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# Indigenous peoples: Environmental defenders

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Taw'buid tribesman armed with a tulag, or spear, inside the Mounts 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.

Tamaraw rangers and forest wardens help protect the iconic Philippine tamaraw and their Mounts Iglit-Baco National Park (MIBNP) habitat on Mindoro Island.

The Mindoro environment protectors include indigenous peoples (IPs), who lost their jobs and are suffering from economic setbacks owing to the impact of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic, with the community quarantine enforced by the government since March to contain the disease.



Curious Taw'buid children in Tamisan Uno on the foothills of Mounts Iglit-Baco National Park in Mindoro.

In this light, a P1.1-million fund was raised to provide for the allowances and provisions of the forest frontliners in recognition of their important role in protecting the tamaraws and their natural habitats.

The initiative also highlights the celebration of October as the Tamaraw Month.

Concerned groups and individuals comprising the Tamaraw Society turned-over the fund to the Tamaraw Conservation Program (TCP) on October 29.

**IP Sundays, IPRA month**



Fufu Ama, or tribal elder, Ben Mitra with a gadun, or short bow, used for hunting small prey like birds and lizards. The Taw'buid are the most numerous of Mindoro's eight ethnolinguistic groups. Though they revere the tamaraw, they also engage in slash-and-burn farming and set-up both spike traps and snares to snag wildlife.

The IPs' rights and contributions to humanity are recognized by many sectors worldwide.

The United Nations commemorates August 9 as the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples. It is celebrated around the world and marks the date of the inaugural session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations at the United Nations in 1982.

At the same time, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) led the celebration of the 23rd year of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act in October with the theme, "Correcting Historical Injustices for Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Welfare."

For the Catholic Church in the Philippines, October 10 is IP Sunday. Celebrated every second Sunday of October, priests dedicate homilies about the sad plight of the IPs and encourage support for their struggle for self-determination.

In his homily, Bishop Broderick Pabillo, the administrator of the Manila archdiocese, also recognized the role of IPs in protecting and conserving the environment and biodiversity.

IPs are known to be the ultimate defenders of land rights. But little is known about their role as the protectors of the environment.

## **Land is life**

According to the NCIP, there are a total of 133 different IP groups in the Philippines. Some 1.2 million are IP rights holders with a total of 5,411,798.93 hectares covered by Certificate of Ancestral Domain Titles.

A United Nations Development Programme report said there are around 14 million to 17 million IPs in the country.

At the core of the issue of the right to self-determination of IPs is the issue of land rights. For centuries, IPs all over the world have been fighting for their right over their ancestral lands which have been taken away by governments or by law.

Beverly Longid, global coordinator of the International Indigenous Peoples Movement for Self-Determination and Liberation (IPMSDL), said IPs believe land is life, therefore, it is integral to IPs not only in the Philippines but around the world.

## **Land-grabbing, encroachment**

The encroachment to ancestral lands of IPs has been happening for a long time, Longid said.

“Since the onset of colonization, encroachment has been happening. Now, it is development projects, mining, energy, among others [that have been encroaching on IPs lands],” she said in a Zoom meeting with the BusinessMirror on October 13.

Unfortunately, she said not only in the Philippines, but also elsewhere around the world, there is no legal recognition on the rights of IPs to their native lands that makes companies easily encroach on their territories.

According to Longid, sometimes, the government even allows or facilitates the encroachment on ancestral lands to pave the way for so-called development. This, she said, almost always result in the massive destruction of the environment and natural resources.

## **Environmental defenders**

IPs are known as defenders of the environment. They protect the forests, as well as the plants and animals that thrive within their ancestral domains—because they are crucial to the IPs’ survival, Longid explained.

The fact that the remaining forests are found in IP lands is proof of IPs value and defense of their ancestral domains, she pointed out.

Unfortunately, Longid said the programs and policies of governments are not very supportive or beneficial to IPs, even in the Philippines.

“Currently, there’s no such program or policies where we can work with government on that score,” added Longid, an Igorot from Benguet province, an IP tribe in Cordillera Administrative Region in northern Philippines.

## **IP territories, KBA**

For centuries, IPs have been fighting against destructive development projects in their ancestral domain, she said.

It is for this reason that the remaining forests that are rich in biodiversity and key biodiversity areas (KBA) are found in IP territories

“This is no longer in the framework of protection or saving [our ancestral domain]. It is now in the framework of defending the remaining areas of biodiversity,” she said.

Longid cited what she described as human-induced fires in the Amazon rainforest in South America which are being targeted by ranchers who want to intrude in the territories of IPs.

The IPs in the Amazon are now fighting for their forests, she said.

