

[FeaturesBiodiversity](#)

# Asean Heritage Parks: Woes, hope amid pandemic

By [Jonathan L. Mayuga](#)  
September 27, 2020



Picture-perfect corals of varying shapes and colors attract divers in Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, one of the best dive spots in the world. It is one of the nine Asean Heritage Parks in the Philippines.

Protected areas closed for months, tourism income lost, reduced mobility of park rangers and increasing pressure on the environment with communities left with no other options but hunt animals for food, or harvest wildlife resources to put food on the table.

These situations are happening in the middle of the health crisis brought by Covid-19, and it is now taking its toll on Southeast Asia's rich biodiversity.

Among those hit hard in varying degrees are Asean Heritage Parks (AHPs), considered the cream of the crop of protected areas in Southeast Asia.

## **Protected areas and AHPs**

Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim said there are 2,652 protected areas in the Asean region covering an accumulated total of more than 800,000 square kilometers.

These are in Brunei Darussalam, one; Cambodia, two; Indonesia, nature; Lao PDR, one; Malaysia, three; Myanmar, eight; Philippines, nine; Singapore, two; Thailand, six; and Vietnam, 10.

The ACB identifies the areas that are declared AHPs, a flagship program of the Asean.

Lim gave these information during a webinar, titled "Asean Heritage Parks and Covid-19 Pandemic: Impact, Responses, and Recovery," held via Zoom recently by the ACB and the Directorate General of Nature Resources and Ecosystem Conservation (NREC) of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoEF) of Indonesia.

Known for their unique biodiversity, ecosystems wilderness and outstanding values, AHPs are given the highest recognition because of their importance as areas of conservation.

The AHP Programme encourages the Asean member-states to set aside and conserve more areas in the region that are of high conservation importance.

To be recognized as an AHP, a protected area undergo a stringent process to pass the discerning criteria of ecological completeness, naturalness, having high conservation importance and representing a wide variety of ecosystems of species typical of the particular region.

## **Heritage, life-support system**

Ir. Wiratno, M. Sc., director general of Indonesia's MoEF-NREC, said AHPs are something the region should be proud of.

In his message, Wiratno said protected areas in Indonesia are very important life-support system, like fresh water for consumption and agriculture.

He said they provide various support, regulating, provisioning and cultural services.

“I would like to remind [everyone] that protected areas are very important as a life-support system like fresh water for consumption and agriculture,” he added.

## **Indonesia's One Health concept**

Ibu Indra Exploitasia, DVM, director, and Nining Ngudi Purmaningtyas, deputy director, respectively, of Biodiversity Conservation Directorate General of MoEF-NREC in Indonesia underscored the importance of protecting the forest to promote a healthier environment.

They shared Indonesia's One Health concept, wherein the health of the environment, humans and animals are directly connected.

They believe that damage to the environment eventually affects animal and human health.

The establishment of protected areas, they said, is a strategy to heal, and provide therapy to Indonesia's damaged environment.

## **Biodiversity-rich Asean region**

Home to an abundance of diverse biological resources, 18 percent of the world's known fauna and flora are found in Asean, Lim said.

Lim highlighted the importance of biodiversity conservation in the region, and cited Asean's recognition of the immense role of the region's biodiversity-rich areas, both as a solution to preventing future pandemics and for the region's recovery post-Covid-19.

“These biodiversity areas provide resources for nourishment, shelter and even medicine. People and communities depend on biodiversity for their livelihood and survival; hence the sustainable use of these resources is essential for the present and future generations,” Lim said in her opening remarks during the webinar.

## **Mitigating, preventing disease outbreaks**

A former director of the Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in the Philippines, Lim said establishing and effectively managing protected areas is regarded as the most effective tool in ensuring the conservation of the region's rich ecosystems and biodiversity.

But more than their breathtaking views and the valuable ecosystem services that they provide, Lim said natural parks and protected areas have much more to offer as they could also be the key to mitigating the impacts of disease outbreaks, and more important, even preventing them.

A licensed veterinarian and expert in zoonotic diseases, Lim said the Covid-19 pandemic is a reminder that many wildlife species could be natural virus reservoirs.

Hence, she said that when habitats are encroached on or destroyed, these reservoir species are driven toward human settlements, increasing the risk of virus transmission to domestic animals, and eventually to humans.

## **Best solutions**

Calling conservation efforts at the ecosystem level as best solutions to preventing future disease outbreaks, Lim said it can decrease habitat loss and keep the wildlife species and their inherent viruses in the safety of their natural habitats.

This is the reason why the Asean and with the support of ACB are working on establishing more protected areas, she said.

The ACB head said the establishment of more protected areas while sustaining the management of existing ones become even more crucial in building a new normal amid the ongoing pandemic.

## **Tourism sites**

Lim said being the cream of the crop of national parks and protected areas in the region, AHPs are popular tourism areas. About 80 percent of AHPs, she said, are considered ecotourism sites.

But like other tourism areas affected by Covid-19, AHPs are severely affected by the ongoing community quarantines or lockdowns.

A preliminary online survey among protected area managers conducted by ACB from April 26 to June 16 revealed the impact of Covid-19 to protected areas in the region.

About 76.9 percent of park officials surveyed said their protected areas have been closed to tourists and visitors because of the pandemic, while 62 percent said their protected areas incurred tourism income losses as a result of the closure.

Meanwhile, more than 50 percent of the respondents said their enforcement activities were affected.

## **Lockdown woes**

During the webinar, park managers shared experiences how the Covid-19 lockdowns have affected their operations.

Angelique Songco, protected area superintendent of the Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, said because of Covid-19 they only received 139 visitors from March to June, a sharp decline from 3,400 visitors in the same period last year.

“We are expecting a revenue of \$21,000 over the total amount that we got last year. We lost this revenue because of Covid-19 pandemic, along with the opportunity to educate and inspire people to support the conservation of Tubbataha and other marine ecosystems,” Songco said.

For her his part, Abdul Jalil Abd Rahman, a representative of the community in Taman Negara National Park in Malaysia, said the 86,000 tourists they received last year were practically lost because of the pandemic.

Fortunately, he said members of the communities who have lost their livelihood have been receiving aid from the government.

Tam Tanh Nguyen of Vietnam’s Hoang Lien National Park also lamented the fact that the lockdown resulted in zero income from tourism for their park.

## **Productive amid Covid-19**

Reduced mobility brought by the community quarantines or lockdowns is a major challenge to park authorities. Despite that, the park managers said they are able to continue performing their functions, including law enforcement.

In Tubbataha, marine park rangers have been rotated and deployed on time, while the scheduled management trips and research activities were pushed through.

The management of Kepulauan Seribu National Park in Indonesia, on the other hand, tapped the locals to patrol and conduct monitoring in the park as the mobility of its staff was affected by the suspension of public transportation.

On a positive note, the managers of AHPs and protected areas, however, are finding ways to be productive even during the lockdowns, Lim noted.

She said park managers have also been consulting and coordinating with indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs), whose livelihoods have been gravely affected by impacts of Covid-19.

Fortunately, she said despite grappling with the difficulties, the communities remain protective of their environment and have stepped up active roles in monitoring and surveillance activities.

“It is important to note, therefore, the essential role of the IPLCs and take them into consideration as we prepare for the ‘new normal’ in ecotourism activities,” she said.

Lim said alternative livelihoods must be part of the contingency plan in the event of future outbreaks.

<https://businessmirror.com.ph/2020/09/27/asean-heritage-parks-woes-hope-amid-pandemic/>