

‘Forests give protection vs new, deadly diseases’

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MARCH 28, 2021



Biak-na-Bato National Park in San Miguel, Bulacan, consists of a cave network and a system of rivers and trails of both historical and ecological importance. It is one of the ecotourism areas nearest to Metro Manila.

The Philippines is developing an “Urban Forest Bathing Project” similar to the concept of forest bathing in Japan.

This was initiated through the partnership of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources’ (DENR) Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) with the private sector last month.

The project that will create green spaces in urban areas in the Philippines is part of BMB’s Urban Biodiversity Program.

The program aims to promote the conservation of the country's rich biodiversity, develop and maintain green spaces within the cities, and to provide important ecosystem services to Filipinos.

Highlighting the launch of the project as favorable for both the environment and the people, Environment Secretary Roy A. Cimatu noted the many benefits of having healthy forests to the mental and emotional well-being of the people living in urban areas.

“The Urban Forest Bathing Project will not only help the environment, as more trees and land spaces will be used for this if deemed successful; it will also help the people nourish their mental and emotional well-being,” Cimatu said in a recent statement.

Importance of forests

The importance of protecting and conserving the country's forests is once again put on the spotlight as the annual International Day of Forests is observed on March 21.

With the theme, “Forest restoration: A path to recovery and well-being,” this year's global celebration, according to the DENR's Forest Management Bureau (FMB), highlights the valuable benefits of forest restoration in terms of human health, food security, environmental and climatic condition, provision of green jobs, stakeholder engagement and healing.

Marcial B. Amaro, DENR's assistant secretary for Policy, Planning and Foreign-Assisted and Special Projects, said that based on the latest data from the FMB and the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority, the Philippines has a total forest cover of 7,014,152 hectares, of which 20.89 percent, or 2,028,000 hectares, is closed forest.

The open forest covers about 66.8 percent of the total or estimated area of 4,683,000, while mangrove forest is about 4.3 percent or 333,000 of the total, Amaro told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview on March 23.

In the past five years, he said the DENR-FMB's focus is protecting existing forest more than expanding the current forest.

He said this can be gleaned from the budget prioritization of Congress, wherein the budget for the Expanded National Greening Program was slashed by an average of P2 billion in the last five years.

“That is approximately [equivalent to] 100,000 hectares of additional forest cover per year,” said Amaro, the concurrent director of the DENR-FMB.

Traditional medicines, wellness

Traditionally, among the earlier civilization, and in the Philippines as well, the link between forest and human health could not be more pronounced than in rural areas, particularly where the indigenous peoples (IP) inhabit.

“We have medicinal plants. That’s a direct link to health and wellness,” Amaro said.

“For the longest time, our IPs look at the forest not only for food but for medicine. To expand that, wellness, clean water and abundant water supply and clean air, are primary functions of the forests,” he added.

True value of forests

The Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) highlighted the true value of forests as “the backbone of growth and prosperity, and protectors against the impacts of climate change and the emergence of new and deadly diseases”

ACB Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim said that considered one of the world’s most biologically rich and diverse ecosystems, forests are among the region’s natural capital that sustains the region’s growth, especially now it aims speed up recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Since the start of this health crisis, the Asean Centre for Biodiversity has been stressing the role of biodiversity in regulating climate and diseases. Today, on International Day of Forests, the ACB highlights the central role of these complex ecological systems in our efforts to build a healthy region, which is aptly resonant with the theme of this year’s celebration—Forest restoration: A path to recovery and well-being,” said Lim in a statement on March 21 in time for the International Day of Forests 2021.

Growing recognition

Lim said there is now a growing recognition of forests, along with other types of natural ecosystems, as integral components of a country’s total wealth, which provide life support and basic human needs, such as food, fresh and clean water, medicine, shelter and fuel, especially during the time of the pandemic.

“While we have seen a decline of the Asean forest cover in the past decades, the good news is that the overall rate of forestry loss in Asean slowed from 1.2 percent per year from 2000 to 2010, to 0.26 percent per year from 2011 to 2015, according to the 2020 Asean-EU report ‘Investing in Sustainable Capital in Asean,’” she said.

“While this is important progress, it is also worthy to note the need to continue improving genetic, species, and habitat diversity in our remaining forests,” she added.

“With habitat fragmentation being one of the biggest threats to biodiversity in forest ecosystems, big land mammals like tigers, elephants and rhinoceros are among the species most affected,” she pointed out.

Shrinking Asian forest

Meanwhile, Ricardo L. Calderon, executive director of the Asian Forest Cooperation Organization (Afoco), in his message during the United Nations Forum on Forests, highlighted the vital roles forests play in providing a variety of services that billions of people depend upon for their livelihood and subsistence.

“Tropical forests of Southeast Asia play important roles in biodiversity conservation, ecosystems services and global carbon balance. However,” he said. “The region experienced continuous forest loss at a rate of 8 million hectares per year between 2005 and 2015, but significantly registering the highest net gain in forest area in the 2010-2020 Forest Resources Assessment,” he added.

Reduced capacity

According to Calderon, a forestry expert, forests in Asia are at risk of reduced capacity for climate mitigation, limited provision of ecosystem services and biodiversity loss, and reduced economic growth potential without proactive measures to put in place sustainable Management practices.

He said Afoco as a formal regional body, will continue to provide the bridge in order to enhance cross-sectoral cooperation and broaden cooperation among member-parties, partner institutions and organizations on the management of forests for the sustainable production of goods ecosystems services, biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation.

Calderon said Afoco will continue to provide a platform of exchange of expertise and technical cooperation in areas of forest restoration and rehabilitation through the implementation of its landmark programs and regional projects.

Moreover, he said regional body will work to strengthen forestry institutions and enhance forest governance through capacity development programs for the sector’s policymakers, technical practitioners and researchers, in order to help contribute to the sustainable management of forests.

According to Calderon, with the Covid 19 global pandemic that has affected the global economy and billions of people all over the world, it is an opportune time to ensure that forests will be an integral part of the global discussions and decisions for the world to recover from the pandemic, and build back better in achieving sustainable development goals.

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