

# A look at wildlife farming in PHL

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MARCH 21, 2021



Hunted in the wild, crocodiles and monkeys are now “thriving” in wildlife farms in the Philippines. The population of saltwater crocodiles like this from the province of Palawan and long-tailed macaques like this in the forests of Tawi-Tawi was on the decline prompting the introduction of wildlife farming of the species. Farming monkeys in the Philippines started in 1984, while farming crocodiles began in 1987.

The Convention on International Trade on Endangered Species (CITES) recently published data for 2019 based on reports of countries in compliance with the international treaty.

Based on the trade data, the Philippines reported the export of 1,053 captive-bred long-tailed macaques for biomedical research to the United States.



The significant increase in the number of exported live monkeys from 140 in 2018 to 1,053 in 2019, a year before the global pandemic, did not escape the attention of animal rights group Action for Primates (AP).

“Prior to 2018, the last recorded export of long-tailed macaques was in 2015 when the Philippines recorded 676, again to Japan,” Sarah Kite, the spokesman for Action for Primates told the BusinessMirror via e-mail on March 3.

## **Appeal to authorities**

AP has been appealing to countries like the Philippines not to allow the capture of wild long-tailed macaques for captive breeding and eventually, export of their progenies.

Kite said: “The large increase in the number of long-tailed macaques exported from the Philippines for research purposes during 2019 is alarming. It represents greater than a seven-fold increase over the previous year,” Kite said.

She added that there are increasing concerns about the conservation status of this species “which is now considered to be vulnerable, including in the Philippines.”

Because of the “lack of accurate information” on the macaque population in the Philippines, “it is important that the DENR do not allow the capture of macaques from the wild to supply breeding farms,” Kite said.

The group believes that the number of long-tailed macaques exported from the Philippines during 2020 may be even greater.

Although the data have not yet been released, there has been a reported increase in the demand for long-tailed macaques for research purposes, including for Covid-19, Kite said.

This, together with a ban on the export of macaques from China, the largest supplier of monkeys to the US, has apparently caused the research industry to turn to other countries, such as the Philippines, to meet the demand for the animals.

“Our concern is not only for the conservation status of the long-tailed macaque, but also for the extreme suffering and death to which the intelligent and sentient animal will unquestionably be subjected to,” she lamented.

## **Wildlife farming**

The Philippines, through the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and its Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB), issues wildlife collector’s permits for various purposes, such as scientific research and captive-breeding in wildlife farms.

Besides monkeys, the Philippines is known to farm other wildlife, such as saltwater crocodiles, an industry which is slowly taking off.

According to the DENR-BMB, other wild animals being farmed in the Philippines are local and exotic parrots, butterfly, hornbill, macaw, cockatoos, lovebird, and exotic reptiles, such as snakes, turtles and tortoise.

## **Rationale**

Amelita D.J. Ortiz, acting director of the DENR-BMB, cited several reasons on why wildlife farming in the Philippines is being allowed.

It aims to promote sustainable use of resources and to reduce the pressure of hunting/poaching on the wild population, thereby preventing the decimation of the natural population of wildlife species.

More importantly, the DENR-BMB believes that wildlife is consistent with the DENR's mandate to promote the socio-economic well-being of Filipinos.

The DENR-BMB chief believes that wildlife farms could serve as a source of captive-bred animals for the enhancement of the natural population of species with low numbers through the introduction, reintroduction and restocking in the wild.

"Wildlife farming, through appropriate farming technology, is a legitimate strategy for conserving wildlife, enhancing rural livelihoods, and increasing food access," she said.

In commercial breeding, she pointed out, only progenies of the species can be used for commercial purposes, which include the sale of skin, meat and other products derived from the animals being farmed.

## **Historical, legal basis**

According to the DENR-BMB, while it cannot be ascertained when the wildlife farming begun in the Philippines, it can be safely assumed that attempt to farm wild animals commonly hunted for food happened way back, offering as proof the domestic animal collection, such as native chicken and native pigs which parental origin can be traced from Philippine wild animals.

The regulation of wildlife farming was instituted in 1983, when the Philippines joined CITES, which encourages member countries to promote it as source of stock for the international trade.

A year later, farming for long-tailed macaques began.

In 1987 the Crocodile Farming Institute, later renamed as the Palawan Wildlife Rescue and Conservation Center (PWRCC), was established by the DENR in cooperation with the government of Japan, the DENR-BMB said.

The establishment of PWRCC aims to prevent the further decline of two naturally occurring species of crocodiles in the Philippines—the saltwater crocodile and the endemic Philippine or Mindoro crocodile.

