

# Sanctuary for endemic plant, animal species

Mangatarem Critical Habitat

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This thickly forested portion of the Zambales Mountain Range in Mangatarem town in Pangasinan, is now named the Mangatarem Critical Habitat.

Good news for threatened wildlife species, including the endemic Philippine deer and Philippine warty pig, which populations are declining due to habitat loss and hunting in the thickly forested Zambales Mountain Range in the town of Mangatarem, Pangasinan.

The 4,422.8-hectare forest, home to the threatened endemic plants and animals, is earmarked for conservation. It was named Mangatarem Critical Habitat based on the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Administrative Order (DAO) 2020-17 signed by Secretary Roy A. Cimatu on December 16, 2020.

The area provides sanctuary to the species traditionally hunted to the brink of extinction.

## Critical habitat

A critical habitat is an area that is considered important for the survival of certain species of plants and animals. As such, they must be preserved and conserved to allow the species to thrive.

Section 25 of Republic Act 9147, or the Wildlife Act, provides for the establishment of critical habitats outside protected areas under Republic Act 7586, or the National Integrated Protected Areas System (Nipas) Act, where unique but threatened species, plant or animals, occur.



A Philippine deer is a rare sight nowadays. This stag was photographed in the hinterlands of Agusan del Sur by wildlife photographer Gregg Yan. The Philippine deer, listed as a vulnerable species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature can be found in the newly established Mangatarem Critical Habitat in Pangasinan.

“All designated critical habitats shall be protected, in coordination with the local government units and other concerned groups, from any form of exploitation or destruction, which may be detrimental to the survival of the threatened species dependent therein,” the law states.

## **‘Vulnerable’ species**

Both species, traditionally hunted for their meat, are listed as “vulnerable” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The IUCN’s Red List of Threatened Species states that the population of the Philippine deer, known as “usa,” are fragmented but are reported to be common in isolated areas. However, heavily hunted and declining in number throughout most of its range.

IUCN states that the largest populations of the Philippine deer are in Luzon, Mindanao, Samar and Leyte, but local extinctions have been reported on Biliran in 1993, and probably Bohol and Marinduque.

“Population declines have been reported in the subspecies found on Mindoro Island. The overall population of the species remains unknown, but a decline of 30 percent over three generations [estimated at 24 years] seems plausible,” it states.

On the other hand, the Red List of the IUCN states that while precise data on the Philippine warty pig populations is lacking, considering the extent of forest degradation the species more commonly called “baboy-damo” in Filipino was undoubtedly far more extensively distributed in the past.

The Philippine warty pig has also been declared as extinct on Marinduque, an island province in the Mimaropa Region (consisting of Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon and Palawan provinces), which is ironically known for its rich biodiversity and high endemism.

## **Primary forest**

The Mangatarem Critical Habitat encompasses forested territories of barangays Cacaoiten, Cabaluyan II, Calomboyan Sur, Lawak Langka, Catarataran, Pacalat and Malabobo.

Cimatu said the area is critical for the survival of endemic Philippine species at risk of extinction.

Establishing the Mangatarem Critical Habitat, he explained, aims to protect them and their habitat from destructive human activities.

“By doing this, we at the DENR can save habitats that are critical for the survival of threatened species or species at risk of extinction, including other associated wildlife and, at the same time, provide this land area a legal framework to protect it from destructive uses,” Cimatu said in a statement.

## Wildlife sanctuary

A first-class municipality, whose name is associated with mango and oyster in the old days, Mangatarem's thick forest also provides sanctuary to some of the country's rare and unique animals and plant species.

Some of the species are the endemic Philippine duck, the flame-breasted fruit dove, Philippine eagle owl, Luzon scops owl and Rufous hornbill.

Unique plants that are found in the forest include the threatened oi-ói, kalíngag and malabayábas.

## Management regime, goals

As a newly declared critical habitat, the DENR will work hand-in-hand with the local government, communities and other stakeholders involved in accomplishing the locally driven ecosystems management approach for the protection of the territory.

“We need to sustainably manage this certain area, as this is one of the most important and few remaining forest blocks in Pangasinan,” Cimatu pointed out.

“Through this, we can both protect the endemic and threatened flora and fauna living in it, while sustaining the ecosystem services and community livelihood dependent on the forest,” he added.

Under the DAO 2020-17, the Mangatarem Critical Habitat shall be under the DENR-Ilocos Region office, together with the local government of Mangatarem and other stakeholders.

The DENR regional office will take the lead and shall be responsible for the preparation of the Critical Habitat Management Plan to ensure that existing ecosystems in the critical habitat are preserved.

The management of the critical habitat is mandated to ensure that the existing ecosystems in the habitat are preserved and kept in a condition that will support and enhance existing populations of endemic and wild plants and animals, assess development and safeguard the ecological integrity of the area and strictly enforce all applicable environmental laws for the protection of the habitat.

## ‘Off-limits’

Mangatarem, the country's ninth critical habitat, is now “off-limits” to destructive human activities, including mining and quarrying and logging.

The other critical habitats in the Philippines are Rafflesia schadenbergiana Critical Habitat, Cabusao Wetland Critical Habitat, Malasi Tree Park and Wildlife Sanctuary Critical Habitat, Carmen Critical Habitat, Adams Wildlife Critical Habitat, Magsaysay Critical Habitat for Hawksbill Turtles, Cleopatra's Needle Critical Habitat, and Dumaran Critical Habitat.

Under Cimatu's order, dumping of waste products detrimental to wildlife, squatting and/or occupying any portion of the area will be strictly prohibited in accordance with Republic Act 9147, or the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act of 2001.

## **A boost to forest protection**

Marlyn M. Banda, technical division chief of the Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Office (Penro) in Pangasinan, said declaring Mangatarem a critical habitat will be a big boost to the ongoing forest protection program in the area.

She said the crafting of the management plan would hopefully include livelihood programs for communities around it to ensure that the people will not see the forest as their primary or main source of income and livelihood that may eventually lead to unsustainable activities like logging, charcoal making, or worse, hunting animals.

Banda noted that there's no ongoing livelihood program for the communities in the area as far as the DENR is concerned.

"The DAO has just recently been signed and the crafting of the management plan has not been started," she explained.

Nevertheless, she is confident that the management plan will be thoroughly discussed by the DENR and various stakeholders next year.

"The fact that it is now a critical habitat, there will be a restriction in its use. Hence, destructive activities will not be allowed just like in a protected area," Banda told the BusinessMirror in telephone interview on March 9.

She said under the Nipas law, there are prohibited acts inside the strict protection zone. The same, she said, will now apply in the entire Mangatarem Critical Habitat.

She said the DENR Ilocos Region office is expected to include the management of the Mangatarem Critical Habitat in the Work and Financial Plan for 2022.

## **Undisturbed**

Fortunately, Banda said the Mangatarem Critical Habitat remains intact and undisturbed by destructive human activities.

"So far, the area which is thickly forested remains intact. The trees and the forest provide safety for the wild animals there and we see no problem so far," she said in Filipino.

The DENR, Banda said, makes sure that regular patrolling and monitoring in the forest is conducted regularly, to prevent any attempt to cut trees or hunt animals.

“We see no illegal activities in the area so far because of the regular patrolling and monitoring,” she said.

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