

Establishing Protected Areas in the Philippines: Emerging Trends, Challenges and Prospects

The Philippine Protected Areas System: An Overview

The Philippines has always been considered one of the major biodiversity hotspots in the world. For while it boasts of one of the highest levels of diversity and endemism of life forms and some of the most unique habitats in the world, it is also home to some of the planet's critically endangered species of wildlife, such as the Philippine eagle, one of the most magnificent raptors in the world and our country's symbol of biodiversity conservation. The country's habitats and ecosystems, which play a major role in maintaining ecological balance and in the day-to-day lives of Filipinos, are in constant threat, mainly from unwise resource use and development paradigms that tend to increase pressure on the world's already scarce resources. The recent book *Megadiversity* by Russell Mittermeier of Conservation International, which documents the world's seventeen most important countries in terms of biodiversity, concludes that the Philippines belong to the top five biodiversity hotspots in the world.

In view of these reasons, the Philippine government, in cooperation with the public and international donors, embarked on a mission to establish a system of protected areas in the country. The last remaining representatives of Philippine habitats and ecosystems were set aside for conservation through innovative approaches spelled out in the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) Act of 1992, a landmark piece of legislation which provides the framework for a decentralized, community-based reserve management strategy.

There are more than 200 protected areas in the Philippines, ranging from large natural parks, to landscapes and seascapes, to wildlife sanctuaries and small watersheds that form the initial components of the NIPAS Act. Of these, however, less than a quarter receive some form of protection, either through foreign funding or local initiatives. This is because after the passage of the NIPAS Act, very little money was allocated by the government to effectively manage these reserves.

Currently, two major projects are piloting the implementation of the

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Figure 1. General location of some of the protected areas mentioned in the text.

NIPAS Act: the Conservation of Priority Protected Areas Project, a seven-year initiative funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through the World Bank, and the

National Integrated Protected Areas Project, a five-year undertaking funded by the European Union. While the two projects share the same broad objectives of biodiversity

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conservation and sustainable development, they differ in their modes of implementation. While the National Integrated Protected Areas Project is being implemented by a European consulting firm in partnership with government, the Conservation of Priority Protected Areas Project is being implemented through an experimental partnership between the Philippine government and the public. The former is represented by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), while civil society participation is done through the NGOs for Integrated Protected Areas (NIPA), a consortium of Philippine nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) bonded together by a common vision of establishing protected areas that are sustainably managed by local communities in collaboration with government. Although the partnership got off to a rocky start, it has since evolved into a viable model of cooperation between two important segments of society working towards the common goal of biodiversity conservation.

The Conservation of Priority Protected Areas Project covers the first ten priority reserves in the system:

- *Batanes Protected Landscapes and Seascapes*—the northernmost province of the Philippines, composed of scenic islands and beautiful seascapes inhabited by the indigenous Ivatans peoples. It has a high level of floral

endemicity and is a major flyway for migratory birds from northern Asia.

- *Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park*—the largest and most important protected area in the country in terms of biodiversity. It is home to 12 habitat types and 40 species of wildlife (most of them endemic) included in the IUCN list of globally threatened species.
- *Subic-Bataan Natural Park* —the major protected area nearest to Manila and a test case to demonstrate how the nation's economic development can take place successfully alongside the conservation of the country's last remaining forests.
- *Apo Reef Natural Park*—the biggest atoll-type reef in the Philippines and a natural haven for marine life, bird life, and a variety of endangered plants.
- *Mount Kanlaon Natural Park* —an active volcano and the tallest peak in the Visayas group of islands, which is also a microcosm of the fragmented state of Philippine ecosystems.
- *Agusan Marsh Wildlife Sanctuary*—the most biologically diverse marshland in the country, where more than 200 species of birds from Japan, China, and Russia spend the winter months.
- *Mount Kitanglad Range Natural Park*—the second highest peak in the country and the headwater catchment area for the major rivers of northern Mindanao; home

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to the Talaandig, Higaonon, and Bukidnon tribes, as well as the Philippine eagle.

