

Unique islands, unique biodiversity

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In Photo: Majestic limestone karst

A group of islands—Gigantes Islands, or Islas de Gigantes in the municipality of Carles in Iloilo province—is known for its rich fishing ground.

Lately, hordes of tourists in Carles visit Gigantes, which beauty was discovered by local and foreign tourists through word of mouth in the course of relief

operations in the aftermath of Super typhoon Yolanda (international code name Haiyan) in November 2013.



Fish and scallops at the Bangkal Fish

Port in Carles, Iloilo.

A second-class municipality with one of the highest poverty incidence in the Visayas, Carles, 18 kilometers from Panay Island in the Visayan Sea, is developing a plan to promote sustainable tourism on Gigantes, which has 10 islands and islets.

Around 13,000 people live in four barangays on its two major islands—Asluman and Granada on Gigante Norte, and Lantangan and Gabi on Gigante Sur.

Legend has it that the islands were once inhabited by giants, thus, the name Islas de Gigantes.

Before that, Gigantes were used to be called Sabuluag, or Salauag, the name of endemic tree species abundantly found on the islands.

Biologically diverse



Fishermen unload newly harvested scallops at the fish port in Barangay Bangkal, Carles, Iloilo.

The Philippines being part of the Coral Triangle (referring to a roughly triangular area of the tropical marine waters, including that of **Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands** and **Timor-Leste**), Gigantes is home to some of the most biologically diverse and richest coastal and marine resources, according to the Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE).

Besides the endemic species of frogs and geckos, which make Gigantes unique, several endemic bird species have been recorded on some of the islands.

These include the Philippine coucal, Philippine hawk owl, Philippine nightjar, Pygmy swiftlet, Philippine pygmy woodpecker, Philippine bulbul and the pygmy flowerpecker.

FPE is working with Gigantes Islands communities, in partnership with the University of the Philippines Visayas Foundation Inc. (UPVFI), for the P2-million project titled “Building Resilient and Sustainable Small Island Communities”.

Gigantes is marred with political, economic and cultural issues, which result in resource degradation, insecurity and vulnerability of the island and its communities, FPE said.

Limestone karst forest, caves

Some of the islands in Gigantes are unique. Forests grow over basically limestone karsts with a number of karst caves.

Some say there are 50 caves on Gigantes, but less than half have been identified and explored.

Scientists and experts say limestone karst and limestone caves are the most specialized habitats in the Philippines because they often harbor unique species of flora and fauna that are highly restricted in distribution.

According to “Status Assessment of the Population and Habitat of Threatened Endemic Limestone Karst Frogs and Lizards of Gigantes Islands [An Initial Report]”, a total of nine karst-obligate species of amphibians and reptiles are currently known in the Philippines, comprising of five species of frogs and four species of lizards.

Many of the species are seriously threatened with extinction owing to high levels of disturbance of limestone karsts and caves caused by mining for cement, quarrying and collection of guano; and other human activities, such as

treasure-hunting, conversion into agricultural land, urban development, slash-and-burn farming and unregulated ecotourism.

Frogs, geckos

The most threatened of the herpetofaunal species in the Philippines that are endemic to karst are the Gigantes limestone frog, which belonged to the *Platymantis insulatu*, a species of frog in the *Ceratobatrachidae* family, and the Gigante limestone gecko.

The Gigantes limestone frog is listed as critical, while the Gigantes limestone gecko is endangered under the Red List of Threatened Species of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Both species are known from the islands of North Gigantes, South Gigantes, Bulubadiang and Cabugao Dako.

Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim of the Biodiversity Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, said Gigantes frogs and geckos make the islands unique, thus, the clamor for its protection and conservation.

“The Gigantes frogs and geckos perform important ecological functions. Their existence is important on the islands because they are control agents that can prevent population growth of potentially harmful insects,” Lim said.

On the other hand, she said, the extinction of any species would cause ecological imbalance, especially if it is the only one that performs particular ecological function. “That is why we really need to study these frogs and geckos. Know more about their diet,” she said.

Scallops capital

Being rich in marine and coastal resources, Gigantes is known for shellfish, including the tasty scallops that abound in the deep waters around the islands.

Scallops are not easy to collect, being found only in areas at least 15 feet below sea level.

