

A man-made mangrove forest thrives in Iloilo

By **Jonathan L. Mayuga**

MARCH 26, 2017



In Photo: Primavera and Batislaon with the mangrove forest behind them.

A man-made mangrove forest in Leganes, Iloilo province, is now becoming a magnet for birds, a variety of spawning fish species, mud crabs and other marine wildlife.

The 15-hectare Katunggan Park in Barangays Gua-an and Nabitasan, which used to be fishponds, is now thickly covered with mangroves.



A wooden viewing area stands over the mangrove forest in Katunggan Park.

From being an abandoned, underutilized and unproductive fishpond, proponents of the project reverted the area into a mangrove forest for climate-change mitigation and adaptation—and later a tourist and learning destination.

Milkfish producer

Located 11 kilometers north of the capital Iloilo City, Leganes is a fourth-class municipality that used to be one of the province's top producers of milkfish.

It has 187 hectares of coastal area and most were used for fishpond operations.

Because of the environmental damage caused by the fishponds, the business became unsustainable. The area eventually went from being underutilized to abandoned, making it totally unproductive.

Rehabilitation



Dr. Jurgenne Primavera of the Zoological Society of the London-Philippines watches as Wilson Batislaon, municipal environment and natural resource officer of Leganes, Iloilo province, narrates how the Katunggan Park came to be.

In 2009 the plan to rehabilitate the abandoned fishponds—to revert the underutilized and unproductive fishpond into mangrove forest—was conceived.

“It all started in 2009, when we explored the possibility of reverting these abandoned and underutilized fishponds into a mangrove forest. We started with 9.5 hectares and now we are eyeing to expand the park,” said Wilson Batislaon, municipal environment and natural resource officer (Menro) of Leganes.

By 2012 the area was successfully reverted into mangrove forest, attracting fish and other marine wildlife.

“There is also a good number of birds in the park now,” he said.

LGU-led project

Speaking mostly in Filipino, Batislaon said the project is a result of a partnership between the local government unit (LGU) of Leganes and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), through its community-based Mangrove Rehabilitation Project.

According to Batislaon, the project started rolling after the signing of a memorandum of agreement between the LGU and the ZSL. Developed through assisted natural regeneration and active monitoring and maintenance, the area was eventually converted and named as the Katunggan Park.

An agricultural technician, Batislaon said he had to undergo training and learn from experts, led by Jurgenne Primavera, chief mangrove scientific advisory of ZSL-Philippines.

Mangroves 101

Primavera provided “Mangrove 101” lecture to members of the media during a visit organized by the Foundation for the Philippine Environment (FPE) at the Katunggan Park early this month. She underscored the importance and proper way of rehabilitating the country’s mangrove forests.

“Planting mangroves should be done properly. You plant only the right species, otherwise, they will be a waste,” she said in Filipino.

Primavera added reverting abandoned, underutilized and unproductive fishponds to mangrove forest is the way to go, especially because the country is vulnerable to storm surges.

She said, besides being an ecosystem itself, a healthy mangrove forest could be a source of food and livelihood for communities. People living in coastal areas with no protection against storm surges, she said, are sure to perish, citing what happened during the 2013 onslaught of Super typhoon Yolanda (international code name Haiyan).

Areas with thick mangrove forests, she said, were least affected because they were protected by the mangrove forests.

“In some areas, the mangrove species that were planted in the wrong areas were easily washed away,” Primavera noted.

Best practice

“FPE has an ecosystem-based disaster-risk reduction management program that we are scaling up. Based on our experience in Leyte, we are looking at the Katunggan experience as a model,” FPE Executive Director Oliver Agoncillo said.

The lessons learned from the experts, even before Yolanda occurred, were utilized in the rehabilitation of what is now known as Katunggan Park.

According to Batislaon, from September 2009 to 2015, more than 86,000 mangrove seedlings were planted in the area.

In January 2010 the Leganes LGU allocated P147,000 for mangrove rehabilitation.

“From there, the project went on. We rely on volunteerism from our partners. Students from state colleges and universities in Iloilo do most of the planting,” he said.

