Philippine wildlife reporting app promises to upgrade fight against trafficking

by **Rosy Mina** on 3 September 2020

- *The Philippines' environment department plans a year-end rollout of an app, currently being tested, that should make it easier for citizens and enforcement officials to report wildlife crimes.*

- *Illegal wildlife trafficking is the fourth-biggest transnational crime in the world, following the trafficking of drugs, people, and weapons; in the Philippines, the trade is estimated at $1 billion a year, and threatens the country's unique wildlife, of which many species are found nowhere else.*

- *The WildALERT app is designed to overcome one of the main problems with reporting any kind of crime from remote areas — patchy internet reception — by using an offline mode that allows users to enter photographic and location data on-site and upload it when they get reception.*

- *The app also has a library feature, essentially a Facebook for endangered species, to allow users to quickly identify and report species they encounter; the lack of specialist knowledge is currently one of the big gaps in the existing campaign against the illegal wildlife trade.*

MANILA — In the Philippines, it's normal for neighbors to share their food, and — since areas most are still under a form of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic — even toiletries, clothes, and other essentials. But what if a neighbor gives you wild animals?

That's exactly what happened to Christian Atienza, a resident of the town of Mabini in Batangas province, south of Manila. Imagine his surprise when his neighbor, Philip Ramos, turned over hatchlings of brahminy kites (*Haliastur indus*), locally known as *lawin*.

Ramos says he found the hatchlings in a neighborhood forest near his house and tried to release them back into the wild, but they kept returning to his home. At a loss for what to do with the young birds of prey, he handed them over to Atienza who, in turn, took care of them. Atienza reported the brahminy

kites to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) after receiving offers and even threats from aggressive buyers.

Brahminy kites are found from the Indian subcontinent through Southeast Asia and down to Australia. In the Philippines, they're considered a threatened species, one of many that make up the country's 50 billion peso ($1 billion) illegal wildlife trade.

In the case of Atienza's Brahminy kites, they were taken to the government's wildlife rescue center in Quezon City on May 10 and have been there since. But even for people like Atienza, who try to do the right thing, informing authorities about wildlife sightings can be complicated because the reports have to go through several channels, causing delays in validation and coordination.

The Brahminy kite hatchlings. Image courtesy of Christian Atienza on Facebook

To address the red tape and ease the reporting process, the DENR in March launched a mobile app, though it's not yet available to the public. The Wildlife Agency and Citizen Law Enforcement Reporting Tool (WildALERT) is a centralized system that aims to help DENR employees and law enforcement partners, and

eventually citizens in general, identify wildlife species, report illegal activities while in the field, validate and update reports, and monitor the status of wildlife crimes.

