

# Expert: Endemism is key in protecting biodiversity

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Endemism is important in promoting biodiversity in the country, a professor at the University of the Philippines-Los Baños (UPLB) said.

Dr. Juan Carlos T. Gonzalez, head of the UPLB Museum of Natural History, said the study of endemism or naturally occurring species in a location, such as an island, region or country, is important to further understand and appreciate biodiversity, as well as to take steps to protect it.

To enhance biodiversity, people should plant more trees, vegetation and flowering plants to encourage pollination, Gonzalez discussed during an online session organized by Energy Development Corp. (EDC) in line with Philippine Environment Month in June.

“For the longest time, we have been reforesting using nonnative species,” he said.

Besides being unsuitable for the location they are planted in, the nonnative species are unable to thrive and serve their purpose of being home to other endemic flora and fauna. In some instances, such reforestation measures end up being more harmful than beneficial, he explained.

In response, EDC established the Binhi greening program in 2008 to address such needs and ensure that endemic tree species are propagated and nurtured across the country.

Binhi has identified and documented 96 threatened species of native Philippine trees and successfully planted in all its 177 partner-organizations across.

An ornithologist, Gonzalez was impressed with the country’s biodiversity data.

According to a 2019 checklist, there are 700 species recorded with 241 of them found only in the Philippines, with the Mindanao region possessing the highest rate of endemism.

At the same time, new species of birds continue to be discovered, including the Cebu hawk-owl in 2012 and the Sierra Madre ground warbler in 2013.

Gonzalez added that this is an indicator of the continuously evolving ecosystem and the need for humans to know more about the creatures that they coexist with.

In partnership with the University of the Philippines Diliman's Institute of Biology, Gonzalez said the results of an almost decade-long Biodiversity Conservation and Monitoring Program carried out in the geothermal sites further illustrate the impact of endemic trees to biodiversity. He cited the result among birds and flying mammals, including bats.

Gonzalez noted that at least 300 species of birds have been documented to be thriving in these locations, representing about 43 percent of the total bird species in the country.

Some 169 bird species are Philippine-endemic, which represent nearly 71 percent of the total endemic species in the country.

He cited the significance of a total of 59 threatened bird species recorded in these geothermal sites, including the critically endangered Philippine eagle.

Gonzalez noted other important sightings including the Visayan tarictic hornbill in Negros and the Apo myna in Mindanao, among many other precious birds.

He noted that the Binhi forests are an "amazing laboratory" where scientists, including himself, are not only able to study species but also "understand the relationships and patterns that govern our own anthropogenic disturbances," or human activities that impact the environment.

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