

BIODIVERSITY

Natural wonders of Nayong Pilipino at risk from planned vaccination site—critics



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6 MINUTE READ



The zitting cisticola is a tiny, resident bird which can be seen in grasslands.

IN October 2019 the national government approved the development of the Nayong Pilipino Cultural Park and Creative Hub inside the Entertainment City of the New Seaside Road in Parañaque City.

The property, an 8.5-hectare reclaimed land in Manila Bay, belongs to the Nayong Pilipino Foundation (NPF). The area was identified as one with high cultural, historical, heritage and ecotourism values because of its proximity to the Las Piñas–Parañaque Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area (LPPCHEA).



A female blue rock thrush is a visiting bird spotted by members of the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines at the Nayong Pilipino Forest Park.

The planned Nayong Pilipino Cultural Park and Creative Hub was intended as a place to learn the country's natural and cultural heritage, while providing a venue for promoting sustainable tourism. Because of the pandemic, the project was unfortunately shelved.

Fast-forward to May 2021, the property remained undeveloped and is being eyed as the site of a mega-vaccination center by the government, with the hope of accommodating 10,000 to 12,000 persons a day. It was being deemed crucial to the government's target of achieving herd immunity by the end of the year.

Multifaceted issues

THE proposed vaccination center to be run by ICTSI Foundation Inc. of billionaire Enrique Razon, however, continue to draw flak, initially from the resigned Nayong Pilipino Foundation Executive Director Lucille Karen Malilong-Isberto, who criticized the Department of Tourism (DOT) led by Secretary Bernadette Romulo Puyat and the Interagency Task Force on Covid-19 for pursuing the project.

Malilong-Isberto had earlier raised environmental, legal and moral issues over the proposed mega-vaccination project, saying it will not only threaten 450 trees in the

property which have become home to hundreds of native birds, but expose the Board of Directors to potential legal repercussions with the use of government land by a private foundation, which is not within the mandate of the NPF.



The Brown shrike is a noisy and conspicuous migrant. It is adapted to different kinds of habitats, and preys on a variety of animals—including smaller birds, frogs and lizards.

Malilong-Isberto also took exception to the fact that the primary backer of the mega-vaccination project is not the Department of Health, but the DOT, whose mandate is primarily to promote tourism.

A vacant lot, nothing more?

PROPONENTS of the proposed mega-vaccination site project belittled the “ipil-ipil forest” and “grassland” on the NPF property as nothing more than a vacant lot and a neglected property.

Reports quoted the project’s proponents stating that the NPF’s board of directors had not even planted a single tree in the property over the years, and that the foliage there is nothing more than a trove of “ipil-ipil” trees that grow like shrubs.

Ultimately, they are saying the mega-vaccination facility is more important than saving the ipil-ipil forest and grassland.

Urban biodiversity

VARIOUS groups have since taken the cudgels for the NPF, assailing the proposed use of the property for the centralized vaccination as it not only threatens to scrap the Nayong Pilipino Cultural Park and Creative Hub project, but disturb the existing grassland and forest ecosystems that provide safe havens for urban biodiversity.



Urban green spaces—no matter how small—provide a life-support system in an urban setting.

While the grassland and “ipil-ipil” forest at the NPF property is being dismissed as a neglected property, it nonetheless provides home to a good number of birds, reptiles, and insects in that part of the urban jungle.

The NPF is mandated by Presidential Decree 37 to “promote, encourage, and initiate research and development projects, [as well as] activities in social sciences and the humanities.”

But among others, its purpose is also to establish parks and recreation centers for the promotion of sustainable tourism in the Philippines, while generating opportunities for creating vibrant and empowered communities.

Bird haven

THE Wild Bird Club of the Philippines is a witness to the potential of developing the NPF property into a bird-watching site.

As it already is, the place is now home to a multitude of native birds, and is frequented by migrant ones from other areas.

On September 20, 2020, members of the group went on a bird-watching expedition in the area but was only allowed as close to perimeters of the property, said Mike Lu, who is the president of the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines.