"In law enforcement, especially apprehending wildlife violators, the key element is time," Theresa Tenazas, a lawyer and the officer in charge at the DENR's Wildlife Resources Division (WRD), told Mongabay. "And if we are able to bridge this gap from the discovery of the crime or illegal activity up to the time of reporting, then apprehension will be speedy. It will facilitate the actual and on-time apprehension of the violators."
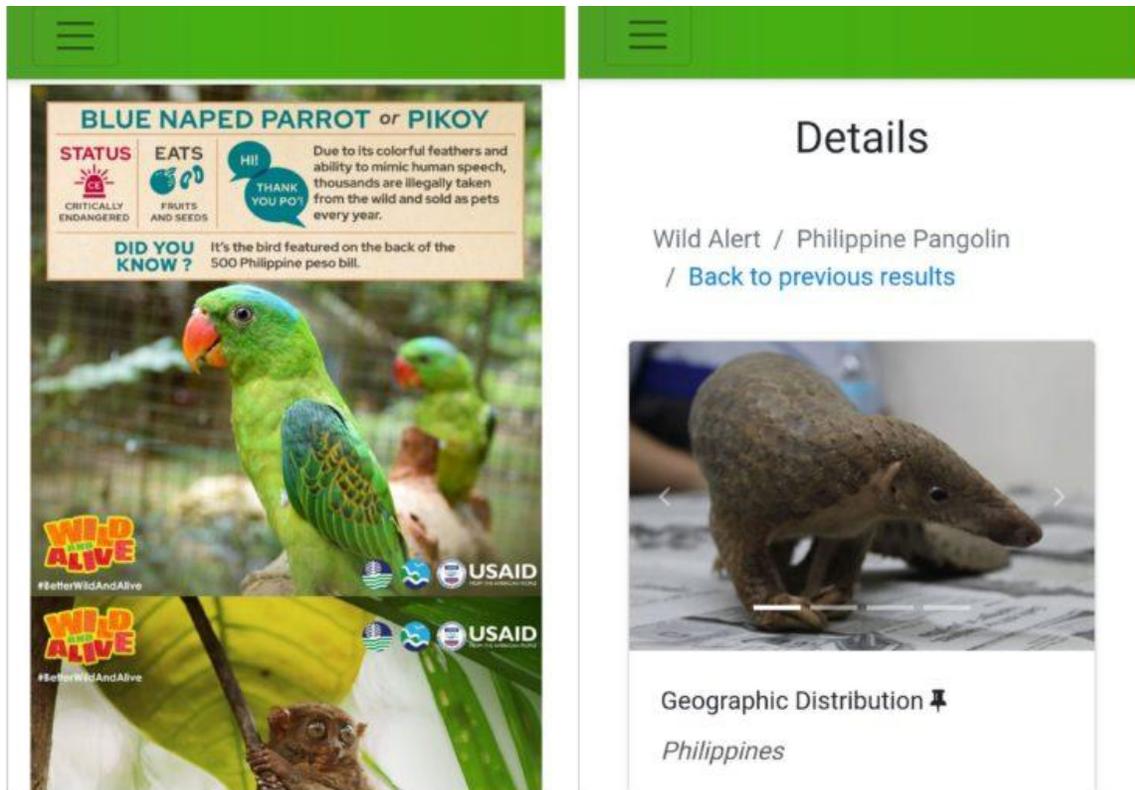
The department aims to roll out the app among DENR personnel and law enforcement partners before the year ends; plans for an earlier deployment were delayed by travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The environment department will begin training sessions via video conferencing in September or October. For concerned citizens, the app will go public by January 2021, which includes an anonymous reporting function.

Expediting a response

The DENR says it hopes that with WildALERT, it can respond more quickly to reports and more effectively enforce the Wildlife Conservation and Protection Act of 2001, which regulates the hunting, possession, collection, transportation, importation, and trading of wild animals in the country.

The Philippines is among 18 countries considered mega-biodiverse, with species endemism at 49% for terrestrial wildlife. It has the fourth-highest bird endemism in the world. As a biodiversity hotspot, it's among the top areas for conservation priority in the globe.

The illegal wildlife trade is the fourth-biggest transnational crime in the world, after the trafficking of narcotics, humans and weapons. Despite being considered by some as a marginal offense, given that the most visible victims are rarely people, the illegal wildlife trade is even more profitable than illegal mining.

WildAlert App mobile interface

"There are victims here because we are depriving the ecosystem if we take these wildlife species away, and we humans will soon be victims if we don't stop the proliferation of illegal wildlife trade," DENR undersecretary Ernesto Adobo Jr. said in a statement.

For now, the main method of reporting wild animals to the government is through the DENR's Action Center hotline. Other ways to report are through social media, text message, e-mail, or by mentioning it to DENR personnel. Once reported, the information on wildlife species is forwarded to the DENR's Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB). The WRD, which is part of the BMB, will then record any information submitted via phone call, online messaging, or verbal complaint.

The subsequent job of coordination regarding validation of reports and rescue operations falls to members of the Task Force Philippine Operations Group on Ivory and Illegal Wildlife Trade (POGI), a group that includes representatives from law enforcement, customs, and the coast guard, as well as national and local environment offices.

Science-based crime, tech-based action

As wildlife enforcement officers and the public wait for the WildALERT app's full rollout, they can already access the wildlife species library on the website WildALERT.ph.

The library, which lists 480 species, provides a photo and scientific name for each animal, as well as its common names in English, Filipino, and local dialects. It also lists the geographic distribution, description, and conservation status of each species.