Closer to home, she cited the successful defense of their right to land and natural resources by Kalinga people of the Cordillera against the proposed Chico River Dam Project in the 1970s.

The Chico River, also called the “river of life,” is essential to the people in the Cordillera and Cagayan Valley.

The people feared that the planned dam was environmentally destructive and would deprive thousands of people of their right to land and water.

The strong people’s opposition forced the government to cancel the project in the 1980s.

“Had the IPs not succeed in opposing the projects, the communities along the Chico River would have all been gone,” she said partly in Filipino.

## **Best practices**

IPs around the world, as well as in the Philippines, are known for their best practices in protecting and conserving their natural wealth.

Longid said their group is trying to popularize IP practices in forest protection and in certain values, such as in gathering or using resources that are only needed.

“This means production and consumption is not wasteful. Reduce, reuse and recycle. In certain [organized IP] communities, we are able to introduce nondestructive projects like [constructing] micro dams that will provide electricity to communities to counter accusations that we are antidevelopment,” she said.

According to Longid, without IPs' right to self-determination, the remaining biodiversity areas will be gone for good.

“If not for the active defense by IPs, most of these areas that are key biodiversity areas would be gone by now,” she said.

## **Vulnerable, highly at risk**

In Mindoro, the plight of the tamaraws, their natural habitat and their protectors mirror what is happening across the country, one of the 17 megadiverse countries in terms of flora and fauna and one of 35 biodiversity hot spots in the world due to the rapid rate of biodiversity loss.

The situation was aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic because some people who lost their jobs are forced to turn to alternative source of income and livelihood that are destructive to the environment.

At the same time, forest protectors, including IPs, are at risk of eventually losing their jobs because of income loss in protected areas and national parks whose operation is partially dependent on tourism income.

## **Important role**

The important role played by IPs goes beyond simply protecting and conserving the environment. Their role in biodiversity conservation is globally recognized, the Mindoro Biodiversity Conservation Foundation Inc. (MBCFI) believes.

Grace Diamante, MBCFI executive director, said IPs are the main players in conservation because since time immemorial, they are the original inhabitants of a particular area.

While most of vast areas are no longer exclusive to IPs, they still have traditional access to them for their subsistence.

“IPs believe that they coexist with plants and animals around them. But they themselves admit that they cannot do it alone, hence, the help from lowlanders are needed,” Diamante said via Messenger on October 19.

## **Enhancing IP capacity**

Diamante said the MBCFI help IPs develop their individual and organizational capacity to carry out biodiversity conservation “even in the management of their ancestral domains without canceling their own cultural practices and the traditional system of resource use.”

In working with peoples’ organizations (POs), who are also Mindoro IPs, each member has allotted almost 1 hectare for conservation. Half of the land area is dedicated to reforestation using native trees that will never be cut down under a conservation agreement between the individual and MBCFI. The rest is planted to fast-growing trees for fuelwood and fruit-bearing trees.

IPs in Mindoro are helping protect the forests. Diamante said 69 members of the PO they are working with are waiting to be tapped by the DENR as forest protectors.

## **Sustainable living**

Asean Centre for Biodiversity Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim said via Messenger on October 14 that IPs are known to live in harmony with nature, living and working with their natural environment.

“Since time immemorial” indigenous peoples have lived peacefully with nature, taking only what they need for sustenance, and adopting sustainable practices that allowed the Earth to replenish itself,” Lim said.

“This is what we consider their traditional practices, and the informal know-how that is passed on from generation to generation is traditional knowledge,” she added.



Lim said such knowledge, once harnessed, will be very helpful in protecting biodiversity and preventing extinction.

“Being designated by the CBD [Convention of Biological Diversity] as the regional node for the global biodiversity target on protected areas in the Asean, the ACB, per request of member-states, also supports activities that promote and recognize IPs as they apply traditional measures for area-based conservation. We consider this as one of the means to achieving the global protected area targets,” Lim said.

## **Make or break**

Assistant Secretary Ricardo Calderon told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview on October 26 that IPs play a crucial role in biodiversity conservation, especially because they have control over vast tracts of land within their ancestral domains.

IPs, he said, have the potential of being the ultimate environmental defenders, given that they promote practices in sustainably managing the natural resources. Such potential, however, can go sideways.

“Some IPs facilitates environmental abuse as they partner with unscrupulous individuals,” said Calderon, also the concurrent director of the DENR’s Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB). He was referring to wildlife traders, loggers or timber poachers, or people representing big companies with vested interest over IPs’ lands.

It is for this reason that IPs, he said, should always be mindful of the environment more than the benefits offered by proponents of potentially destructive activities.

“The IPs should always be on the side of conservation. What we need to do is harness their potential,” Calderon said.

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