Tourists consider scallops a rare treat, but not on Gigantes. Scallops on the islands are harvested daily with some fishermen, even offering tourists to harvest scallops for only P100 to P180 a kilo, already without the shell. Crabs are, likewise, popular among tourists on the islands. At P200 a kilo, cooked crabs are packed for homebound tourists.

Capacity building

FPE's project in Gigantes called Building Resilient and Sustainable Small Island Communities, focuses on providing expertise to residents in its four island-barangays, particularly in environmental protection and conservation, tourism promotion and disaster-risk reduction, said UP Visayas's Jorge Ebay, who represents UPVFI, FPE's partner on Gigantes.

Governance systems, according to Ebay, need focus to ensure sustainable tourism, in partnership with the local government unit (LGU) of Carles.

With an 80-percent poverty rate, in terms of income and food threshold, some of the province's poorest are on Gigantes.

"This means the capacity to buy food is a common problem. This means most people do not have the means to buy basic goods, [such as] rice, coffee, sugar," Ebay said.

Isda Inc.

Islands Sustainable Development Alliance Inc. (Isda), an umbrella organization of 12 community-based groups on Gigantes, was organized two years ago.

Barangay Lantangan Kagawad Samuel Suguano Sr., the concurrent president of Isda, aims to work to ensure the inclusive growth and development of Gigantes.

Aileen Ramirez, the alliance's secretary-general, said Gigantes residents have learned to appreciate having a strong voice in demanding for what are due them from local government officials.

“We ask for their promise during the elections,” she said in Filipino. The four barangays in Gigantes now allocate part of their internal-revenue allotment for Isda to fund the group's operations with the initial amount of P25,000 each. Isda is asking for its share from the environmental fees collected by Carles. The alliance intends to use it to boost the livelihood opportunities of their members.

Priority site

“Gigantes Islands is one of the six priority sites of FPE because of its unique ecosystem and diverse flora and fauna,” said Executive Director Oliver O. Agoncillo during a meeting with local officials of Carles. The meeting was part of the media exposure trip on Gigantes held from March 2 to 4 for the winners of the Sarihay Media Awards last year.

Being a priority site means FPE's long-term, proactive engagement on Gigantes, said Ramunda Debuayan, regional unit manager of FPE Visayas. FPE has been working with the communities on Gigantes since 2009.

“Right now we are putting in place a conservation management plan. We are introducing to the population the health and environment approach,” Debuayan said. The formation of Isda is eyed as the sustaining mechanism in Gigantes, she said.

Booming tourism

Ecotourism in Gigantes is booming, said Ma. Pofe B. Esmilla, municipal administrator of Carles. “We were overtaken by the influx of tourist arrivals after Yolanda [in 2013],” she said.

The challenge, she said, was to finalize a sustainable tourism plan not only for Gigantes but for the entire municipality.

“Tourism in Carles is still in its infancy,” which started only after the onslaught of Yolanda, Esmilla said.

Thanks to Yolanda

“With help coming Gigantes Islands’s way [to help those affected by Yolanda], by word of mouth, the beauty of the islands became known,” Julieta A. Manggasang, municipal disaster risk reduction management officer of Carles, told the BusinessMirror.

“Before [the supertyphoon occurred], the communities on Gigantes Islands were the last to receive relief goods. But when Yolanda struck, it became a priority. As people come in to help, they’ve discovered Gigantes and soon after, tourists started to arrive,” Manggasang said partly in Filipino.

Carles Tourism Officer So-San B. Marcelo said the sustainable tourism plan would consider formulating a guideline for the industry. It will include

regulatory policies in the establishment of resorts, hotels and home stays, tour transportation, rate for island hopping and island tour and entrance fees—a tourism package that would ensure environment protection and natural resources conservation.

Serious threat

Tourism in Gigantes is seen as an opportunity, as well as a threat to the islands' ecosystems.

The unregulated or unchecked ecotourism, Debuayan said, is the most serious threat to the limestone karst forest and karst cave-dwelling geckos and frogs.

Citing the popularity of scallops, she said the increasing number of tourists resulted in the increased demand for scallops, making the harvest of the clam unsustainable.

“We are eyeing to commission a study to look into the biology of the scallops, to know whether current practices of harvesting is sustainable,” Debuayan said.

FPE, in partnership with communities, hope to change that by ensuring that people appreciate Gigantes Islands more by formulating a sustainable ecotourism plan and governance system that puts profit or money behind the islands' unique ecosystems—their natural wealth and rich biodiversity.

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