BIODIVERSITY

Community protecting flying foxes, hornbills, waterbirds in Tawi-Tawi

BY**ASEAN CENTRE FOR BIODIVERSITY**
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4 MINUTE READ

During the conduct of migratory water bird surveys at the Tawi-Tawi Group of Islands.

SEARCHING for Sulu hornbills, a group of community rangers called “Tawsi (Tawi-Tawi Advocates for Wildlife Support Initiative of Panglima)” traversed the muddy and treacherous road of Panglima Sugala in the province of Tawi-Tawi.

At some point, they had to tow their truck and began tirelessly trekking 19 kilometers up to its deep, thick forest. Soon after, their efforts paid

off, as they found an active nest that serves about five Sulu hornbills, or tawsi, as Tawi-Tawi residents call them in their vernacular.

At the first bird monitoring activity on October 22 and 23, 2020.

Sulu hornbills, which are endemic in the Sulu archipelago, are considered one of the world's most critically endangered species, with less than 50 individuals out in the wild.

Using their cameras and global positioning system-equipped phones, the community rangers immediately sent a report to Philippine Biodiversity Conservation Foundation Inc. (PhilBio).

The rich biodiversity and ecosystems of Tawi-Tawi have gained attention from concerned organizations and groups aiming for biodiversity conservation on the island. Aside from being the home of the Sulu hornbills, other threatened species, such as flying foxes, Christmas frigatebirds, Far Eastern curlews, and Great knots are also found on the island.

The Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) is supporting the Community-based Biodiversity Conservation in the Tawi-Tawi Group of Islands project of PhilBio, which aims to strengthen the capacity of community members on biodiversity research and monitoring of the Sulu hornbill and other threatened forest birds, while establishing baseline information on migratory birds, flying foxes, and their habitats on the island. The collaboration commenced last year, but was only

formally launched online in April due to restrictions borne from the pandemic.

Community-led

IN her presentation at the online launch, Executive Director Lisa Paguntalan of PhilBio said preliminary monitoring activities of the community were conducted between October to November 2020.

“The results came out good and acceptable,” Paguntalan said, as she described the monitoring activities under the new normal. She shared some of the challenges faced by the team, such as knowledge gaps in identifying certain species.

The Tawi-Tawi biodiversity conservation project, according to her, is community-led. At its core is multistakeholder collaboration, which creates a platform that gives value to both local and scientific knowledge.

“We believe…the community’s active involvement, matched with their local knowledge and lived experiences, could best serve the project, whose benefit will also redound to the community,” ACB Executive Director Theresa Mundita Lim said.

Other partners of PhilBio in the project are the local government unit of Panglima Sugala that supports the 26 Tawsi rangers, Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Energy, Philippine Marine Corps, North Carolina Zoo, Asian Species Action Partnership, and the Oriental Bird Club.

Three active nests of Sulu hornbills were discovered in Panglima Sugala. Other threatened species that were recorded include the critically endangered Blue-winged racquet-tail, Sulu pygmy

woodpecker, black-billed hanging parrot, Philippine slow loris, the undescribed Sulu warty pig, and pit viper.

Fifty-seven waterbird species, including the critically endangered Christmas frigatebird, endangered Far Eastern curlew and Great knot, the vulnerable Chinese egret, and the near-threatened Malay plover, were identified in the initial report.

Three roosting sites of flying foxes, on the other hand, were confirmed in the municipalities of Bongao and Panglima Sugala.

The common island flying fox and large flying fox were the two species commonly found in the three roosting sites, while the critically endangered Golden-crowned flying fox in the Bongao roost was the only one found thriving within a human settlement.

Asean connection

THE Tawi-Tawi Group of Islands is part of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Lim said the area borders two biogeographical zones that host unique, genetically connected sets of wildlife.

“It is important to narrow the knowledge gaps and increase understanding on species distribution, movement, and likely local migration between the Philippines, Malaysia and [Indonesian Borneo],” she added.

The ACB chief cited a study conducted by Juan Carlos Gonzalez, a University of the Philippines professor, in 2013 that showed strong evidence of the genetic interconnection of hornbills in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Studies suggest that the genetic ancestry of the Philippine hornbill assemblage (*Buceros, Anthracoceros, Aceros, Penelopides*) can be traced back to Sundaland. These birds were believed to have crossed multiple biogeographic barriers, such as Huxley's line—a zoogeographic boundary placing Palawan and Borneo together; Wallace's line between the Asian and Australian faunal regions to Sulawesi; the Moluccan Islands (or "Wallacea"); and Lydekker's line, which runs along the border of Australia's continental shelf to Melanesia, which is a subregion of Oceania.

"As we deepen our understanding of the ecology of these species, we will also get to appreciate their importance and strengthen efforts to conserve the remaining population of these critically endangered species [including] the Sulu hornbill," Lim explained.

Next steps

LIM expressed her hope that, with this project, the platform, methodologies—particularly those that apply community participation and citizen science in the Asean—can be highlighted, and learning experiences can be shared across the region on its implementation.

Assessment results may encourage research partnerships and collaborations, as well as help share conservation strategies—including mainstreaming of biodiversity—into local policies and development plans.

Paguntalan said PhilBio will continue assisting the monitoring and community-based education as well as awareness activities in Tawi-Tawi.

She also recommended continued support for Tawsi rangers and the rehabilitation of logged areas.

Images courtesy of Godfrey Jakosalem and Tawsi Rangers

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