

# Protectors of Philippine tamaraw in peril

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A Taw'buid tribesman is armed with a tulag (spear) inside the Iglit-Baco Mountain Range. Indigenous tribesmen are employed as porters, scouts and trackers and serve to educate their fellow tribesfolk about the merits of protecting the land.

The Philippine tamaraw, also known as the Mindoro dwarf buffalo, is the country's most iconic land mammal.

Its population's earlier decline was widely believed due to a deadly disease that continued until the 1960s, and hunting for food and trophy until not more than 100 of them were left in the wild.

In the 1970s, recognizing the importance of conserving and protecting the tamaraw, the Philippine government launched the Tamaraw Conservation Program (TCP) anchored on captive-breeding program.

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Its known habitat, the hinterlands of Mindoro that includes vast portions of Mount Iglit and Mount Baco, were declared as sanctuary and conservation area.

The program has produced but one tamaraw—Kalibasib—short for *kalikasan bagong sibol*, or newly sprung nature, and would perhaps be the first and the last tamaraw bred in captivity.

Fortunately, a small population of the smaller but more aggressive cousin of the Philippine carabao has seen a slight but steady increase in the last decade—a sign of hope that the iconic animal will continue to roam the grasslands of Mindoro for years and years to come.

## A keystone species

Experts believe that the tamaraw is a keystone species.

Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim said protecting and conserving the tamaraw in its sanctuary and natural habitat is unique and iconic.

“First, the tamaraw is found only in Mindoro. It is iconic, one of the smallest buffalos in the world, and therefore, should be a source of national pride and pride for the people of Mindoro as well,” Lim told the BusinessMirror in an interview via Messenger on August 6.

A former director of the DENR-BMB, Lim said more importantly, the tamaraw is attached to the culture and traditions of the Mangyans and can be considered a keystone species.

“Its habitat is associated with other unique plants and animals found only in Mindoro. Its survival, therefore, can be an indication of the health of other species it is associated with, as well as the effective functioning of the ecosystem, where they are naturally found, and one of their known habitats is Mounts Iglit-Baco,” she explained.

## **Asean Heritage Park**

Straddling adjacent mountain range territories from which it got its name, Mounts Iglit-Baco National Park (MIBNP) is covered under the National Integrated Protected Areas System Act.

Considered to be a conservation area of great value not only to the Philippines but to the Southeast Asian region, it is fitting of the designation as an Asean Heritage Park (AHP).

Home to some of the island’s endemic species like the tamaraw, the area is a gene pool of threatened flora and fauna, including some that cannot be found anywhere else in the world, except on Mindoro Island.

According to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources-Biodiversity Management Bureau (DENR-BMB), other important species can be found on Mounts Iglit-Baco.

These are the Philippine deer, wild pig and Mindoro cloud rat.

Endemic bird species there include the Mindoro imperial pigeon, Mindoro scops owl, black-hooped coucal, scarlet-collared flowerpecker and heart pigeon.

## **ACB priority area**

According to Lim, Mounts Iglit-Baco National Park, being an AHP—a title bestowed upon national parks that are considered “best of the best” in Southeast Asia—receives priority attention from the ACB for capacity building of the park staff.

The ACB has provided assistance to the national park's law enforcement and monitoring program, through equipment, such as Global Positioning Satellite, camera body and lens, laptops, hand-held radio and binoculars.

It supported training on law enforcement and protected area management.

ACB's livelihood support is consistent with the management plan, including the establishment of model sustainable communal and agro-forestry farms.

The interventions of ACB in Mounts Iglit-Baco, Lim said, is largely through its Biodiversity Conservation and Management of Protected Areas in the Asean Project, which is a partnership with the European Union.

“We are allocating some amount this year to support possible livelihood programs for selected communities as part of our economic stimulus for AHPs, whose revenue from tourism have been affected by the [coronavirus disease] Covid-19 lockdown. We hope that this should help them to continue to be our partners in protecting AHPs,” Lim said.

## **Expanding territories**

DENR Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon said despite funding problems, efforts to protect and conserve the Philippine tamaraw is paying off.

“Over the years, there's a steady increase in the number of tamaraws. We have also received sightings outside Mounts Iglit-Baco,” Calderon told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview on August 5.