“We were only allowed to stand outside... and take pictures from afar [while being observed by a security guard,]” Lu said. Apparently, he lamented the fact that there are some areas where bikers and joggers are allowed, but bird-watchers and photographers are prohibited. “Perhaps, they don’t want us to document and record the birds in the area.”

In just two hours of bird-watching—including attempting to photograph the shy and very elusive winged creatures, a total of 177 birds from 25 species were recorded.

Eurasian tree sparrows, rock doves or feral pigeons, as well as black-crowned night herons, were among the dominant species recorded in the area.

Grassland species

AS the property is dominated by grassland, as there are less than 500 trees in the area—mostly ipil-ipil trees—special species of birds that inhabit grassland can also be found in the area, says Lu.

“In terms of birds, we found grassland species. Although [they are not threatened or considered endangered, there are very limited] green spaces left in the metropolis,” Lu lamented. “We should be creating more green spaces to benefit city residents rather than destroying what little is left.”

He also expressed dismay that the area is being targeted by the government for its mega-vaccine facility.

“There are many other undeveloped properties in the reclamation area. Why use this property, which is beside a [Covid facility? It] makes no sense,” Lu told the BusinessMirror via Facebook Messenger on May 11.

He said there is a huge property right across Solaire Resort & Casino Manila, which is in fact wider than the proposed drive-in vaccination at the Quirino Grandstand.

Green spaces needed

WEIGHING in on the issue, environmental group Kalikasan-People’s Network for the Environment (Kalikasan-PNE) said the insistence of the government to sacrifice the last remaining green spaces in Metro Manila is proof that the Duterte administration refuses to heed science that says “we need more open green spaces in Metro Manila; more so, during this protracted pandemic.”

“Increasing biodiversity within the built-up urban environment reduces the spread of disease in many ways,” Leon Dulce, national coordinator of Kalikasan-People’s Network for the Environment, told the BusinessMirror via Facebook Messenger on May 13.

Green spaces, Dulce said, promote microorganisms that compete and control the population of harmful pathogens or disease carriers.

“Urban biodiversity increases the exposure of people to beneficial microbiota, and boosts...immunity. It provides us with various needs such as food security, physical and psychosocial wellbeing, and climate resilience. We need to increase green spaces like the Nayong Pilipino Forest Park,” he explained. “Integrating communities with green spaces also help bring the benefits of urban biodiversity closer to people, such as the Pook Arboretum within the University of the Philippines.”

Peace, healing, heritage spaces

The Nayong Pilipino Foundation Cultural Park and Creative Hub is envisioned to provide a place of peace and healing, where people can be one with nature at the heart of the so-called “concrete jungle.”

“In the midst of a metropolitan region, parks provide the benefits of nature to our physical, emotional, and mental health. The Nayong Pilipino Foundation Cultural Park and Creative Hub—while initially planned and designed for a different purpose—will therefore still remain true to its mandate by providing a place of healing for the people and the preservation of our heritage. A nation’s heritage includes its people,” the NPF said in one of its campaign materials sent to the BusinessMirror via e-mail.

“As the world continues to battle this pandemic, and transmission in the Philippines is still rising, our priority is to ensure the health of our citizens. We have to work together to make sure...everyone has access to testing and treatment, so that we can finally control the contagion that has ravaged our economy for months,” it says.

The NPF believes that one day, the future Nayong Pilipino Cultural Park and Creative Hub shall be a heritage space for the benefit of the public.

It visualized: “We shall stroll along paths in our urban forest and pocket gardens, learn about Philippine flora, and watch children run free in open spaces. A library shall be built as a repository of knowledge products free and open to the public. We shall share meaningful conversations about our future museum with a permanent collection of ethnographic objects. The NPF Cultural Park shall also be a venue for training future cultural leaders. It shall be a place that enshrines inclusivity, creativity, collaboration, and innovation.”

Today, the tug-of-war between project proponents and environmental groups over the Nayong Pilipino property continues to spark spirited debate.

But as a bird enthusiast, and passionate bird watcher, Lu argued that if the greenery of the NPF will be cleared soon, there will be no more trees and grasslands in that side of the city left.

Where will the birds go then?

Image courtesy of Wild Bird Club of the Philippines/Nayong Pilipino Foundation

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