- *Siargao Islands Protected Landscapes and Seascapes*—a surfer's paradise with an extensive system of old-growth mangrove stands and rich marine reserves.
- *Mount Apo Natural Park*—the country's tallest peak and host to a diverse variety of endemic flora and fauna, including the Philippine eagle, and home to numerous indigenous cultural communities.
- *Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary*—the only remaining large marine turtle rookery in all of Southeast Asia.

The project employs a multi-stakeholder approach among government, local communities, NGOs, the scientific community, the private sector, and international partners. It is anchored on a community-based resource management strategy which seeks to empower local communities residing inside and within the buffer zones of parks to manage their own resources and become active partners in protected area management. Providing alternative livelihood opportunities and improving tenurial security of park residents are integral components of this strategy.

Participatory management in each park is ensured through the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB), a multi-sectoral body composed of representatives from government, peoples' organizations,

NGOs, and indigenous cultural communities. It is the highest policy-making body in Philippine protected areas and the venue for democratic participation of all sectors with a stake in the effective management of these reserves. The structure may be cumbersome and unwieldy at times, but, through time, we strongly believe that the PAMBs will evolve into effective stewards of our country's last repositories of biodiversity—a monumental responsibility to the whole of humankind.

In five years of implementing this trailblazing project, NIPA and its partners have established a foundation for models in different aspects of protected area management that could be replicated in the other protected areas of the Philippines and possibly in other parts of the world.

Community-Based Resource Management

Resource management planning. In the area of community-based resource management, a viable alternative model is taking shape with the active participation of local communities in drawing up resource management plans and creating local resource management structures. Community volunteers take part right from the very start of the process, such as in socioeconomic profiling and natural resource inventories. In the case of Mount Kanlaon, for example, local herbalist and wildlife experts from communities inside the park were considered as

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important members of the resource inventory team owing to their familiarity with the native flora and fauna and their use to communities. The scientific integrity of the exercise is ensured by the biologists and other technical experts of the project.

Community resource maps are then drawn up which serve as one important basis in the formulation of management plans. This particular challenge of marrying community approaches and scientific methodologies is in itself an important part of the whole experiment. The preparation of site-specific protected area management plans (which is on-going) essentially follows the same participatory procedure to ensure that, at the end of the day, park managers will have management plans that are implementable and that stakeholders can call their own.

Community resource protection volunteer groups. Local communities are likewise actively involved in the protection and monitoring of biodiversity in their respective areas. Presently, community resource protection volunteer groups in Mount Kanlaon, Mount Kitanglad, Bataan, Apo Reef and Batanes—numbering nearly a thousand strong—are on the front line of enforcing park laws side-by-side with park rangers. With a current ratio of one park ranger for every 6,000 hectares of parkland, these local volunteers provide a vital link in protection efforts over the

long haul.

These DENR-deputized volunteer groups conduct regular patrol work within the vicinity of their communities, establish checkpoints in hotspot areas, apprehend violators and confiscate illegally gathered forest and aquatic products, and maintain a community-based surveillance system that alerts the DENR and other law enforcement agencies to park law violations.

Biodiversity monitoring system.

A biodiversity monitoring system which encourages community participation has also been installed. Although the more technical components of the system need further refinement to maximize community participation, determining resource-use patterns through focused-group discussions form an important part in establishing trends or changes in biodiversity in a specific area. The results of the biodiversity monitoring system are intended for the use of PAMBs and local government units in making decisions related to resource use and management.

Decision-Making and the PAMBs

On the whole, the Protected Area Management Boards are gradually evolving into dynamic forces as envisioned under a decentralized reserve management regime. The complexity of the set-up cannot be overemphasized, though, with different sectors advancing their own resource-use interests often clashing. But that is

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precisely the essence of it all: creating a mechanism that will distill ideas into decisions that all local stakeholders can call their own. A radical departure indeed from the old system, in which decisions affecting reserves in faraway places were made in Manila.