He said sightings in the nearby Mount Calavite National Park, a game refuge and bird sanctuary in Occidental Mindoro, was welcome news.

“We are considering the inclusion of some areas outside Mounts Iglit-Baco in the annual tamaraw count,” said Calderon, concurrent director of the DENR-BMB .

## Protectors in peril

A forestry expert, Calderon said the tamaraw going beyond its known habitat is expected and is encouraged by the fact that the forest on the island is expanding, thanks to the protectors of Mounts Iglit-Baco and tamaraw.

The park's wardens serve as guides and porters for tourism and research expeditions, while both the TCP and park rangers keep poachers at bay in case the Covid-19 quarantine entices some to illegally enter the park and hunt animals.

However, only 23 TCP rangers and three MIBNP wardens are currently patrolling a core area of 2,500 hectares inside the 106,655-hectare MIBNP, which hosts at least 480 of the estimated 600 remaining tamaraws on Mindoro.

## Covid-19 impact

Faced with funding woes, which were aggravated by lockdown in many areas in the country to prevent the spread of Covid-19 pandemic since last March, the protectors of the tamaraw and their habitat are in danger of losing their jobs.

Actually even before the pandemic, the national park was already experiencing a funding problem. This was the reason for the launching of the #TogetherforTamaraws campaign last month.

Calderon said the pandemic caused the stop of the income generated through ecotourism. Many of the national park and tamaraw protectors were laid off just last month.

He said before the lockdown, the income from ecotourism, through the entrance fees collected from visitors to Mounts Iglit-Baco are fueling the operation of the protected area.

## **Wanted: More conservation partner**

“Unlike the Philippine eagle, the tamaraw conservation is not getting much support from the private sector,” Calderon said.

He said the adopt-a-species program of the DENR-BMB has fetched benefactors for the Philippine eagle. Multinational corporations allocate funding from their various corporate social responsibility units that make the conservation of the iconic bird of prey more successful.

“If you noticed, more and more eagles are being discovered and rescued because of successful campaigns to protect and conserve the Philippine eagle with the support of the private sector,” Calderon said.

According to Biodiversity Finance Initiative (Biofin) Philippines, one of the 24 TCP rangers, together with 32 of the 35 Taw'buid, Buid and Iraya tribal wardens who patrol the area to deter tamaraw hunters and poachers, have lost their jobs due to the MINBP's closure following community quarantine measures.

## **Tamaraw Society**

On July 31, as part of the celebration of the World Ranger Day, the Philippine Parks and Biodiversity, a not-for-profit nongovernment organization, launched the Tamaraw Society in an effort to unite 20 champions of the tamaraw and their protectors, the group said in a news release.

There are currently nine champions that have committed to the group's cause.

They are the World Wildlife Fund for Nature-Philippines, Masungi Georeserve, Eco Explorations, D'Aboville Foundation, Planet Cora, Fund the Forest, Echoheroes, Kids for Kids and Oscar Lopez Jr.

Each of the initial 20 champions were called to commit a financial aid of P20,000 in support of #TogetherforTamaraws campaign of Biofin Philippines project under the

United Nations Development Programme, the DENR-BMB and Mimaropa Regional Office.

The fund campaign aims to raise at least P1 million to cover for the half a year's worth of salaries for the wardens and rangers whose livelihood is affected by the pandemic, the news release said.

The fund campaign's proceeds will be disbursed through the TCP under the DENR.

## **'Bayanihan' for tamaraw**

"Our campaign is a Covid-19 emergency response to unite concerned groups by securing the much-needed salaries and allowances for the retrenched [tamaraw] frontliners who protect them," PH Parks and Biodiversity representatives Nella Lomotan and Ann Dumaliang said in a joint statement.

For his part, Onno van den Heuvel, Biofin Global Project manager, said: "Exotic places like the Iglit-Baco mountain range might seem distant to most people, but they must be conserved. Rangers and wardens need and deserve our support to keep doing good conservation work."

"This pandemic should bring forth empathy and not drive us to apathy," Occidental Mindoro Rep. Josephine Ramirez-Sato said. "Let us all show the spirit of *bayanihan* by helping our rangers and wardens in saving the tamaraw."

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