

Renewed hope for Dinagat Islands

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In Photo: An area on Dinagat not affected by mining.

Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez has ordered the closure of 23 mining operations and suspended five others for failing mining and environmental standards on February 2.

According to Lopez, mining has only caused social injustice in many affected communities, as it causes massive environmental destruction and suffering to the people.



An aerial survey of destruction on Dinagat.

Such happened on Dinagat Islands, the island-province in the Caraga region with a population of 127,152, according to a 2015 census of population. Dinagat Islands is known as the “Mystical Island, Province of Love.”

Rich in natural resources, it was declared as mineral reservation area by Proclamation 391, s. 1939 on March 13, 1939, by President Manuel L. Quezon. It was declared a province by virtue of Republic Act 9355, signed on October 2, 2006, by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Dinagat Islands has seven towns: Dinagat, Basilisa, Cagdinao, Libjo, Loreto, San Jose and Tubajon.

Besieged by mining

Lopez, a staunch environmental advocate, now wants to transform the entire island-province from a mining to an ecotourism haven and nature reserve, where the people will be the primary beneficiaries of what its natural wealth on land and surrounding marine environment has to offer, something local officials and its people have been hoping for.

These are mines operated by the AAMPHIL Natural Resources Exploration, Kromico Inc., SinoSteel Philippines H.Y. Mining Corp., Oriental Synergy Mining Corp., Wellex Mining Corp., Libjo Mining Corp. and Oriental Vision Mining Phils. Corp.

For years, since Dinagat's declaration as a mineral land reservation, Lopez said mining has caused massive environmental destruction to the island's forest ecosystems.

The massive extraction of its rich mineral deposits caused Dinagat Islands to lose much of its forest ecosystems and severely affected rivers and watersheds, she said.

Biodiversity

The Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM) said more than 20 mining companies have mining claims over various parts of the province, covering a total of 69,205.74 hectares, or approximately 69 percent of its total land area of 1,036.34 square kilometers or 103,634 hectares.

A total of 19 mining companies have approved Mineral Production Sharing Agreements (MPSAs) over Dinagat Islands, covering a total of 44,480.52 hectares, and many of these mining tenements overlap with supposedly conservation areas.

ATM records showed that the total land area with overlapping mining claims over conservation areas is 6,289.67 hectares, an area larger than Caloocan City's 5,320 hectares.

ATM said four mining companies have pending applications for MPSAs covering a total of 8,091 hectares.

Green groups back Lopez

ATM and various environmental groups lauded Lopez for her decision to close and suspend some mining operations.

Clemente Bautista, national coordinator of the Kalikasan-People's Network for the Environment (Kalikasan-PNE), said the operation of large-scale and corporate mining in Mindanao, especially on Dinagat Islands, has brought so much environmental degradation, resource depletion and widespread poverty to our communities.

Besides closing these mines, Bautista said the government should be ready in providing immediate relief to the affected communities. "In the short term, miners should be given alternative livelihoods and financial assistance to cope with their economic displacement. Local industries, particularly agriculture and fishing, should be prioritized for development, particularly in island-based ecosystem like Dinagat," he said.

More important, Bautista said, it is important to implement a land-transfer program that will benefit farmers and affected miners who stand to lose their jobs and livelihood.

"We suggest to Secretary Lopez to directly coordinate with [Agrarian Reform] Secretary [Rafael] Mariano in implementing this. Providing land to the tillers will ensure [their] source of livelihood and food for the family. Simultaneously, the DENR and the government should immediately rehabilitate the affected ecosystems in the area, particularly the water source and marine areas," Bautista said.

Farmers and those living on the Dinagat Islands do not own properties because of the island's status as a mineral land reservation. Many of them have been denied the right to own land even for their own homes or small farms.

While lauding Lopez's political will, Bautista said the decision to close the mines is a temporary victory. "DENR Secretary Lopez and President Duterte should pass the people's mining bill, which ensures both the welfare and interest of our people and environment," he added.

Rich biodiversity

Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim of the DENR's Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) said the decision to stop mining on Dinagat Islands would boost the government effort to protect and conserve the country's rich biodiversity.

Lim added that previous studies conducted by the DENR-BMB recommended rationalization of Dinagat's land use. Lopez's pronouncement, Lim said, promises to boost the ecological services provided by Dinagat Islands's unique ecosystems.

"I've been to Dinagat. It has a vast bonsai forest. Scientists also discovered a stick insect which could be unique to Dinagat," Lim said.

Lim also noted that, besides being ideal for fishing, Dinagat Islands and its surrounding marine environment is rich in biological diversity.

Unique species

The island is home to unique species of endemic wildlife, such as rodents, tarsiers and several bird species. In 2006 two areas on Dinagat Islands—the Mount Redondo and Mount Kambinliw—were declared as key biodiversity

areas (KBAs), and became part of the 117 KBAs under the Philippine Biodiversity Conservation Priority-Setting Program.