A key element to the success of empowering the PAMB is ensuring the authenticity of sectoral representatives that sit on the board. Certain representatives of dubious affiliation served on some interim PAMBs during their initial five-year term. After the lapse of the first term, NIPA and its site partners made sure to put in place a selection process that produces genuine sectoral representatives. Through this, all stakeholders are now assured that their interests are advocated by representatives they can trust. The process of an enhanced capability-building strategy for the new PAMBs can now proceed in earnest to better prepare them for the new challenges that lay ahead.

Very recently, the strength of this decision-making structure was put to a severe test in Mount Kanlaon. The Mountaineering Federation of the Philippines was able to obtain a court order to restrain the PAMB from enforcing a two-year-old trekking ban which had been put into place to let the trails recover from the ravages of the most recent El Niño event and unregulated trekking in the past. Believing in the wisdom and legitimacy of the PAMB decision, community members took it upon themselves to

enforce the decision and prevented three hundred members of the federation from embarking on a potentially destructive mass climb. Although this has temporarily set back a looming alliance with the mountaineering community, a series of dialogues is planned to renew cooperation with this important stakeholder. Nevertheless, this particular experience showed that a decision arrived through consensus among major stakeholders is more binding and implementable.

Strengthening of Indigenous Structures and Traditional Knowledge Systems

Cognizant of the important role that indigenous cultural communities play in managing these reserves, the project puts special focus on the revitalization of indigenous social structures and the enhancement of traditional knowledge systems. In Mount Kitanglad, for example, the Higaonon, Talaandig, and Bukidnon tribes are now enforcing their traditional laws and practices on all park visitors to ensure respect for the cultural and biological integrity of the mountain they consider sacred. Aside from securing necessary permits from the protected area superintendent, visitors are required by the Council of Elders, which the project helped strengthen, to perform rituals to seek permission from the mountain spirits so that no untoward incidents happen to them.

Admittedly, it is still a long way

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before the process of harmonizing traditional beliefs and practices with protected area laws is completed. Currently, there is tension between the protected area superintendent's office and the Council of Elders regarding the management of Mount Kitanglad, and this is actually one of the major concerns being addressed by the project. But we believe that by creating the right atmosphere for dialogue and negotiation, the inherent strengths of the two systems will eventually complement each other to create a viable model in managing protected areas with indigenous peoples.

Building Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for Biodiversity Conservation

The foundations of these models and their future sustainability would not be possible without the multi-stakeholder partnerships established by NIPA at the local and international levels.

At the reserve level, the partnerships already exist (albeit at varying levels of development) among the local government units, park communities, NGOs, indigenous cultural communities, DENR, and academia. In Mount Kanlaon, for example, several city and municipal governments are now directly funding some of the key activities critical for park management, such as protection work, restoration of degraded habitats, and the construction of interpretive and visitor centers. Likewise, the aca-

demographic community has been contributing valuable staff time toward the conduct of biological and social research. Some NGOs, on the other hand, are funding livelihood activities aimed at creating alternatives that will ease pressure on park resources. More importantly, the high level of cooperation between the DENR and MUAD (the local NGO implementing the Conservation of Priority Protected Areas Project in this particular reserve) has surmounted the atmosphere of distrust that usually characterizes government-NGO relations.

By its very nature as a consortium, NIPA has built-in mechanisms to draw from the strengths and capacities of its NGO members, which are engaged in diverse activities such as biodiversity conservation, rural development, livelihood and enterprise development, rural finance, gender issues, and indigenous cultural community concerns, among others. Although efforts need further streamlining to improve the involvement of some of its members, NIPA serves as the only model in the Philippines of a consortium that groups together some of the biggest and oldest NGOs engaged in different facets of development work, bound together by a common vision of establishing a sustainably managed protected areas system. NIPA also collaborates with other NGOs in pursuing this vision. The Foundation for Philippine Environment, a national NGO managing an endow-

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ment fund for conservation, has been consistent in its support by way of financing some of the more critical capability-building activities of NIPA. Moreover, the strategic partnership that NIPA has established with government is an indispensable element in NIPA's quest to realize this vision.

