

Sibugay Coastal Wetlands eyed for Ramsar listing

Zamboanga Peninsula's wetland of international importance

BY JONATHAN L. MAYUGA BUSINESS MIRROR

Home to a variety of native and migratory birds, including waterbirds, the Sibugay Coastal Wetlands (SCW) in Zamboanga Peninsula is undeniably a wetland of international importance.

With an area of 172,007.25 hectares, this economically important ecosystem is now being pushed by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) for inclusion in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance.

Strong commitment

The push for the designation of the Sibugay Coastal Wetlands as a Ramsar Site demonstrates the country's strong commitment to the Ramsar Convention as well as to the Convention on Biodiversity and Convention on Migratory Species, said Michael F. de la Cruz, chief of the Sibugay Technical Services in the Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Office (Penro), in a news release on June 6.

Besides the presence of important ecosystem-forming species like coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass and mudflats, SCW serves as a staging, roosting and foraging grounds for other equally important species like marine turtles and whale sharks.

Ramsar Sites are covered by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance Especially as Waterfowl Habitat, an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands.

Known as the Convention on Wetlands, it is named after the city of Ramsar in Iran, where the convention was signed in 1971.

Philippines Ramsar Sites

A member of the Ramsar Convention, the Philippines is bound to work toward the wise use of all its wetlands and designate suitable wetlands to the list of Ramsar Sites.

The country currently has eight Ramsar Sites, namely: Olango Island Wildlife Sanctuary, Naujan Lake National Park, Agusan Marsh Wildlife Sanctuary, Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, Las Piñas-Parañaque Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area, Negros Occidental Coastal Wetlands Conservation Area, and the Sasmuan Pampanga Coastal Wetlands

International importance

Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim of the Asean Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) told the BusinessMirror the importance of acquiring such a distinct title as a Ramsar Site.

“We support the DENR and the Sibugay LGU [local government unit] on their nomination of the SCW as a Ramsar Site. With the area being used as a watering hole and sanctuary by migrating birds, [it] is a crucial part of the East Asia-Australasian Flyway,” said Lim, a former director of the DENR’s Biodiversity Management Bureau (DENR-BMB), when asked for her comment via Messenger on June 22.

According to Lim, a biodiversity conservation expert, the whole of the Sibugay Coastal Wetlands also has a huge potential for nature tourism and is already a source of livelihood to the people in the area.

Key to fisheries sustainability

Keeping the coastal areas healthy is key to the sustainable food supply from fisheries, she added.

“Before the pandemic, I was able to visit the [Sibugay] wetlands, and saw the amazing flight of fruit bats at dusk from a view deck in the municipality of Siay, and was given a taste of the rich fishery resources, attributed to the wetlands as spawning and growing ground for the seafood,” she recalled.

The ACB provided support to Siay for bird monitoring and to help in its enforcement before the pandemic.

“We look forward to supporting more activities related to the listing of the Sibugay Wetland Natural Reserve as a Ramsar Site,” Lim pointed out.

Ecological connectivity

Anson Tagtag, OIC division chief of the Caves, Wetlands and Other Ecosystems Division of the DENR-BMB, for his part, said wetlands all over the world are connected and are being used by migratory species during different stages of migration.

In the Philippines, Ramsar Sites are staging grounds.

“We need to preserve these habitats. Once lost, the [birds’] migration process will be interrupted,” he said, referring to the destruction of the important habitats.

Tagtag said wetlands are important for the survival of various species.

“Inland and coastal wetlands cater to different groups of migratory birds. Of course, in coastal wetlands, besides migratory waterbirds or shorebirds, there are mangroves and grasses,” he added.

‘Restaurant’ of migratory waterbirds

Tagtag described Sibugay Coastal Wetlands as a “restaurant” of migratory waterbirds.

“Those migrating from Alaska to Australia, from October to March, many waterbirds stop by Sibugay to feed,” he told the BusinessMirror via telephone interview on June 23.

Tagtag also noted that SCW is known to have mudflats and seagrasses, which are key to the survival of many coastal and marine species.

Since the Philippines is in the middle of an important migratory pathway for waterbirds, the need to protect and conserve Ramsar Sites is paramount.

“Imagine if our mudflats have been destroyed? Where will the migrating birds stop to rest and eat?” he asked.

According to Tagtag, what makes Sibugay Coastal Wetlands extra special is its vast tract of mangrove forests which serves as home to over 300,000 flying foxes, or fruit bats, whose existence could not be over-emphasized.

“These flying foxes are silent planters. They help maintain a healthy forest,” he said, compared to inland wetlands.

Ecological and economic importance

A coastal area located at the southern portion of the peninsula, the Sibugay Coastal Wetlands has a total of 5,154.74 hectares of mangroves, 3,697.15 hectares of mudflats, as well as estuarine and coastal waters, the DENR’s Penro in Zamboanga Sibugay said.

The SCW stretches along a 146-kilometer coastline covering a total of nine municipalities and 63 barangays.

It plays a substantial role in the natural functioning of a river basin, or coastal system.

Haven for migratory waterbirds

According to the Zamboanga Sibugay Penro, the wetland serves as a staging, roosting, foraging and breeding ground to various waterbirds, including migratory species.

“During the 2018 AWC [Asian Waterbird Census], 291 heads of the endangered far eastern curlew were recorded in the wetland,” stated a document from the Zamboanga Sibugay Penro that was furnished to the BusinessMirror.

Proponents of the study revealed that banded, or flagged birds, were also documented in the wetland with banding sites from China, Russia, Australia and Japan.

Home to threatened species

SCW also supports threatened species—such as marine turtles, whale sharks, sea cows and saltwater crocodiles.

The vast mudflat is also home to a variety of oysters, scallops and other mollusks.

The bay supports fishing and other marine-related livelihoods which serves as the main source of subsistence for most of the coastal barangays.

In a telephone interview on June 21, Georgina L. Fernandez, chief of Conservation and Development Section/Focal-Nagao Funded Project of Penro Sibugay, said mapping of the Sibugay Coastal Wetland is ongoing to include an updated list of mangroves and mudflats.

“To date, we have documented 68 species of waterbirds, 42 are considered migratory species. And we have identified four threatened species. Eleven are considered near-threatened species,” Fernandez said.

Opening up new opportunities

The Sibugay Coastal Wetlands will be renamed Sibugay Wetland Nature Reserve upon its inclusion on the Ramsar List when contracting parties meet in Gland, Switzerland, in December.

As such, it will undergo a more stringent management regime.

Fernandez said the title will also open opportunities for international cooperation on research, allowing the DENR and its partners to learn more about SCW.

“It will also help raise funding for conservation and protection of the site,” she added.

Wise use of resources

For his part, Penro Chief Edgardo P. Montojo said in a news release that it is important to advocate for the wise use of the wetlands’ resources so they will be enjoyed by future generations.

“Here, the Ramsar list will play a unique role,” he said.

Currently, the DENR-Region IX is preparing the documents for the inclusion of the SCW into the list. The documents will be submitted to the DENR-BMB, the designated Ramsar National Administrative Authority, for endorsement to the Office of the DENR Secretary who will then endorse it to the Ramsar authorities.