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Protecting Mount Busa's rich biodiversity

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5 MINUTE READ



Mount Busa, a vast mountain range and watershed area in Sarangani province

Officials of Sarangani province have joined hands with conservation advocates to protect and conserve Mount Busa—the vast mountain range and watershed area straddling several towns in Sarangani and South Cotabato in Mindanao.

Home to the region's verdant primary forests, Mount Busa may soon be declared a protected area under the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System (E-Nipas) Act of 2018, with the provincial government of Sarangani giving it a much-needed push.



A rare sighting of a Philippine eagle on Mount Busa

Primarily located in the town of Kiamba, Mount Busa straddles Maitum and Maasim municipalities in Sarangani, and those of Lake Sebu, Surallah and T'boli in South Cotabato.

Situated at 2,064 meters above sea level, Mount Busa is the highest peak in Sarangani covering a land area of 114,144 hectares.

This mighty mountain range that is surrounded by forests was declared a key biodiversity area and an important bird area in 2001.

Under siege

THE current protection and conservation measures being implemented for Mount Busa need a boost as it continues to be under siege.

The provincial government of Sarangani said its declaration as a protected landscape under the E-Nipas would strengthen its protection and conservation measures from destructive human activities, such as poaching, hunting, collection of wildlife or byproducts, mining, land conversion, slash-and-burn farming and unauthorized cutting or removal of timber.



A rufous hornbill, also known as Philippine hornbill or kalaw, can be found in Mout Busa.

Signed into law on June 22, 2018, E-Nipas amends Republic Act 7586, or the National Integrated Protected Areas System (Nipas) Act of 1992, that promotes and strengthens the management of protected areas (PAs) in the Philippines. The law also protects and conserves the country's rich biodiversity against various threats.

E-Nipas expanded the areas and the number of PAs and national parks covered by the previous law. This is on top of imposing a stricter penalty and higher fines against violators of the law.

Protected areas

THERE are 240 PAs in the Philippines with a total of 107 under E-Nipas compared to the previous 13 PAs under Nipas.

The rest of these PAs are covered by presidential proclamations or executive orders, which are considered to be initial components and may be disestablished by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) upon the recommendation of the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB), the highest policy-making body of a PA.

Hence, the PAs are given stronger protection against potentially destructive development projects like mining, quarrying and logging or the establishment of an agricultural or agroforestry plantation that has besieged some PAs, such as those in Palawan province.

Local conservation area

MOUNT BUSA has been declared a local conservation area (LCA) by the provincial government of Sarangani through Resolution 2020-10-042 in March last year.

The LCA resolution acknowledged that the forest cover and wildlife of Mt. Busa are slowly diminishing due to human encroachment and illegal activities.

Prior to the passage of the resolution, Sarangani Gov. Steve C. Solon created the Mount Busa Task Force and Technical Working Group, which called on all stakeholders to immediately act to protect and conserve Mt. Busa.

The LCA resolution was supported and endorsed by the municipalities of Kiamba, Maitum and Maasim, the provincial tribal council, the Sarangani provincial field office of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples and concerned national government agencies (NGA).

The municipal boards and barangay councils of Maasim, Kiamba and Maitum also endorsed a parallel resolution, while community stakeholders mounted a signature campaign supporting the LCA resolution.

Urgent measure

Executive Director Cornelio M. Ramirez Jr. of Sarangani province's Environmental Conservation and Protection Center (ECPC) told the BusinessMirror in an interview on July 28 that the Sangguniang Panlalawigan (Provincial Board) of Sarangani may pass an ordinance to further strengthen Mount Busa's protection while the province is waiting for the PA declaration of Mt. Busa.

“[Governor Solon] believes that declaring Mount Busa a protected area is very urgent because of the threats in the area,” he pointed out.

Protecting the mountain range, he said, will also protect the province’s important water source, which is clearly threatened by tree-cutting and use of mercury by small-scale miners.

“Mount Busa is an important source of water for domestic and agricultural use, among other uses, such as power generation,” Ramirez said.

He said the mountain range, being a watershed, needs stronger protection because it is home to threatened wildlife that depend on its forests’ bounty.

“There are mining activities in the area, while hunting and the gathering of wildlife, including birds and plants, are rampant,” he said.

Protected area assessment

Once Mount Busa is declared a protected area, Ramirez said it will undergo a rigid management regime, starting with the crafting of a management plan by its own PAMB.

The DENR’s central office has started assessing the proposed measure to conserve the mountain range, Ramirez said, with the submitted requirements being processed by both the DENR regional and central offices.

The assessment was facilitated by the Mount Busa Conservation Task Force and supported by the Sulong Kalikasan program of Governor Solon.

“Its declaration as a protected area will add more teeth to [our] protection efforts and enforcement of various environmental laws,” Ramirez said.

He said that the PA declaration will also provide adequate funding support from both local and national governments, which will strengthen the implementation of conservation programs for the mountain range.

At the House of Representatives, Sarangani Rep. Rogelio D. Pacquiao has filed House Bill 9055 to declare Mount Busa a protected landscape.

Threatened wildlife, cultural significance

NAMED by the DENR as a key biodiversity area based on the vulnerability and irreplaceability of species in the area, Mount Busa is home to a diverse species of plant and animal wildlife.

The mountain range is the habitat of some 200 plant, 58 bird, 30 amphibian, 24 reptile, 12 mammal and at least 18 other species of flora and fauna.

Threatened wildlife species of conservation concern that have been found in the area include the Philippine eagle, Mindanao flying lizard, Taylor’s dwarf reed snake, rufous hornbill (Philippine hornbill or kalaw), tarsier and frog and orchid species.

Besides being an important watershed in Mindanao, Mount Busa is also culturally significant for it is considered a hallowed ground by the T’boli indigenous people, who calls it Bulul Tembob.

The mountain range is also vital to the economy as it balances the area's ecosystem, especially the Sarangani Bay Protected Seascape, one of Mindanao's richest fishing grounds.

The mountain range also maintains two major river systems: Pangi, a site for whitewater rafting adventure, and Siguel, which feeds a hydropower plant for domestic and agricultural use.

Community, LGU backing

DENR Region 12 Information Chief Jhadija Bayam-Benpolok said Mount Busa has long been identified as home to a diverse species of flora and fauna.

“For a long time [now], Mount Busa is known for the sighting of wildlife, particularly the Philippine eagle,” Bayam-Benplok told the BusinessMirror via Messenger on July 27.

“The community members themselves were the ones who asked the assistance of DENR in declaring it a protected area,” she said.

She said that even the local government units are united in this move as manifested by their support to DENR's various information drive to raise the awareness of the people living around Mount Busa.

Image courtesy of Saranggani Provincial Gov't

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