In March 2011 a bamboo hut was constructed, which serves as reception and rest area for volunteers.

The park now has 230 meters of elevated pathway made of wood and mostly bamboo materials.

Visitors can also view the entire mangrove forest park from atop a viewing deck.

Problems and solutions

“Before, this is an open area. You can even see the goats. People [living nearby trespass in the park to] gather wood and mangroves to make charcoal,” Batislaon said.

“We were afraid then. Our caretaker said the trespassers had bolo or machete,” he said.

To prevent trespassers, they lobbied for the passage of a municipal ordinance and sought the assistance of the local police for protection.

“There is now an ordinance. We asked the police to enforce the law. Because of that ordinance, they [local residents] were afraid to enter the area,” he said.

Good politics

After the election in 2010, he said the newly elected mayor of Leganes, Adolfo E. Jaen, supported the project.

“Even though there was a change in leadership, we saw good politics, good governance. The new mayor supported the project,” he said.

Usually, he said, a change in leadership often means a change in policies; projects were discontinued. Not in this case in Leganes.

“Even though the mayor is new, he supported the project. Bantay Dagat [Sea Patrol] were deputized. We were authorized to apprehend trespassers. From then on, we did not hesitate to arrest trespassers,” he said.

Visitor magnet

After covering the area with mangrove forest, people started to visit. This encouraged the proponents of the project to turn it into a park and learning center.

“Visitors can help by giving donation. Some donate P10, P20 and we are thankful for it because we use it in maintaining the park,” he said.

“In a month, we have 200 students or visitors. During school days, at least a thousand students visit. But we are regulating the visit. We have a protocol. We do it by batches. We orient them first, teach them the proper way of planting mangroves,” he said.

He explained that the park could not accommodate a very huge crowd.

A group of 15 per batch, he said, is ideal to minimize potential adverse impact.

“We teach them [visitors on] what to plant, how to plant, when to plant. In August and September, there is no planting because it will only go to waste. The waves are too strong,” he said.

100-percent target

Leganes has 6 kilometers of coastline, and about 75 percent are already covered with mangroves.

“We are hoping to stretch it to cover 100 percent,” Batislaon said.

According to Primavera, it is ideal to have at least 100 meters of mangrove forests along the coastline. In Leganes there are some areas with mangrove forests that are 200 meters thick.

Batislaon said at least 10 hectares to 15 hectares of abandoned, underutilized and unproductive fishponds in Leganes can still be recovered and converted into mangrove forests.

He said now that the mangrove forest in Leganes is thriving, fishermen themselves said their daily fish catch has improved.

For his work, Batislaon won the 2016 Walt Disney Conservation Hero Award—one of many whose pioneering conservation efforts were recognized by the Disney Conservation Fund (DCF). Batislaon was nominated by ZSL America.

“In the continuing battle to save the Philippine environment, Agricultural Technician Wilson Batislaon has provided critical support by galvanizing and guiding the restoration of 15 hectares of abandoned fishponds to mangrove habitats,” the DCF web site said.

DCF said Batislaon has engaged more than 500 students and teachers, out-of-school youths, government and private-sector employees, civil-society members and the Philippine Coast Guard to plant more than 20,000 mangroves in dozens of sessions since 2009, in close collaboration with ZSL.

“Wilson [Batislaon] has tirelessly worked to raise government funds and to establish regulations to protect mangroves, culminating in the launching of the Katunggan Eco-park in 2014,” DCF said.

DCF supports organizations worldwide working through its “Reverse the Decline, Increase the Time” initiative to reverse the decline of threatened species and increase the time kids and families spend in nature.

The fund honors conservationists who have gone above and beyond, demonstrating passion, courage and tenacity in tackling some of the biggest challenges in protecting the planet's resources.

The Katunggan Park in Iloilo is a best practice and mangrove rehabilitation model for LGUs.

Image Credits: **Jonathan L. Mayuga**

<http://www.businessmirror.com.ph/a-man-made-mangrove-forest-thrives-in-iloilo/>