

- [BIODIVERSITY](#)

## **Are ecotourism sites ready to accept visitors amid the pandemic?**

 **BY JONATHAN L. MAYUGA**

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6 MINUTE READ

Environment Secretary Roy A. Cimatu recently highlighted local ecotourism sites, particularly in the country's protected areas, which can be an alternative to the "dolomite beach" on Roxas Boulevard, Manila, for rest and relaxation.

Taking the cue from this policy pronouncement, the DENR's Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) will hold an online workshop to identify the protected areas that are now ready to accept visitors.

Due to the spread of the Covid-19 disease and subsequent imposition of community quarantines across the country, all 240 protected areas in various parts of the country were ordered closed since March 2020.

With this latest policy pronouncement from the country's chief steward of the environment and natural resources, the question the begged to be answered is: Are our protected areas ready to resume operations amid the pandemic?

### **Alternative ecotourism sites**

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) chief said there are many ecotourism sites in nearby provinces waiting to be

explored, encouraging those living outside Metro Manila to visit them instead of the dolomite beach.

A portion of the Manila Bay coastal area was covered with crushed dolomite from Cebu in 2020, thus, the monicker “dolomite beach,” allegedly for beach nourishment. The DENR said it is part of an integrated coastal zone management of the Manila Bay Rehabilitation project.

Cimatu said there are equally captivating ecotourism sites in protected areas that were established under the National Integrated Protected Areas System through Republic Act (RA) 7586, as amended by RA 11038, or the Expanded NIPAS Act of 2018.

However, he reiterated that like the dolomite beach, these areas are covered by existing quarantine rules and that “health protocols must be observed while visiting these sites to ensure the safety of the visitors while enjoying the tours.”

## **Health protocols**

“Those visiting PAs should expect to undergo the screening process and adhere to existing Covid-19 safety guidelines,” Cimatu said in an online news conference on November 11.

He said the rules and regulations issued by the concerned local government units for the safety of the tourists are also implemented in ecotourism sites within the PAs.

Nevertheless, with the relaxing of community quarantine status in many areas, Cimatu said prospective travelers have “a vast array of places to choose from” for their pleasure and enjoyment.

## **Ecotourism, video contest**

In September and October 2021, the DENR-Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB), United Nations Development Fund-Biodiversity Finance Initiative (Biofin) and the Department of Tourism held a three-part webinar series dubbed “Ecotourism in Protected Areas: Towards Green Recovery.”

The webinar discussed the impacts of the global pandemic on ecotourism, lessons on post-pandemic ecotourism recovery strategies, and how to encourage the participants to be responsible travelers.

Newly designated DENR-BMB Director Datu Tungko Saikol also invited the public to join the “Virtual Travels to Protected Areas,” a video contest for travelers of legal age and residing in the Philippines, as a way of promoting the country’s local ecotourism sites.

The contest aims to generate content featuring the country’s PAs. The deadline for submission of entries is on November 30.

“After two years of being confined in the comfort of our homes and localities, we can take this opportunity to explore nearby protected areas and capture their beauty and values through videos,” Saikol said in a news statement.

## **Nationwide assessment**

Taking the cue from Cimatu’s call for the public to visit ecotourism sites, Saikol said the DENR-BMB is planning to organize an “Online Assessment Workshop on the Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic to Ecotourism Development Program in PAs” from November 23 to 25.

To be participated in by key staff from DENR regional offices and protected area superintendents of selected protected areas, the online webinar aims to come up with an updated list of the status of all PAs in the country.

The DENR-BMB director wants to know which PAs are already open or still closed, including a more detailed information about the impacts of the pandemic to ecotourism in PAs.

## **Impact of protected areas in Southeast Asia**

Last year, the Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) came up with a report titled, “Protected Areas and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Impacts, Responses and Recovery,” that highlighted the protected areas, the communities living around these areas, and how the pandemic affected their socioeconomic conditions.

There are currently 2,652 PAs in Southeast Asia, covering an accumulated total of more than 800,000 square kilometres in the region. Of these, 49 are designated as Asean Heritage Parks (AHPs).

ACB Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim, in her recent talk, highlighted the result of the Asean-wide survey on selected AHPs, which are considered as the cream of the crop of PAs in Southeast Asia.

Lim said that establishing and effectively managing protected areas is regarded as the most effective tool in ensuring the conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity.

## **Key to mitigating diseases**

“More than their breathtaking views and the valuable ecosystem services that they provide, these natural parks and protected areas could also be the key in mitigating the impacts of disease outbreaks, and more importantly, even preventing them,” she said.

Lim said that the Covid-19 pandemic reminded us that many of these wildlife species could be natural virus reservoirs.

“When their habitats are encroached on or destroyed, these reservoir species are driven toward human settlements, increasing the risk of virus transmission to domestic animals and, eventually, to humans,” she explained.

“Conservation efforts at the ecosystem level are our best solutions to preventing future disease outbreaks as they can decrease habitat loss and keep the wildlife species and their inherent viruses in the safety of their natural habitats,” Lim added.

## **Impacts of lockdowns**

The results of the survey for 27 PA managers across Southeast Asia indicate that a number of PAs observed a decrease in illegal activities during the period.

There was a drop in poaching (seven PAs), illegal logging (four PAs) and illegal harvesting and collection of wildlife and forest products (10 PAs).

Meanwhile, 12 PAs reported that the lockdowns and restriction of movements had no impact on illegal activities in their area.

However, due to the community quarantines or lockdowns, enforcement were also affected.

Of those surveyed, 51.9 percent said the enforcement of field personnel tasked to patrol the PAs was restricted by the lockdown, while or 48.1 percent said the lockdown had no effect.

## **Ecotourism and income loss**

On tourism, 20 PAs, or 76.9 percent, were closed to all tourists and visitors during the lockdown. Three respondents, or 11.5 percent, said portions of the protected areas were closed to tourists and visitors, resulting in income loss to affected PAs.

A total of 17 PA managers, or 62 percent, said their areas incurred income losses due to the closure of protected areas.

Thailand's Hat Chao Mai National Park, for instance, was estimated to have lost 900,000 Baht (\$29,000) in tourism revenues as of March 25, 2020.

Agusan Marsh Wildlife Sanctuary, meanwhile, reported an estimated loss of P27,000 (\$539) as of April 30, 2020, while Malaysia's Gunung Mulu National Park said about 400,000 MYR (\$93,590) was the estimated value of foregone earnings due the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **ACB support to PAs**

According to the ACB report, the main concern observed is the loss of income in the areas where tourism is a source of revenue of the AHPs and PAs, as well as of the communities in the area.

“Most parks need to look into preparation in order to put in place new measures, such as physical distancing, limiting the number of visitors and disinfecting once they open for tourism,” the ACB noted.

In reopening PAs to visitors, the ACB pointed out that park management also needs support for the possibility of future outbreaks—not just on the aspect of health and safety of staff and visitors, but also on alternative livelihoods for communities that are dependent on tourism for income.

“The lack of human disturbance in the PAs has increased wildlife encounters and to some extent, reduced illegal activities. The AMS, with support from the ACB, may want to look into these needs to support the AHPs and PAs in the immediate future,” the report added.

Image courtesy of DENR Central Luzon photo