The site's species library aims to help enforcers and citizens identify species. "In filing cases, you have to identify the product of the offense," says Tenazas, who adds that wildlife prosecution is a science-based case. "It's also one way of looking for more public participation in the fight against illegal wildlife trade so people will also be knowledgeable once they sight species."

Attendees of the pilot testing of the WildALERT app's beta version. Image courtesy of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)

Identifying a species correctly will shorten the verification process because of improved accuracy plus the elimination of manual recording of field data.

Another important element of the WildALERT app that speeds up the reporting process is the georeference feature, which Tenazas says allows the app to be used online or offline.

When a user takes a photo of a wild animal using the app's recording feature, the time and location are instantly recorded. The report is already documented even if the user is offline.

This is helpful for enforcement officers and citizens in areas with weak or no internet signal. They can enter the information offline and later sent it to the report management platform when they get an internet connection. A data manager will assess the report and then forward it to the nearest DENR office or law enforcement site. This should allow for a quicker response, theoretically in a matter of a few hours.

The georeference feature is also crucial in creating a heat map within the app. The map will show red dots to denote areas where illegal wildlife activities are prevalent based on the locations of reports. This will aid the DENR in providing greater operational support for specific areas and deploying more enforcement officers to locations where there is a greater population of species as evidenced by the high number of wildlife crimes.

Overcoming glitches, challenges

The WildALERT app is being developed by the DENR's BMB in partnership with USAID Philippines' Protect Wildlife Project, and was pilot tested in February.

Representatives from the DENR's Knowledge and Information Systems Services, as well as its offices from eight regions and other law enforcement agencies, identified several glitches during that testing, including in the transmission of reports, notifications, and app crashes.

The Brahminy kite hatchlings rescue team. Image courtesy of Christian Atienza on Facebook

There were fewer recorded glitches during the soft launch and demonstration on March 3. Wildlife enforcement officers are now more concerned about internet reception in areas of the country where usage of the app is likely to be higher, and the capacity of officers' personal mobile phones, some of which are older models.

The internet problem can be addressed for now by the app's offline feature, but the DENR says there's still a need for stable and fast internet connection because delays in uploading reports will hamper rescue operations.

"This is an appeal," Tenazas says. "If the USAID may be able to read this interview, if it is possible that we extend once more the help to providing people with appropriate mobile phones and portable Wi-Fi."

She says another USAID project provides BMB personnel with smartphones for the WildALERT app, but not all involved in wildlife enforcement are eligible for new mobile phones.

Pandemic seizures

The importance of cracking down on wildlife crimes has come under the global spotlight during the COVID-19 pandemic, given the strong indications that the disease sprang from a wildlife source.

"Better conservation of large intact natural areas, including natural world heritage sites and urgent measures to address illegal wildlife trade are really considered important to limit the emergence of new diseases in the future," Mechtild Rössler, director of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, said in a recent panel discussion.

In March, the Philippines' DENR halted the transportation of licensed wildlife and forest items in line with the country's lockdown measures to reduce the transmission of COVID-19. But it says there still needs to be stricter monitoring of illegal wildlife activities during the pandemic.

A soaring Brahminy kite. Image courtesy of WildALERT.ph

The WRD says it did not receive any reports of illegal wildlife activity from enforcers or citizens in the first quarter of the year, but saw a spike in reports from April to June, when lockdowns were in place. The WildALERT app could have been useful to the DENR during this time, when most business transactions moved online, including the selling of wildlife species, but it had to be set back due to technical issues.

Despite this, authorities launched four enforcement operations in the second quarter in response to wildlife crime reports, leading to the apprehension of six alleged violators and filing of three cases. They also seized eight animals and nearly 20 kilograms (43 pounds) of agarwood products , widely harvested for the fragrant resin . The estimated street value of the contraband is 3.85 million pesos ($79,600). Other alleged offenders have been apprehended by partner offices and law enforcement agencies, and more are being tracked online.

With the species library website the only functional feature of the WildALERT app for now, the DENR says it's counting down the months until its personnel and partner law enforcers can finally download and use the full-featured package.

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