

‘Gaps in ecosystems services valuation in Asean countries need to be addressed’

By **BusinessMirror**

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This photo was an entry to the Zooming in on Biodiversity Photo Contest, an Asean-wide photo competition held by Asean Centre for Biodiversity, with support from the European Union.

Biodiverse areas produce ecosystem services that are indispensable to economic and social development. Assessing them informs decision-makers better about the value and priorities for conserving natural capital.

Newly released policy briefs of the Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), in collaboration with the European Union under the Biodiversity Conservation and Management of Protected Areas in Asean (BCAMP) project, underscore the need to address knowledge and research gaps in ecosystems services valuation in Asean member-states, ACB said in a news release.

The “Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Assessment and Economic Analysis for Management, Policy and Innovative Financing Applications [Besa++]” policy briefs present the results of national and site-level stock-taking activities conducted in five Asean member-states, namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, as part of the interventions of the BCAMP project.

The activities assessed the existing knowledge and awareness of protected area managers and policy-makers and managers on Besa and other economic analysis applications in biodiversity conservation.

“Knowing the full and true economic value of ecosystem services will help decision-makers arrive at win-win solutions both for the economy and the environment. This knowledge provides a deeper understanding of what a nation stands to lose from activities that alter, if not destroy, natural ecosystems,” ACB Executive Director Theresa Mundita Lim said.

Consultation workshops on the results of the stocktaking activities in the five Asean countries were held from July to September 2019 to gather inputs from the government, academic institutions, and nongovernment organizations.

‘Wealth of research data’

In Thailand, data and information have been used to support studies addressing specific policy issues, the Besa++ brief said.

A 2019 mangrove study, for example, looked into the changes in land use and mangrove coverage using the baseline data of Thailand’s Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (DMCR).

“Opportunity costs of conserving mangroves,” or the costs incurred when mangroves are not conserved, were also analysed based on the land price data from Thailand’s Department of Treasury.

Results of the study helped determine the effectiveness of preventing the conversion of mangroves to alternative uses, the news release said.

While there is a wealth of data and studies, the policy brief noted that researchers and protected area managers and policy-makers must closely collaborate to maximize the uptake of existing research.

“Research results can be used to inform more realistic conservation, sustainable development planning and target setting,” the brief said.

Thailand has a combined 107,290.35 square kilometers of protected areas, equivalent to 21 percent of the total land area of the country.

Role in establishing protected areas

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, valuation studies have been used to support the establishment of new state parks, such as the Selangor State Park, which is the third largest in Southeast Asian country, covering 108,000 hectares, ACB said.

Established as a state park in 2007 under the National Forestry Act Enactment 2005 of Selangor, and managed by the Forestry Department of Selangor, this natural forested area protects some of Malaysia’s west coast state’s most vital resources.

Prior to the park’s establishment, various uses of the forest areas were valued, and a trade-off analysis between protective forest reserve, particularly as water catchment functions, versus production forest reserve options, was undertaken.

While there are many studies on value estimates of ecosystem services in protected areas, a few of them have led to substantial increases in the rates for the enjoyment of these services, or the sharing of excess profits among natural resource-based producers, the government and communities.

For instance, despite consumers’ willingness to pay higher rates, prescribed entrance fees in protected areas have not increased. Other factors, however, come into play, such as

the approval process for raising fees in forest recreational areas at the state government level.

Malaysia has established networks of both terrestrial and marine protected areas with a total size of 5.87 million hectares to conserve nationally and globally significant biodiversity.

Wider scope of assessment

The policy brief on the Philippines noted that ecosystem services assessments held in the country are narrow in breadth, and indicate a limited capacity at the protected area level, the news release said.

Based on the review of 768 publications in the Philippines, studies were found to be disposed toward resource use assessment and recreation services.

The published studies mostly considered a few ecosystem services instead of the ideal system-wide approach of looking into multiple uses and assessing their trade-offs.

“Recent development of tools for ecosystem services accounting should now provide the basis for protected area managers to start accounting for these various ecosystem services,” it said.

According to the policy brief, capacity building in the use of these tools should be undertaken in collaboration with academic institutions, which are in a better position to invest in training their constituents and establish information systems.

The Philippines has 526 identified protected areas, of which 240 covering 7.15 million hectares are managed by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. The rest are under different types of authority and management.

Knowledge, capacity gaps

Assessments in the five Asean countries showed key actors working to improve the management and financing of protected areas have limited knowledge on ecosystem services valuation, economic analysis, and innovative financing mechanisms.

In the Philippines, an online survey for protected area managers, researchers, government officers and faculty and staff of academic institutions, yielded a low response rate due to the “lack of knowledge on the topics presented,” the news release said.

Of the 317 potential respondents, 37 participated in the survey. The overall knowledge and skill on ecosystems valuation was found to be below that of a “novice.”

Similarly, results of a survey conducted in Cambodia showed most of the respondents are either novices (35 percent to 46 percent) or have no knowledge (31 percent to 36 percent) on ecosystem services measurement and accounting.

More than 50 percent of the government officers in the survey expressed the need to understand how to account for and value cultural, provisioning and supporting services of ecosystems.

Government officers also expressed the need for training on conservation financing, especially on regulatory instruments of financing and fiscal financing.

The researcher respondents, on the other hand, said that greater knowledge on the standardized methodologies and approaches is required.

Cambodia has a large remaining expanse of tropical forests, and its system of protected areas and corridors covers 42 percent of the country.

According to the Lao PDR policy brief, on the other hand, insufficient knowledge and skills on assessing economic values of biodiversity and ecosystem services were “one of the most important factors accounting for the loss of forestry resources and biodiversity.”

Lao PDR has rich forest resources and biodiversity, with one of the highest proportions of forest cover in Southeast Asia.

In a similar survey, most Lao PDR respondents indicated that they have limited knowledge and skills on Besa, including baseline inventory and species-specific, change, indicator and resource assessment.

Lao respondents have some knowledge and skills in provisioning services and the estimation of their market price, but “little” on regulating, cultural, and habitat services.

They also said they possess some knowledge and skills in conservation financing. However, most lack experience in developing financing mechanisms.

Commenting on the Besa++ briefs, Enrico Strampelli, head of Cooperation for the EU delegation in the Philippines, said: “The true value of biodiversity and ecosystem services to the wealth of a nation and to the well-being of future generations is often overlooked by decision-makers, or underestimated against immediate economic interests.”

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, “we know, now more than ever, what could be the final price to pay for forest degradation and wildlife trafficking.”

Lim said the ACB will consider the recommendations from the Besa++ policy briefs in its future policy actions with Asean member-states.

“What is common in the reports is the need to improve the competency and skills in valuing biodiversity and ecosystem services, and effective communication of data and information to policy-makers and stakeholders,” Lim said.

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