

Concerted efforts towards future-ready, green cities

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LAGUNA, Nov. 1 -- The ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) joins the global observance of World Cities Day today. Designated by the United Nations in 2014, the celebration of World Cities Day serves to remind everyone that as urbanisation becomes inevitable, the development of cities must take into consideration present and future needs, and their long-term impacts on nature and biodiversity.

In the ASEAN and the rest of the world, the expansion and development of urban areas have brought economic development right at the fringes of forests or marine coastal areas, resulting in the alarming decline of vast natural resources and biological diversity. The rapid expansion of the world's population, which is expected to double by 2050, compounds the already mounting pressure on ecosystems. In a 2018 ASEAN Sustainable Urbanisation Strategy report, it was estimated that more than half of the region's populations are concentrated in the cities, and will increase by more than 70 million by 2025. The increasing density of cities predisposes urban populations to risks such as climate change and the spread of infectious diseases like the COVID-19.

The rate of population growth and expansion of cities will most likely overtake the rate of regeneration of the already scarce natural resources that provide basic ecosystem services. The United Nations Environment Programme in a 2018 report cited that such "urban metabolism" must consider how cities can continue to access ecosystem services while sustainably managing them at the same time.

This is why the conservation of the remaining natural areas and biodiversity in the cities, and developing green spaces are of paramount priority. Mainstreaming and integrating biodiversity into urban planning must be done, and it will entail the collaboration of various sectors and stakeholders.

The ASEAN region has been making headway in developing green and sustainable cities. Under the Bio-Bridge Initiative of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the National Parks Board of Singapore (NParks) and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) of Thailand are leading the development of an ASEAN Work Programme on green infrastructure, aimed at integrating green infrastructure and urban biodiversity and incorporating ecosystem-based adaptation solutions into the member states' planning and development. The draft of this work programme is currently under review by the ASEAN Member States.

The ACB is likewise pleased that the City Biodiversity Index, a self-assessment and benchmarking tool developed by Singapore and experts pooled by the CBD Secretariat, is widely adopted in the ASEAN and across the world. The Index is a tool that enables cities of all kinds and sizes to benchmark and monitor the progress of their biodiversity conservation efforts against their own individual baselines based on 23 indicators that assess their native biodiversity, ecosystem services, as well as the appropriate governance and management modalities. The Philippine Biodiversity Strategic and Action Plan, for instance, have applied the index in establishing green spaces and livable urban areas.

We also commend the actions of national and local governments in conserving the last lung of the cities. One prime example is the declaration of the Arroceros Forest Park in Manila, Philippines, as a "permanent forest park," just early this year. The 2.2-hectare park hosts more than 3,000 trees of 61 varieties and 8,000 ornamental plants and is home to 10 bird species. The park's vegetation can help build resilience against siltation and flooding. Meanwhile, the Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Center (NAPWC), a 23.85-hectare protected area in the heart of Quezon City, Philippines, benefitted from effective urban landscaping and now boasts having a lagoon, a garden of native plant species, and more than 4,000 trees, making the NAPWC a haven for the 73 bird species freely flying in the area.

Meanwhile in Thailand, green spaces in the megacity of Bangkok are being integrated into urban structures that can also be used for agricultural production. Various projects, in collaboration with the other sectors such as the academe and business, are being implemented to enhance the contribution of urban and peri-urban agriculture to bridge the country's gap in food security and the rising population.

Cities and urban areas have attracted investments and contributed to socio-economic development. On the flip side, however, many activities in urban areas have been destructive and harmful to the environment, such as habitat encroachment and displacement of native biodiversity.

Urban communities, nevertheless, can be valuable allies in nature conservation, particularly in mainstreaming biodiversity. Usually situated in proximity to the seat of government, urban populations can amplify policy advocacy efforts around crafting and implementing biodiversity-related laws. Tech-agile urban dwellers are able to maximise traditional and alternative platforms and approaches that could enhance environmental laws in the country. For instance, the CitiesWithNature online platform, co-founded by ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and The Nature Conservancy, connects different stakeholders with

governments from around the world to exchange lessons and practices on embedding biodiversity considerations into urban planning and development.

Many cities have adopted sustainable landscape techniques that allow nature parks and green spaces to thrive, reducing water and air pollution while offering aesthetic features that are soothing for the city dwellers. Trees and plant covers not only provide shade, they are also effective wind and flood barriers. Without a doubt, urban biodiversity contributes by and large to the overall capacity of cities and communities to function well and become more resilient.

In these examples, we see the unparalleled contributions of both the private and public sectors and the communities in enriching biodiversity in urban areas and making sure that the innumerable benefits of biodiversity are valued and recognised. These actions show that urban development and biodiversity need not be at opposing ends.

Let us take the World Cities Day commemoration as a call to raise awareness not only on the plight of cities and urban communities but also on the steps that need to be taken to bring us closer to our vision of 'Living in Harmony with Nature'. As we work towards COVID-19 recovery, we are given an opportunity to build anew and integrate the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity into our plans and actions. Indeed, these transformative actions are crucial in preventing and mitigating future crises. If we are to make our ambitions into realities, it is certain that cities must be part of the solution to curb global biodiversity loss. (ACB)

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