

# Protecting Mount Arayat National Park

From a forest reserve to a protected landscape



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5 MINUTE READ



Mount Arayat

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is pushing for the enactment of a measure that will boost the status of the Mount Arayat National Park (MANP) in Pampanga province as an area set aside for conservation.

House Bill 9206, sponsored by Reps. Aurelio D. Gonzales Jr., Elpidio F. Barzaga Jr. and Eric Go Yap, will establish MANP as a Protected Landscape under Republic Act 7586, or the National Integrated Protected Areas System (Nipas) Act of 1992.

Established as a protected area by virtue of Presidential Proclamation 594 series of 1933, Mount Arayat was among the first National Parks in the Philippines under Republic Act 3915, or the First National Park Law.

## **From forest reservation to protected landscape**

Essentially a wilderness, or a forest reservation, the 3,715.22 hectares national park straddles 12 barangays—five in Magalang, namely Ayala, Sto. Nino, San Vicente, San Agustin and Turu, and 7 in the Arayat side, namely San Juan Bano, San Mateo, Gatiawin, Bitas, Panlinlang, Baliti and La Paz Turu.

As it became an initial component of Nipas Act upon the law's enactment in 1992, the status of MANP as a protected area became the subject of review by experts.

The requirements, such as maps with technical description, conduct of suitability assessment and public consultation and preparation of Protected Area Management Plan were already conducted from 2015-2018, while the deliberation of the Regional Nipas Review Committee and Regional Development Council were held in 2019.

The recommended appropriate category was as Protected Landscape, wherein it refers to areas of national significance, which are characterized by the harmonious interaction of man, land and water while providing opportunities to public enjoyment through recreation, tourism, and other economic activities.

## **Biodiversity consideration**

According to the DENR-Pampanga, the rich biodiversity of Mount Arayat is the main consideration in its establishment as a protected area.

Among the considerations are the irreplaceability or presence of restricted range and congregation species; its vulnerability or the presence of globally threatened and endemic species; its naturalness or its intact natural cover forest cover; abundance and diversity of flora and fauna; and the uniqueness or outstanding cultural, geological, and aesthetic features that support biodiversity and sustain ecological processes and functions.

Another important consideration is the value of ecosystem services in terms of recreation, educational, traditional use, heritage and other sustainable uses.

The MANP is home to notable species of flora and fauna. A total of 70 species of trees and plants; 86 species of wild birds; 14 species of mammals; and 11 species of reptiles have been recorded in the area.

It also has threatened species of flora like the Arayat pitogo, kamagong and tindalo, and the newly discovered endemic species, *Pyrostria arayatensis*, a plant that belongs to the coffee family

## **Socioeconomic importance**

In 2016, the DENR initiated the Ecotourism Development Program on Mount Arayat. A management plan and business plan were also developed, opening up livelihood opportunities to people in the community.

According to the DENR, ecotourism remains the most suitable activity on Mount Arayat in order to ensure environmental protection and conservation, while supporting local communities.

The DENR helped established people's organizations whose involvement helped promote sustainable tourism practice in the area.

Currently, the MANP has recreational and resort area that continue to draw tourists.

It has a recreation and resort area in San Juan Baño with agreement between the local government unit of Arayat and the DENR.

For religious pilgrimage, the MANP has a "Station of Cross" in Barangay Ayala in Magalang town

Meanwhile, for mountaineering and trekking, it boasts of four destinations, namely White Rock, South Peak, North Peak and Pinnacle Peak.

## **Rivers and waterfalls**

The existence of rivers and waterfalls highlights the importance of protecting the MANP. It provides crystal-clear for domestic use and irrigation to subsistence farmers living around the mountain.

Being a forest reserve, MANP has three waterfalls that continue to attract tourists wanting to beat the summer heat. They are in the resort area in San Juan Baño, Brgy. San Agustin, and the Pau falls in Brgy. Baliti.

## **Rich biodiversity**

Laudemir Salac, Pampanga's Provincial Environment and Natural Resource Officer (Penro), told the BusinessMirror that Mount Arayat, being rich in biological diversity, was recognized by no less than former President Manuel L. Quezon who signed the law establishing the MANP as a protected area with the category of Forest Reservation.

“During that time, they already recognized the beauty of Mount Arayat as a biodiversity area and as an ecotourism area. It is rich in natural resources. It has a natural spring that supplies the resort area. We have endemic flora and fauna on Mount Arayat,” Salac said in an interview via Zoom on August 6.

According to Salac, these are the reasons why the mountain is a popular tourist destination in Pampanga.

Since March 2020, however, the MANP is closed to tourists to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

## **Protecting Mount Arayat**

Ever since its establishment as a forest reserve, Mount Arayat is under a strict management regime, Salac said, but the threats of migration continue.

He said the DENR-Pampanga is currently conducting a study to determine the number of people living within the MANP.

But because the area is already occupied by tenured migrants, the DENR is giving out tenurial instruments—a 25-year lease agreement

for them to practice sustainable agriculture and help protect Mount Arayat.

“They are allowed to stay there but we strictly prohibit the cutting of trees for charcoal making. They are also our National Greening Program [NGP] partners,” Salac said in a mix of English and Filipino.

“We’ve involved the community and the people’s organization in protecting Mount Arayat. Now, we plant both native trees and fruit-bearing trees and some are already harvesting atis and guyabano,” he added.

## **Development partners**

Salac is referring to the Samahan ng mga Magsasaka ng Ayala sa Mataas na Lupa Inc., or SMAMLI, in Barangay Ayala, Magalang municipality.

It is the DENR’s primary partner in the implementation of its greening program and in implementing the Biodiversity Friendly Enterprise program in the area.

On the other hand, the New Maria Sinukuan Upland Farmers Association Inc. (NMSUFAI) is the DENR’s partner in Barangay San Juan Baño, in implementing the NGP and in ecotourism

## **Threats to Mount Arayat**

According to Salac, slash-and-burn farming and charcoal-making is no longer a big problem because livelihood opportunities are made available through ecotourism.

Other threats include hunting of monkeys thriving in the area.

“We hear there were hunters targeting long-tailed macaque for food,” he said.

## **Communicating biodiversity**

Don Guevarra, the chief of the DENR Region 3 Public Affairs Office (RPAO 3), said the area is important with the recent discoveries of new species, such as on Mount Arayat, underscores the importance of protecting areas set aside for conservation.

“A group of students discovered a new species of coffee that exist nowhere else in the world. This is unique to Mount Arayat,” Guevarra said. Making it a legislated protected area, he said, gives additional protective layer to the biodiversity-rich mountain.

He said the DENR RPAO 3, in partnership with their counterparts in the DENR-Pampanga, is communicating its importance in the communities around Mount Arayat.

“Actually, the people in the community already know the richness of Mount Arayat, but we are continuously doing it [communication] to remind the people to help protect and conserve the rich biodiversity,” Guevarra said.

To strengthen the protection and conservation and put in place a strict management regime, Salac said they are pinning their hope on the enactment of a law that will establish Mount Arayat as a protected landscape.

“Actually, in the House [of Representatives, the approval of the bill] is almost done, and there’s a counterpart bill in the Senate. Our champions in Congress have given their assurance that before the end of the year, President Duterte will sign it into law,” Salac said.

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