

Philippine eagles given second chance

By [BusinessMirror](#)
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The Philippine eagle that was recently found and rescued early this month in Maitum town in Sarangani province. A piece of marble, that was used as a bullet, was recovered embedded near the eagle's right collarbone.

Another Philippine eagle was recently found and rescued in the hinterlands of Maitum town in Sarangani province. It was the first eagle rescued this year, and after seven were rescued from several areas in Mindanao last year.

A municipal government team retrieved the eagle that was trapped in thorny rattan vines while preying on a monkey.

The rescue was relayed to the Community Environment and Natural Resources Office for its proper handling and turnover to the Philippine Eagle Center (PEC) in Davao City, said the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Region-12 in a news release.

It was found out that a piece of marble, which was used as a bullet in an improvised rifle, was recovered embedded near the eagle's right clavicle or collarbone, the DENR-12 said.

The bird was found near Mt. Busa complex, a declared key biodiversity area and home to critically endangered, threatened, vulnerable and rare fowl species.

The rescued Philippine eagle was the third found in Sarangani in a span of four years, the DENR-12 said. The two previous eagles were found on January 2, 2017, and December 13, 2019, and were likewise turned over to the PEC for rehabilitation.

7 Philippine eagles rescued in 2020

The nonprofit Philippine Eagle Foundation (PEF), which runs the PEC, said it received a call about the rescued Philippine eagle on January 9.

The still immature eagle, about 3 years to 4 years old, was entangled in thorny vines near Salagbanog Falls.

It was thereafter named "Salagbanog" after the falls, where it was rescued by T'boli farmer, *Mang* Gamang, of Barangay Ticulab, Maitum, Sarangani province, according to PEF.

Salagbanog is the first rescued Philippine eagle this year.

Last year, the PEC reported a record-high of seven rescued eagles amid the travel restrictions and community quarantine because of the 2019 coronavirus pandemic.

DENR authorities attribute the frequent sightings of the country's national bird in the mountain area to the healthy biodiversity of its forests, which also host endemic flora, fauna, and hardwood species.

In a telephone interview on January 26, PEF Director for Research and Conservation Jayson Ibañez said that of the seven rescued eagles last year one died due to malnutrition, three were successfully released back into the wild, while the remaining three are currently under rehabilitation.

Survived 2 hunting attempts

Taking its X-ray after the turnover, the PEF team discovered that Salagbanog, believed to be a male based on its weight, appeared to be one tough eagle.

It has survived two hunting attempts as evidence suggested.

The marble that was used as a bullet and found embedded near its collarbone was removed in a surgery.

Another bullet, a pellet from an air rifle, was also embedded near its neck. The veterinary team decided it is better left untouched.

“Our veterinary team had successfully removed the marble as it was not deeply embedded. But the pellet, we decided to leave it as is,” Ibañez told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview on January 26.

Both “bullets” have no visible entry wounds, meaning the injuries they caused had already healed.

Hunted for food

Like an ordinary slingshot used by villagers in upland areas in hunting small birds, marble guns that is about 10 times more powerful can cause serious injuries and possibly maim for life, if not kill, even a Philippine eagle, the largest bird of prey in the world.

Anson Tagtag, chief of the Wildlife Conservation Section of the DENR’s Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB), told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview on January 26 that like other guns used in hunting, marble gun is illegal and should be confiscated by authorities.

He said hunting in the Philippines using deadly weapons are meant to kill the target on site.

“Most of the hunters using guns are hunting for food out of necessity,” he said partly in Filipino.

Besides hunting animals with deadly firearms, some hunters also use traps, which are equally harmful, if not deadly.

Second chance

Salagbanog was fortunate to have survived not only one, but two attempts on its life. At the PEC, rescued eagles are given a second chance.

Not all rescued eagles, however, are released back into the wild, Ibañez said, as some that were turned-over to the PEC were maimed and could not survive in the wild.

“If they are not fit for release, they end up either as a breeder or as an education eagle,” he said.

Wild and free

Among last year’s rescued Philippine eagles that were released back into the wild is “Siocon.” It was found by a farmer while it was hiding in the bushes in the forest of Siocon, Zamboanga del Norte, in April.

But because of the travel ban and community quarantines imposed by the government then, the PEC veterinary team and the DENR office in Siocon decided to provide the eagle the next best thing—telemedicine and online rehabilitation guidance.

After recovering, Siocon was released back into the wild on May 21.

