

Pagasa, a legacy of hope in Philippine eagle breeding

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January 24, 2021



Philippine eagle Pagasa

Pagasa would have turned 29 on January 15. The first to be bred and hatched in captivity using the cooperative artificial insemination (CAI) technique, Pagasa breathed his last on January 6 at the privately run Philippine Eagle Center (PEC) in Malagos, Davao City, his birthplace.

He died of infections associated with trichomoniasis and aspergillosis, diseases common to raptors.

The eagle's demise came not as a surprise. It occurred a week after he was being treated. While the center's veterinarians believed all was well and with high hopes that he would be able to recover, his conditions continued to deteriorate until his untimely death.

Icon of hope

The very idea of having Pagasa produced under artificial means gave the researchers at the center renewed hope in saving the species from extinction.

When the eagle was conceived, it paved the way for researchers to contribute to the dwindling number of the species, according to the nonprofit Philippine Eagle Foundation (PEF), which runs the center.

The successful hatching of Pagasa in 1992 was received with much jubilation and the PEF was able to produce 27 captive-bred eagles afterward.

Pagasa's hatching was the culmination of 14 years of research at the center, whose primary purpose is to save the species from extinction through conservation breeding.

Produced through cooperative artificial insemination, a tricky procedure compared to the natural breeding or pairing method while in captivity, Pagasa was the center's first CAI baby.

Out of the 28 chicks hatched at the center, only seven were produced through CAI.

There are currently 11 breeding eagles in the CAI program, including female Philippine eagle Mabuhay, Pagasa's progeny.

Mabuhay was hatched on February 9, 2013, when Pagasa was 21.

Even after reaching past his productive years, Pagasa lived his life as an icon of hope as he continues to serve as an inspiration to the men and women of the PEF who are working tirelessly to save the National Bird from extinction.

Eagle's mortality

According Jayson Ibañez, director for Research and Conservation of the PEF, other eagles have died while at the center's care before Pagasa came.

The causes of deaths vary. Some that were badly injured upon rescue later on died after surgery or while under treatment.

Some of the eagles that die before Pagasa were Diola, Pagasa's mother that died at 29; Luyag, at 32; Jing-jing, at 32; Tsai, at 28; and Thor, Tsai's partner, at an age of 46.

Strict biosecurity protocols

Ibañez told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview on January 19 that biosecurity protocols at the center was even more heightened because of their suspicion that Pagasa got the deadly disease from any of the wild virus-carrying or disease-carrying wild doves that may have gone close to Pagasa.

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Nevertheless, he maintained that Pagasa's demise was an isolated case.

The PEC observes strict biosecurity protocols to prevent incidents like what happened to Pagasa, Ibanez said.

“What we really go for is prevention,” he said.

He said the food and water given to the Philippine eagle and other raptors must be fresh and clean all the time, and containers used for their drinking must be decontaminated or disinfected.

“We don't really know which species of doves caused the disease. But there are several species in Malagos watershed and surrounding areas,” he said.

He said infection could happen in three modes—direct contact via fecal or urine contamination, eating of an infected animal, or drinking water contaminated by poop or urine of infected animals.

“Some doves that might be infected [Pagasa] could include emerald dove, white-eared brown dove, spotted dove, zebra dove,” he said.

Wanted: Male eagles

Ibanez said PEC is looking for more breeding eagles to boost its capacity to produce eagles that can be released later into the wild.

A Philippine eagle becomes sexually mature and productive at 5 years for females, and 7 years for males. They are productive until they reach 25.

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With Pagasa's demise, although he is already past his productive stage, the PEC is banking on relatively young adult breeders and pairs at the center to produce the next generation Philippine eagles.

Among them are natural pair Diamante and Dagitab, and budding natural pair Mayumi and Phoenix.

The PEF is also hopeful of the future of Geothermica and Sambisig. The pair are both housed at the Jurong Bird Park in Singapore.

"Previous productive couples and imprinted birds have recently retired. We are waiting for new pairs and imprints to start breeding," Ibañez said.

He said the center lacks male breeders for imprints to boost its capacity to produce more eagles.

"PEF has young breeders that are expected to lay eggs soon, but we still need new male breeders for cooperative artificial insemination," he said.

Imminent threat

PEF Executive Director Dennis Salvador said Pagasa's demise conveyed the reality that the threats of animal diseases are real, and they present clear danger to the Philippine eagle population and other raptors housed at the center.

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“Even if we have biosecurity protocols, we have no control over the environment and the other wildlife coming in which is out of our control,” he said.

“What if it was the deadly bird flu that hit us?” he asked. If it was avian flu, the entire population at the center could easily be wiped out,” he added.

Clear and present danger

On top of virus-carrying wildlife like fruit doves that are near the center, Salvador added that the presence of poultry farms, even backyard pigeon farms, near the center present danger to the Philippine eagles and other raptors under their care.

The Philippine eagle population produced through the PEF’s captive-breeding program represents about 5 percent of the entire population of Philippine eagle in the country, he noted.

“We have already sounded the alarm to the local government and they responded positively on this. But still the presence of poultry near the center remains a clear and present danger,” he said.

Wildlife loan agreement

According to Salvador, the threat of deadly animal diseases pushed the DENR and the PEF to enter into a wildlife loan agreement (WLA) with the Wildlife Reserves Singapore.

Under the WLA, Philippine eagle pair of Geothermica and Sambisig was sent to Singapore as Ambassadors for Philippine Biodiversity.

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The move was also intended to produce Philippine eagle offsprings and start a population outside the country just in case a deadly disease like the avian flu wipes out the Philippine eagle population back home.

“This underscores the need for us to enter more Wildlife Loan Agreements with other countries,” Salvador said.

Eagle's safety, security

Lastly, for the protection of the Philippine eagle population and other raptors at the center, he said there is a need to look for another location far from human habitation, where the eagles can be safe against the deadly avian flu that almost always hit and wiped out the poultry farm population in a matter of days.

However, he admitted that relocating the center is easier said than done. He admitted that they need access to resources which the PEF currently does not have.

He said the DENR is already well aware of their plan as they have made requests for help and support a long ago.

Hopeful that everything will fall in place and that things will go their way as planned, Salvador said: “We have already started looking for a suitable area, away from the human population and poultry farms.”

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