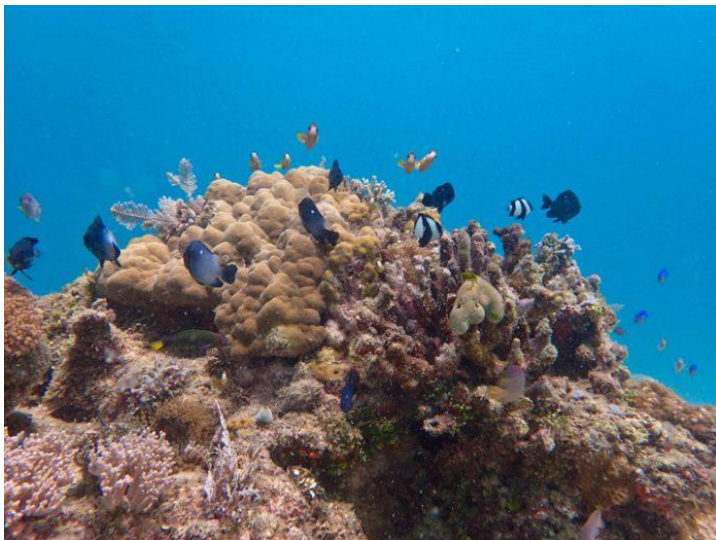


Cancun commitments to boost biodiversity

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In Photo: An assortment of fish and other species swim around a group of corals in the waters of Bohol.

THE global effort to protect and conserve biodiversity got a much-needed boost during the United Nations (UN) Biodiversity Conference in December 2016 in Cancun, Mexico.

The conference resulted in significant commitments for action on biodiversity, including agreements to integrate biodiversity in forestry, fisheries, agriculture and tourism sectors, said Director Theresa Mundita Lim of the Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) of Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

“The decisions and agreements highlight the recognition of the role of biodiversity through integration in four thematic areas—forestry, fisheries, agriculture and tourism,” said Lim, a member of the Philippine delegation in the two-week event.

Almost 6,400 delegates from country-parties, observer-countries and international organizations took part in the conference and attended the 13th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 13).

A total of 37 decisions were finalized during the COP 13 meeting. A member of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Philippines is committed to pursuing the agreements forged during the conference.

International treaty

The CBD is a UN treaty devoted to promoting the conservation, sustainable use and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from the utilization of biodiversity worldwide, with 194 countries as parties to the international agreement.

COP 13 aims to negotiate agreements and commitments that give impulse to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, as well as the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets.

With the central theme, “Mainstreaming Biodiversity”, COP 13 was composed of different simultaneous events, exhibitions, presentations, fairs and fora.

The integration implies that biodiversity must be considered part of the functioning of the productive sectors, which seek to reduce, avoid and mitigate negative impacts, and generate positive effects on biodiversity and ecosystem services.

In this way, biodiversity contributes to sustainable development and the provision of essential services for human well-being.

Biodiversity advocate in UN body

Lim, a staunch advocate of biodiversity, was appointed as the next chairman of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific and Technological Advice, a scientific body that advises the CBD COP.

Lim was endorsed to the position by Philippine Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez and will serve a two-year term.

As the next chairman of the advisory body to the CBD COP, Lim will be responsible in preparing the next set of recommendations for the CBD COP meeting to be held in Egypt in 2018, and manage the holding of two Subsidiary Body meetings before the COP.

Among the key tasks of the Subsidiary Body is the finalization of the Fourth Global Biodiversity Outlook (GBO4), which updates the assessment on the global effort to halt biodiversity loss and makes recommendations on what steps and measures need to be undertaken.

Cancun Declaration

Highlighting the Biodiversity Conference is the approval of the “Cancun Declaration on Mainstreaming the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity for Well-being” by the ministers and other COP 13 heads of delegation.

Countries representing all United Nations regions support commitments under the Cancun Declaration, and a variety of Aichi Biodiversity Targets.

Among others, the declaration recognizes that “it is essential to live in harmony with nature as a fundamental condition for the well-being of all life.”

That the well-being of all life depends on the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and the ecosystem services it underpins. It also acknowledges that biodiversity offers solutions to the pressing development and societal challenges that the world community is currently facing.

Ministers and heads of delegations also recognized the negative impacts on biodiversity caused by degradation and fragmentation of ecosystems; unsustainable land-use changes; overexploitation of natural resources; illegal harvesting and trade of species; introduction of invasive alien species; pollution of air, soil, inland waters and oceans; climate change and desertification.

They also declared that the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, adopted at the 21st session of COP in December 2015, as well as of the Marrakech Action Proclamation adopted in November 2016 at the 22nd session, can and should also contribute to the implementation of the objectives of the CBD, and vice versa.