The eagle’s solar-powered GPS/GSM tracker indicated the eagle has settled inside the forests of Balingoan town, some 3 km away from its release site.

Philippine eagle “Makilala-Hiraya” that was retrieved from its rescuers in Barangay Kisante in Makilala, North Cotabato, was pinned to the ground by a flock of crows when rescued by three residents who handed it over to local officials.

After getting cleared of viral diseases and over a month of rehabilitation at the PEC, the female eagle was finally released back to its forest home in Mt. Apo on July 28, 2020.

Makilala-Hiraya was last located within the protected ancestral domain of the indigenous Obu Manobo in Magpet town, 13km north of her release site.

The third rescued eagle that was released into the wild last year, “Mal’lambugok” was trapped allegedly after it killed a resident’s livestock.

The captor claimed it was already the fourth piglet killed by the eagle before its capture in July.

Cleared for release after less than two months of rehabilitation, Mal’lambugok flew to her freedom on September 26, 2020, as the world celebrated World Environmental Health Day.

To serve a higher purpose

According to Ibañez, eagles that can no longer be released back into the wild, when badly injured or has become domesticated after many years in captivity, serve a higher purpose.

They are either used for breeding under the PEC’s captive breeding program or become “ambassadors” of biodiversity and become part of the information, education and communication campaign of the PEF to save the iconic Philippine eagle from extinction.

Such would most likely happen to three of last year’s rescued eagles.

Philippine eagle “Balikatan” that was rescued with the help of a concerned citizen.

The PEF was informed on August 28, 2020, about an eagle that was under the care of his cousin in Bacuag, Surigao del Norte.

The eagle was bought by his cousin from an indigenous Mamanwa trapper for P8,000 apparently to save it from harm.

Together with DENR staff in Butuan City, a PEC team retrieved the already docile Philippine eagle.

“It seemed comfortable being handled by [humans],” Ibañez said.

While the subsequent X-ray test showed no injuries or abnormalities in its body, it was found that the eagle was half blind. Its left eye could not see, while the other eye is also showing early signs of a possible cataract.

“Our rehabilitation team at the PEC is working remotely with two US veterinary consultants to save the bird’s right eye. But with its current condition, it could no longer be released back to the wild,” Ibañez said.

Philippine eagle “Caraga,” on the other hand, has its right leg fractured by gun pellets.

On September 25, 2020, a day before Mal’lambugok’s release back to her forest home in Barangay Sobrecarey in Caraga, the PEC got a phone call that another eagle was trapped at Sitio Tagbanahao, the same place where Mal’lambugok was rescued.

It also reportedly killed a piglet, making its captor retaliate by trapping the bird.

Ibañez said a wild eagle with leg injury could not hunt and survive in the wild and that the only way it could make it this far is if someone cage and feed it.

Philippine eagle “San Fernando,” another immature eagle needing rescue, was the last to be rescued in 2020. The PEC learned of the captive eagle from DENR’s Edgar Agbayani on October 4, 2020.

Two residents gave information about the captive eagle that was caught in a trap intended for palm civets on the Pantaron mountains in San Fernando town in Bukidnon last October 1.

The bird was turned over to the PEC staff in Malaybalay City on October 5. Its X-ray showed an air-gun pellet lodged at the eagle’s right wing.

The eagle could now eat on its own but has to undergo further tests at the PEF’s quarantine area, just like eagle “Caraga.”

According to Ibañez, all rescued eagles turned over to the PEC undergo thorough evaluation. But all, if not fit for release, will serve a higher purpose, eventually, after their rehabilitation.

Protected by law

Ironically, the Philippine eagle is supposed to be protected by law

The iconic Philippine eagle, like other endangered wildlife, is protected by several environmental laws, foremost of which is Administrative Order 235, s. of 1970 that prohibits the wounding, taking, selling, exchanging and exporting, possessing and killing of the *Pithecophaga Jefferyii*.

Likewise, Republic Act 9147, or the Wildlife Act, provides for the conservation and protection of wildlife resources and their habitats, and penalizes violators depending on the gravity of the offence.

A critically endangered species, only about 400 pairs of the Philippine eagle is left in the wild.

Community awareness

Tagtag said it is apparent that in some areas, lack of community awareness remains a problem.

“Without the community’s support, all our efforts [in conservation] are doomed to fail,” he said.

It is for this reason that the DENR-BMB continues to engage the communities who are at the forefront of the campaign to protect and conserve the country’s rich biodiversity, he said.

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