

COLUMNISTS

COMMENTARY

2021 is decisive point for nature in Asean

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This year sets off the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, which scientists assert as humanity's last chance to save the planet from the catastrophic impacts of climate change. This is our tipping point to halt and reverse the further degradation of ecosystems of land and sea while addressing pressing socioeconomic issues.

Home to 20 percent of the world's known plant species, the Asean region, of which the Philippines is part, has a bigger stake in this critical decade. The region's vulnerability to climate change as shown by the recent calamities that struck the Philippines and its neighboring countries makes the next 10 years of great consequences.

Following the unthinkable year that was 2020, the most important question now is no longer the whys, but the hows. It is time to shift our gears and take action.

Ecosystem restoration is a holistic approach to assisting the recovery and reconstruction of areas, with equal attention to conserving protected areas. Naturalist Sir David Attenborough in his recent documentary "A life on our Planet" made an emphatic appeal to "rewild the world" as the only way out of the crisis that mankind has created.

Despite the dire consequences of the pandemic, we remain optimistic about the future. Recovery is an opportunity for us to reset and leverage on biodiversity conservation as part of the efforts to ensure sustainable growth in the medium- and long-term, including addressing risks and providing livelihood and jobs to affected communities.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the UN, in its recent Pandemics Risk Report, said reducing human activities

that drive the loss of biodiversity, conserving protected areas, and adopting measures that reduce unsustainable exploitation will prevent the spillover of diseases.

The ongoing work of the Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), contributing to steps to combat COVID-19 and other diseases of zoonotic origin, takes off from the recent positions of the Asean leaders, including the Asean Comprehensive Recovery Framework and Implementation Plan. Guided by the framework, the ACB is enhancing coordination with other Asean bodies in the efforts to strengthen enforcement of wildlife protection laws and effectively manage wildlife habitats, such as through the Asean Heritage Parks program, of which the ACB is the secretariat.

Restoring ecosystems likewise involves scaling up effective greening programs that tap endemic and native plant species and engage community participation. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources will plant 100 million trees under the multisectoral Greening Malaysia Program from 2021 to 2025. As of 2020, the Philippine government, led by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, has planted 35.6 million seedlings covering around 45,000 hectares of denuded and open forestland under the national greening program. The region needs to work together in line with these initiatives that have positive impacts on the environment and the well-being of the people.

With lockdowns easing, we anticipate a renewed interest in nature tourism, a significant contributor to the global economy and conservation efforts. Drawing up nature-integrated tourism plans and providing stimulus to communities affected by the tourism slump, while ensuring safety protocols, are essential.

Despite the failure to meet global targets in the past decade, we continue to press on. Originally planned for October 2020, the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Kunming, China, in May this year, is expected to adopt the landmark post-2020 global biodiversity framework. The 26th session of the COP to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change will also take place in November 2021, in the United Kingdom.

Restoring ecosystems is a triple win for Asean. But it requires a change of mindsets and deep-set habits, from our food and energy consumption and our choice of products to

business models and decision-making. A synergy of our actions and cooperative efforts will ensure that we measure up to the goals and targets that government leaders will set this year.

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