“We need to make additional efforts to ensure the effective implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and its Aichi Biodiversity Targets, and, as applicable, the Cartagena and Nagoya Protocols, and facilitate closer,” the declaration said.

In approving the Cancun Declaration, the ministers and heads of delegations vowed to work at all levels within their respective governments and across all sectors to mainstream biodiversity, establishing effective institutional, legislative and regulatory frameworks, and incorporating an inclusive economic, social and cultural approach with full respect for nature and human rights.

The declaration will be forwarded to the United Nations General Assembly, the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development 2017 and the Third United Nations Environmental Assembly.

Significant headway

According to Lim, the Philippines is making headway in mainstreaming biodiversity.

Lim said that during the side events, members of the Philippine delegation underscore the initiatives of the Philippine government in focusing on biodiversity in the four thematic areas.

She added that the Philippines is introducing biodiversity integration in businesses as a key to continuity and survival in the face of climate-change impacts.

“The Philippines is now into biodiversity enterprise development. In one of the mainstreaming biodiversity decisions, we were able to push for the adoption of terminology ‘biodiversity-friendly business’. Currently, the Philippines is developing criteria to identify businesses, which we can label as biodiversity-friendly,” Lim said.

But this effort does not rest on the DENR alone, but the whole of government, she said.

Other agencies, she added, needs to provide incentive to businesses that are biodiversity-friendly, referring to the departments of Trade and Industry and of Agriculture and other government agencies.

Biodiversity in development projects

Lim said the initiatives of the Duterte administration, through Lopez, to mainstream biodiversity jives well with the Cancun Declaration.

“In every opportunity, we are highlighting our efforts to mainstream biodiversity consideration,” she said.

She cited the policy to include biodiversity among the criteria in the ongoing mining audit and review of environmental compliance certificate.

Environmental groups in the Philippines lauded COP 13 in approving the Cancun Declaration.

Political will needed

Gloria Estenzo-Ramos, an environmental lawyer and vice president of the ocean conservation advocacy group Oceana Philippines, said the Philippines, like other signatories to the CBD and other related international instruments, should take heed and seriously adopt and implement the principles behind the Cancun Declaration.

“Biodiversity means life, for both humans and nonhumans. Unfortunately, we have become detached from nature. Worse, we arrogantly destroy fragile habitats, such as corals, seagrass and mangroves, for coastal development; and heartlessly contaminate life-support systems—our land, air and water, with our discards and discharges,” she said.

Oceana Philippines is pushing for the protection and conservation of marine-protected areas, including the Tañon Strait Protected Seascape and the Benham Rise, the country’s newest territory 250 kilometers off Aurora Province.

Ramos said the good news is that the Philippine Constitution and various environmental laws already prescribe that policies and programs, practices and actions should always be “in accord with the rhythm and harmony” of nature.

Ramos cited as an example, the amended Fisheries Code, which subscribes to an integrated ecosystem-management approach for fisheries and the use of technology, such as vessel monitoring for all commercial fishing vessels to track behavior of fishers.

“What is needed is political will from both the government and the citizens to ensure our actions are sustainable for present and future generations. We are pleased to see also that the Cancun Declaration also appended annexes as action points to protect biodiversity in our fisheries, forests and agriculture, with specific calls to fight illegal, unreported and registered fishing, which should be everyone’s battle cry,” she said.

A welcome declaration

Wilhelmina Pelegrina, regional campaigner for Food and Ecological Agriculture of Greenpeace Southeast Asia, said: “We welcome the Cancun Declaration and its call to advance ecological agriculture to address the Sustainable Development Goals of ending hunger, poverty and ensuring good health and well-being of the Filipinos. We take note of the declaration’s call for

sustainable consumption and production and the need for diverse diets based on broader range of biodiversity.”

She said Greenpeace also supports the call to conserve and cultivate native varieties, as well as farmer’s landraces, locally adapted breeds and underutilized species, especially in times of climate change.

However, she said farmers have a dynamic seed system and they need on-farm biodiversity to build resilience against climate impacts and for them to have materials they can develop into new, locally adapted varieties should be acknowledged.

“With this, the role that farmers and indigenous peoples as key players in the conservation and sustainable use of farm biodiversity can never be denied,” she said.

The Philippines is rich in biological diversity. It is one of the 17 megadiverse countries in the world and is known to host unique species of flora and fauna that can be found nowhere else in the world.

While it is rich in biodiversity, the Philippines is also a biodiversity hot spot because of the rapid rate of biodiversity loss.

Image Credits: **Stephanie Tumampos**

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