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Sasmuan Bangkung Malapad Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area: A critical habitat in a wetland of intl importance

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6 MINUTE READ



The Sasmuan Bangkung Malapad Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area.

In the town of Sasmuan, a coastal municipality in Pampanga province, where fishing is a way of life, protecting its coastal resource that harbors some of the world's unique but threatened species of birds as well as mangrove is a top priority.

Recognizing its importance to saving this important ecosystem that is frequented by migratory birds, Environment Secretary Roy Cimatu recently issued DENR Administrative Order (DAO) 2021-36 declaring

the 405-hectare Sasmuan Bangkung Malapad Coastal Wetland in Sasmuan town as a critical habitat and ecotourism area.

Under the DAO, the coastal wetland will now be known as the Sasmuan Bangkung Malapad Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area (SBMCHEA). It will be managed by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) local office and the local government of Sasmuan.

The declaration, incidentally, also aims to intensify government efforts in the rehabilitation of Manila Bay, while protecting the area against destructive human activities.

Paquito Moreno Jr., executive director of the DENR Central Luzon Regional Office, said the DAO would serve as a legal framework to protect the SBMCHEA mangrove forests and mudflats, which are a valuable ecosystem found within the more than 3,000-ha Sasmuan Pampanga Coastal Wetland.

It was declared a wetland of international importance in February being the eighth Ramsar Site in the country and the very first in Central Luzon.

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat is an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands. It is named after Ramsar in Iran, where the convention was signed in 1971.

Haven for migratory birds

SBMCHEA is an important habitat to many endemic and threatened water birds, Moreno explained.

He said it is essential to maintain its ecological services and other biological and cultural values, which are fundamental to conserve and enable this ecosystem as a driving force in the region's socioeconomic and ecotourism growth.

With the declaration of the Bangkung Malapad as a critical habitat and ecotourism area, stricter monitoring and enforcement of environmental laws will be done to avert and combat destructive activities within the SBMCHEA.

The DAO prohibits the dumping of waste detrimental to wildlife, squatting or occupying any portion of the critical habitat, burning, logging, quarrying, mineral exploration and illegal fishing and fishponds and dumping of hazardous wastes within the SBMCHEA.

Moreno also urged the public to report to the DENR any person found violating the law in order to stop them from destroying the environment and sustain the rich natural resources in SBMCHEA.

The DENR, along with the local government and communities, will likewise implement the ecotourism area management plan to address site management strategies and activities on habitat protection, rehabilitation, community organizing, promotion of environmental education and awareness, and other sustainability measures.

Mangrove islet

A small mangrove islet in Pasak River and part of the large and enclosed sea of Manila Bay was formed by the volcanic sediments from Mount Pinatubo's devastating eruption in 1991.

The area is known for its vast mangrove forests, where species like the Api-api tree, are abundant.

More importantly, it continues to serve as an important staging ground for migratory birds that travel halfway across the globe during winter to survive the cold weather.

Sanctuary of endangered birds

Interviewed via Zoom on December 10, Audie Salac, the Provincial Environment and Natural Resource Office chief of Pampanga, said under Section 25 of the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act the government established guidelines to protect the population of important species.

In the case of SBMCHEA, it is established to protect the Philippine duck, black-faced spoonbill, Chinese egret, and far eastern curlew. The area is also a host to the Malaysian plover.

Based on a study, SBMCHEA in Batang II barangay, is host to endangered species of migratory birds under the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Since the area is outside a Protected Area, establishing it as a critical area is important.

“I am happy to report that this is the first in Region 3 [Central Luzon] and No. 8 in the country that is declared as a critical habitat by virtue of a law or an administrative order issued by the DENR,” Salac said partly in Filipino.

Stronger partnership

Don Guevarra, the chief public affairs officer of DENR Central Luzon, said the DENR is strengthening partnerships with the local government units (LGUs) and the community stakeholders, specifically the tourism office.

“To promote not only SBMCHEA but the entire Sasmuan, Pampanga Coastal Wetland, we launched a podcast, Project Kalikasan, together with the youth, particularly the Ayala Young Leadership Association-Central Luzon Cluster to give them briefing orientation. We educate them about the importance of SBMCHEA. Some of the members of the podcast project are Pampanga-based. It is important to involve the youth on this because it is new and they don’t know it yet,” he explained.

Hunting in the area, in particular, is strictly prohibited. Fortunately, Salac said Sasmuan Pampanga Wetland and the SBMCHEA are safe from bird hunters.

However, recently, in Candaba Swamp, some hunters who were trying out their guns in the swamp were arrested. A case was filed against them and the case is ongoing, he added.

Co-management

Salac said with the establishment of SBMCHEA, a memorandum of agreement will be signed by the DENR and the LGU of Sasmuan for the co-management of the critical habitat.

“We will then craft a critical habitat management plan jointly with the LGU and the communities and the fisherfolk to address the sustainable management of SBMCHEA,” he said, adding that he expects funding for the activity by January next year.

Crucial to the management of the SBMCHEA, he said, is the protection of the existing mangrove forest, and the conservation of mudflats and seagrasses around it.

Fish trap, artificial reef

He shared that branches of mangroves, particularly the Api-Apihan, are being harvested by fishermen to be used for a fish trap-cum-artificial reef, locally known as “bumbon.” to lure fishes that they will catch.

“We plan to strictly implement the ban on harvesting from this area to protect the mangrove,” he said.

He added that a station was put up by the DENR on the side of the SBMCHEA to enforce the ban.

“Cutting off branches and harvesting of natural resources in the area is a big challenge. But we are getting a lot of help from the LGU which is deploying people in the area, too,” Salac said.

Ecotourism

According to Salac, the fact that the area draws tens of thousands of migratory birds, makes it a potential tourist magnet.

He said the area, while set aside for conservation, will also be developed for low-impact tourism.

“We already have a boardwalk there but we plan to rehabilitate it because it was already dilapidated,” he said.

Information, education

Guevarra said the DENR through the Public Affairs Office use social media to educate the people on the protection and conservation of SBMCHEA.

“We really need it [social media] to reach the young generation. This year, when it [SBMCHEA] was declared as Ramsar site, we launched a massive education lecture in the communities in the four barangays in Sasmuan. We talked to the barangay, to provide the information and education about the importance of Bangkung Malapad,” he said.

“We want to let them know that there are 8,0000 migratory birds that visit the area. But it doesn’t mean that they have 80,000 birds to hunt and divide among themselves,” he joked.

Important ecosystem function

Salac said migratory birds play a very important role in the ecosystem.

He noted that SBMCHEA is healthy because of the presence of organisms that serve as feed to waterbirds.

More importantly, the more birds that visit the area, the more bird droppings that fertilize the mangroves, the mudflats and seagrass areas in the SBMCHEA, which are essential to maintaining a balanced and healthy ecosystem.

“Right now, we are denying requests to plant propagules in the area unless they are accompanied by a DENR officer. We want to protect our mudflats, especially the seagrass, because seagrass is where dugongs and marine turtles go to feasts, too,” Salac said.

Guevarra said the DENR’s Public Affairs Office in Central Luzon is actively educating the people about the importance of critical habitats “because if they are destroyed, the benefits of a healthy ecosystem like food and ecotourism are lost forever, too,” he said.

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