A previously believed to be extinct species of rat, such as the Dinagat cloud rat, was rediscovered by scientists on Dinagat Islands.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature listed the Dinagat cloud rat to be a critically endangered species.

Dinagat Islands is also home to the endangered Dinagat gymnure or the Dinagat hairy-tailed rat, declared by the EDGE Species Programme of the Zoological Society of London as one of the top 100 most evolutionary distinct and globally endangered species in the world.

The province is also home to the Dinagat tarsier, which scientists recently declared as unique to the island and an entirely different species from the Bohol tarsiers, or those found in other areas in Mindanao.

Bonsai forest

The island-province also hosts around 1,000 hectares of bonsai forest, which Lopez said could be the largest in the country.

Lim added the pygmy forest itself is a promising ecotourism magnet. When tourists start arriving, people can start small environment-friendly and ecosystem-based enterprises.

Lim added that the province's ecosystem remains vastly unexplored and offers a lot of promising potential for scientific research and discovery, particularly for plants with pharmaceutical potentials.

“Its wide variety of plants may have genetic materials where communities can benefit once developed for its medicinal or pharmaceutical value,” she said.

Lim added that to maximize Dinagat Islands’s potential, it is important to provide alternative jobs and livelihood to the communities.

“Side by side with the gradual phaseout of mining in the area, it is important to introduce livelihood opportunities,” she said.

Protection against mining

Lopez said she would ask President Duterte to repeal Proclamation 391, which declared Dinagat Islands as a mineral land reservation. She would also push for its declaration as protected area covered under the National Integrated Protected Areas System (Nipas) Act.

Once declared as a protected area, Dinagat Islands would be protected against future mining projects. Executive Order 79 declares protected areas as “off-limits” to mining.

Repealing Proclamation 391 will require the signing of another presidential proclamation or an executive order by Duterte. Once declared as a protected area, an act of Congress is needed to back it up with adequate funding to sustain rehabilitation and development efforts geared toward conservation.

Ecotourism

Lopez said Dinagat Islands has vast ecotourism potentials. She added there are more reasons to develop it, rather than allowing mining companies to continue exploiting its rich mineral deposits for profit.

Blessed with beautiful beaches, Lopez said Dinagat Islands is a potential ecotourism destination. Pristine waters and corals surrounding the island make it ideal for swimming, water sports and other recreational activities sought by local and foreign tourists.

Still poor

“I want to give Dinagat a rest. They [mining companies] have been mining in Dinagat for 77 years,” Lopez said.

She lamented that people in the province remain poor after decades of mining.

“If it is true that people have benefited from mining, why are the people on the island still poor?” she said.

Lopez argued that mining contribution to the national economy is nil, chipping only less than 1 percent to the country’s GDP.

She said 82 percent of the income of all mining companies go to the companies, with only 18 percent going to the government. Of the 18 percent, 95 percent goes to the national government, leaving only 5 percent for the local government.

Lopez said communities rarely benefit from whatever taxes mining companies paid in exchange for the billions worth of mineral deposits they ship out of the country.

She noted that only 20 percent of the people from Dinagat are employed by mining companies.

“Mining is not labor-intensive. It is capital-intensive. In 2014 there was a government report that stated that mining has created 235,000 jobs all over the country, while tourism has [provided] 4.7 million [jobs],” she said.

More jobs, livelihood

Lopez said more jobs and livelihood opportunities await people in ecotourism more than mining.

She insisted that sustainable economic development could be achieved without destroying the environment and causing suffering to people.

Using the sustainable integrated area development (SIAD) approach, Lopez said the DENR would assume the developmental role of providing sustainable livelihood, while teaching environmental conservation to affected communities, such as the Dinagat Islands.

“We will create ecological economic zones where there is respect for nature and value adding in resources, and where people benefit from the resources of the place,” Lopez said.

The DENR chief added that massive planning and consultations will be conducted from February 16 to 18 in areas affected by the closure orders, including Dinagat Islands, where alternative jobs for displaced mine workers will be discussed.

Lopez said she is intending to use the mine-rehabilitation fund of the closed mining firms in rehabilitating mining sites “to heal the land”.

Partnership

The DENR is also tapping the services of a team of experts from the Sixto K. Roxas Foundation in the rehabilitation of the mining sites, and is looking at the potential of biochar as a tool for mine rehabilitation.

Affected mine workers will also be tapped for reforestation under the Enhanced National Greening Program, as well as the government's planned expansion of bamboo and mangrove plantations to fight climate change and poverty.

Under the SIAD approach, "mini economic zones" will be created in order to generate employment, livelihood and income-generating activities in communities where mining companies operate, Lopez assured.

"Dinagat is beautiful. It has a bonsai forest, I think the largest in the country. That is an ecotourism pull. It has forests, mountains, corals, islands. It has great potential. But, first, the mining must stop, then we can sell the beauty of the place," she said.

According to Lopez, Dinagat has a total of 185 potential ecotourism sites, from which the people can benefit.

"It should be Dinagat for the people of Dinagat. That is area development. That is social justice," she said.

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