## **Authorized selling**

Because of the success of crocodile farming, DENR Administrative Order 99-45 dated November 5, 1999, authorized the PWRCC to sell captive-bred saltwater crocodiles to qualified individuals or private entities to use as stocks for leather industry, direct trade and commercial breeding purposes.

The concerned DENR regional offices conduct quarterly monitoring of the wildlife farms within their jurisdiction.

As a policy, captive animals, both the parental stock and progenies, are properly marked. In some, tail cutting, or tattooing, is used. Some are embedded with microchips, while others have leg bands.

Section 17 of Republic Act 9147, or the Wildlife Act, and its Implementing Rules and Regulation state that only progenies or captive-bred animals are allowed for trade.

The DENR-BMB also requires wildlife farm-permit holders to submit a production report, which serves as reference for the processing of wildlife export-permit applications.

## **Arresting declining populations**

According to the DENR-BMB, as far as farming monkeys and crocodiles are concerned, wildlife farming serves its purpose well.

Since 1994, after policies were issued prohibiting the collection of animals in the wild, the trade in monkeys was limited to captive-breeding. The measure was in response to the decrease in wild population.

Only a limited number of wild individuals was allowed for collection for use as parental stocks, Ortiz said.

But before this policy, the Philippines was a major exporter of monkeys, supplying half of the global demand for monkeys estimated at 40,000 primates, mostly long-tailed macaques.

According to Ortiz, in 2004, the long-tailed macaque was assessed as near-threatened, citing DENR Administrative Order 2004-15.

“After more than a decade of regulated removal from the wild, the recent assessment [DAO 2019-09] delisted the long-tailed macaque from the national list of threatened species,” she said.

The DENR- BMB is currently receiving reports of increasing incidence of monkey proliferation and infestation in certain localities in the country.

Finally, Ortiz said that farming or commercial breeding of monkeys and crocodiles have contributed to arresting the decline of the population of the two species in the wild.

“Instead of collecting wild individuals for direct trade, the collected individuals are used instead for parental stocks and only progenies produced in the farms are traded,” she said.

In the case of crocodiles, specifically the Philippine crocodile, several of its progenies have been released into the wild several years back.

The DENR-BMB cited the release of 36 progenies of the Philippine crocodile from a crocodile farm in Davao in the Paghungawan Marsh on Siargao Island in March 2013. Another 29 were released in the same area in June 2017.

## **Croc farms**

There are currently eight crocodile farms in the Philippines, six of which comprise the Crocodylus Porosus Philippines Inc., a nonstock, nonprofit environment nongovernment organization (NGO).

The Philippines is exporting crocodile skins since 2008 to Singapore from these farms.

Crocodile meat, fresh and processed, are now being sold in select stores in areas with crocodile farms, particularly in Palawan, the home of the first crocodile farm in the Philippines, the PWRCC.

As of 2020, about 30,000 raw crocodile skins, the primary product of crocodile farming, were exported, DENR-BMB record show.

## **Economic opportunity**

Ortiz believes that the profitability of a wildlife farm is dictated by demand, citing the case of the monkey trade. When the global demand for decreased, the closure of some monkey farms ensued.

There are currently two operating monkey farms, DENR-BMB records show. One of the farms have over 2,000 monkeys, including breeders and progenies.

Meanwhile, other wildlife farms for birds and plants, such as orchids, and crocodiles have been in business for decades, the DENR-BMB chief said, indicating that the demand for wildlife and their products is sufficient to keep wildlife farms in operation and profitable.

However, Ortiz believes that the profitability of wildlife farming could be undermined by the illegal wildlife trade.

“The illegal wildlife trade robs wildlife farm operators and legal traders profit by taking a substantial share in the global demand for wildlife products,” she said.

## **Wildlife laundering**

However, Emerson Y. Sy, a wildlife trafficking specialist of the nongovernment group Traffic, believes wildlife farming is basically an economic activity and has no or little contribution to wildlife conservation.

“The primary objective of such facilities [wildlife farms] is ‘profit’ and not for the conservation and welfare of wildlife,” Sy said via Messenger on March 8.

For monkey farming, he said the objective is mainly for export as a laboratory animal and that there is no conservation aspect in the enterprise.

Sy said the DENR should look deeper into the operation of wildlife farms and strictly monitor their activities because they can also be used in “wildlife laundering.”

Wildlife laundering happens when wild-caught animals are presented as progenies or animals bred-in captivity, when in fact their origin can be highly dubious, or worse, are actually wild-caught animals using legal export permits as a shield against wildlife trafficking laws

Wildlife farms, he added, can also be buyers of wild-caught animals for the purpose of adding parental stocks to their current number of breeders.

“The DENR should look into it because it has significant implications,” he said.

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