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Pasonanca Natural Park: Zamboanga City's important life support system

 BY JONATHAN L. MAYUGA

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5 MINUTE READ



Rivers with pristine water are common in the Pasonanca Natural Park.

At the heart of Zamboanga City's vast forest is the Pasonanca Natural Park (PaNP), a 17,000-hectare protected area that provides an important life-support system not only to the unique flora and fauna that can be found within it, but also to the people of its surrounding communities.

It was only recently that researchers confirmed it has the presence of a nesting Philippine eagle, making it home to the Philippine national bird and the world's largest bird of prey.

With this recent discovery, the Zamboanga City passed City Ordinance 551, an ordinance declaring the Philippine Eagle and the Zamboanga bulbul as flagship species of the city.

Rich biodiversity; only water source

The PaNP was considered the third highest in the Philippines in terms of level of biological diversity.

Its natural resources are a natural magnet for learners in the field of biology. It is being visited by researchers, students and other entities for educational purposes and agencies for their environmental activities

According to the Biodiversity Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR-BMB), the PaNP is the only source of potable water for Zamboanga City.

Almost 1 million people living in Zamboanga City rely on the clean drinking water they source from the park.

The Tumaga River also provides industrial and irrigation water for the area around the city.

There are six streams, one river and 20 perennial springs within the protected area which serve as the main source of domestic water for the city.

Watershed forest reserve

The PaNP, a legislated protected area by virtue of Republic Act (RA) 11038, or the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System (Enipas) Act of 2018, was first proclaimed as a watershed forest reservation pursuant to Presidential Proclamation 1999 on December 17, 1989, giving it the name “Pasonanca Watershed Forest Reserve.”

It was later proclaimed as a protected area under the Nipas Act of 1992, and was named as the Pasonanca Natural Park as mandated by Presidential Proclamation 132 on July 5, 1999.

The PaNP straddles seven barangays including Bunguiao, Tolosa, Salaan, Lumayang, Pasonanca, Dulian and Baluno.

Natural park

A natural park is defined as a relatively large area not materially altered by a human activity where extractive-resource uses are not allowed, and it is maintained to protect outstanding natural and scenic areas of national or international significance for scientific, educational, and recreational use, which best describes the PaNP.

The PaNP’s Strict Protection Zone, or “No-Take Zone,” covers a total area of 12,000 hectares of primary-growth dipterocarp forest, while the remaining 5,000 buffer zone area is characterized by secondary-growth dipterocarp forest.

According to the DENR Zamboanga Peninsula Office, Zamboangueño and Visayan tribes occupy and cultivate the buffer zone areas and multiple-use zone of the park. Around 90 percent of the total households have been occupying these areas since the 1950s.

The major occupation of the residents in the area is farming and only a small fraction are engaged as wage and salary workers, mostly as maintenance workers and glue guards of the Zamboanga City Water District that protects the PaNP.

Dipterocarp forest

The DENR-BMB added that the PaNP has the largest block of old-growth lowland dipterocarp forest remaining in Region 9.

The old growth and secondary forest covers about 60 percent of the area, while the rest is agricultural land, coconut plantations and built-up areas.

The DENR Zamboanga Peninsula, for its part, reported in the PaNP's latest profile that there are about 70 species of trees belonging to the Dipterocarpaceae and Palmae families thriving within the park dominated with white and red lauan.

The other important tree species thriving in the national park are the Mindanao narek, mangasinoro, tanguile, apitong, yakal, almon and dao.

Threatened species

PaNP, both an Important Bird Area and Key Biodiversity Area, is home to the most threatened premium species of trees.

A total of 11 of the 96 most threatened and premium species in the Philippines are found in the national park.

Of its estimated 15,000 flora, 50 percent are endemic, and about 70 percent to 80 percent are flowering plants. Most of these are threatened outside the PaNP.

Meanwhile, the DENR-BMB said among the threatened wildlife in the PaNP are the Philippine hawk eagle and the red-headed flameback.

In 2018, Birdlife International reported that many of the threatened and restricted-range species in the Mindanao and Eastern Visayas Endemic Bird Area have been recorded in or near to Pasonanca Watershed.

It included the threatened Mindanao bleeding-heart, Philippine dwarf kingfisher, Philippine leafbird, little slaty flycatcher, and Zamboanga bulbul, which is confined to western Mindanao and Basilan.

The Enteng's monitor lizard, one of the two newly discovered Philippine endemic species of Asian monitor lizard, is also recorded in the park.

Tourism potential

The DENR-BMB said the PaNP is a potential tourist magnet in Zamboanga City. Among the tourism activities it offers are trekking, river/swimming, bird watching, nature sightseeing, filming/photo shooting and camping.

It has a total of 30 outposts and seven Biodiversity Monitoring Stations (BMS) around the Core Zone.

The BMS serve as lodges or sleeping quarters of park visitors. Each station has a potable water source and five have electricity.

However, PaNP Protected Area Superintendent Domeliza Campaner told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview on November 23 that the park remains closed to visitors because of the quarantine restrictions being implemented by the local government.

Protecting the PaNP

According to Campaner, there is a very minimal threat within the area's core zone due to the presence of Zamboanga City Water District guards, but the pandemic is a big challenge.

She said the more than 140 Zamboanga City Water District blue guards are now down to just 45.

“Ever since, the PaNP is being protected by the blue guards. But now, we have to find a way to strengthen our forest protection program,” she said in Filipino, adding that they are hoping that in the 2022, “we can have an additional budget for forest protection.”

While the core zone, a strictly “no-take zone,” is well protected, within buffer zones, however, timber poaching, wildlife hunting, small-scale mining and farming posed serious threats to the biodiversity of the national park.

Heritage park

The PaNP is a candidate for the distinct title of an Asean Heritage Park (AHP), which represents the “cream of the crop” of protected areas in Southeast Asia.

According to Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), the DENR-BMB is pushing for the PaNP to become the country's 10th AHP, because of its pristine old-growth forests and ecosystem function as a source of the water supply of the whole Zamboanga City and nearby municipalities.

Moreover, approximately three years ago, a pair of Philippine eagle has been sighted in the protected area.

"This is the first time that Philippine eagles were sighted in the area, considering that it is very close to the city," ACB Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim told the BusinessMirror via Messenger on November 24.

What makes PaNP unique is that "it is a primary watershed [high ecological value area], and also a habitat for a globally important species, endemic only to one country."

"These [among some of] the criteria in the recognition of [protected areas] as AHPs," she said.

According to Lim, once the PaNP earned the title as an AHP, various support will be coming not only from the DENR, but the Asean as well, further boosting its protection and conservation.

"AHP is a brand that can help promote protected areas or national parks recognized as such...as nature tourism sites and to mobilize resources for strengthening management. ACB, for example, prioritizes support to AHPs for its programs and projects," she explained.

Image courtesy of DENR Zamboanga Peninsula photo