmental changes have a huge impact on the emergence and reemergence of certain infectious diseases.”

“Ecosystem integrity is very important. It can regulate diseases by supporting a diversity of species so that it is more difficult for one pathogen to spill over, amplify and dominate,” explained Parungao-Balolong, also currently an associate dean for research and public service of the University of the Philippines Manila College of Arts and Sciences.

A “rewilded” urban habitat, she said, will provide immune protective microbial exposure to human populations through biodiversity restoration.

She said it will result in the reduction of communicable diseases that render humans more vulnerable, such as diseases like Covid-19, and the promotion of beneficial microbiota that will compete against disease-causing microorganisms or pathogens.

She added that the Philippines has a high risk of emergence and reemergence of infectious diseases, noting that this “happens mostly in countries with high biodiversity and serious unresolved environmental, social and economic issues.”

## **Unique biodiversity, unique viruses**

Agreeing with Parungao-Balolong, Atty. Antonio La Viña, former Ateneo School of Governance dean and former DENR undersecretary, said at the same forum that the Philippines is “a host of many unique viruses because of its unique biodiversity.”

“This will not be our final pandemic unless we act properly,” La Viña said.

He warned that if the people continue with “business as usual and if the so-called new normal will still include mining, logging, pollution, coal-fired power plants, all of the things which led to pandemics, the problem will continue to persist.”

## **No to tradeoffs**

He said the national government should “absolutely not allow tradeoffs when it means loss of biodiversity and the risk of environmental damage that causes societal damage, economic damage and public health issues.”

He urged that “pandemic analysis has to be integrated into every Environmental Impact Assessment.”

According to La Viña, the current situation gives the opportunity for the Filipinos, especially the DENR, to do things right.

“I actually don’t see the DENR very active in its response.... They have to be more aggressive. Instead, we have them doing things like allowing ships from China to dock in Homonhon Island to stock up on minerals at a time when we are trying to prevent viruses, especially on an island,” he lamented.

Dulce echoed the challenge to the DENR, reiterating the argument that the mining industry is a litmus test in this situation.

“Large-scale miners like Chinese companies trying to haul mineral ores from Homonhon and Semirara Islands, and Australian-Canadian mining corporation, OceanaGold, that recently violently dispersed barricaders against its illegal and destructive operations, are direct threats to forests and public health alike,” he said.

“From upland watersheds to urban forests down to coastal greenbelts, the national government should not use the Covid-19 crisis as justification for neglecting the protection of these ecosystems. Greening our landscapes is part and parcel of our common fight against the Covid-19 pandemic,” he said.

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