NIPA's experience of collaboration with international partners in biodiversity conservation work has tremendously enriched its reservoir of resources and capacities in biodiversity conservation, particularly in the areas of resource assessment, capability-building, biodiversity monitoring, management planning, and funding for conservation activities, among others. Our partnership with the World Bank-GEF, now in its fifth year, is an experiment in itself, being the first of its kind in the Philippines (and probably the world) in which these multilateral agencies have engaged with civil society to push biodiversity conservation. A lot of lessons have been learned by both sides which can be used to improve future partnerships between them and with others.

Our current collaboration with other international NGOs has likewise been very fruitful. Our cooperation with the Nordic Agency for Development and Cooperation (NORDECO) in biodiversity monitoring resulted in a system that combines scientific methodologies with community approaches. Furthermore, our efforts to combine re-

sources and expertise with Conservation International and Plan International in managing the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park have gradually led to a better management regime in the country's biggest and most important protected area. In the same vein, NIPA's partnership with foreign volunteer organizations is contributing a great deal in technical assistance to the sites. Volunteers to the national office and the sites from the Volunteer Service Overseas (Great Britain), the Peace Corps (USA), and the Overseas Service Bureau (Australia) provide assistance in the areas of management planning, resource inventory, watershed and range management, ecotourism, and environmental education. Strengthening these multi-level partnerships will definitely be high in the NIPA agenda for the coming years.

Challenges and Threats

Among the various challenges confronting the Philippine protected areas system, nothing is more serious than the lack of a conducive policy environment that can enhance and sustain what have been started by the Conservation of Priority Protected Areas Project and the other biodiversity conservation projects. After the enactment of the NIPAS Act in 1992, a series of government-sponsored laws that directly impinge on the integrity of protected areas were passed. The most notable of these are the Mining Act of 1995 and the Fisheries Act of 1998, which, along

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with existing forestry laws, further expose our dwindling natural resources to unbridled exploitation. Although these interests are legally barred from conducting their operations in our protected areas, the government has been ambivalent in enforcing relevant laws, in part due to the higher priority given to economic growth—which more often than not comes at the expense of the environment.

The failure of government to issue policy decisions that will strengthen the NIPAS Act also reflects the low level of priority that protected areas occupy in the policy agenda. Up to now, the protected area superintendent's office has not been an integral part of the official DENR structure, which makes it doubly difficult for the superintendent to enforce park laws and secure adequate allocations for their operations.

Likewise, the prolonged delay in the issuance of appropriate tenurial instruments for both indigenous communities and tenured migrants threaten the sustainability of the community-based initiatives that the project has started. Without tenurial security, park communities have fewer reasons to be effective stewards of resources around them.

The task of gazetting priority protected areas is crucial. The failure of Congress to pass site-specific protected area bills that will permanently establish these reserves tremendously weakens the foundations of the system. The project has yet to

come up with an effective strategy to make our politicians appreciate the urgency of passing the protected area bills pending in Congress.

The need to improve the pace and quality of management planning in our protected areas is equally daunting. The participatory nature of the process has proven to be cumbersome and time consuming. But there is simply no other way to do it, and we are in the process of exploring options that will hasten the process without sacrificing the quality of the plans for the management of our protected areas.

Lastly, the grinding poverty in communities within and adjacent to protected areas, if not systematically addressed, will further increase the pressure on these precious life-support systems. It is a well-known fact that, outside of the indigenous peoples, the majority of protected area residents are very poor migrants driven to the inhospitable slopes of terrestrial reserves by the severe lack of economic opportunities and landholdings in the lowlands. Social inequities, specifically those pertaining to land ownership, are still an essential feature of Philippine society and remain the greatest threat to the protected areas and biodiversity of our country.

Prospects for the Philippine Protected Area System

Undoubtedly, the foundations of a viable protected area system attuned to the conditions of a developing

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country like the Philippines is slowly being established. But let nobody be deluded into thinking that from here on it will be smooth sailing all the way. The threats and challenges are just too formidable to dismiss lightly and will need the concerted efforts of all stakeholders to surmount. More importantly, the necessary follow-through to what CPPAP and the other biodiversity projects have started is crucial if Philippine protected areas are to have a fair chance of surviving the onslaught of current and future threats to their integrity.

Given the current state of our economy, however, we recognize the importance of further strengthening our collaboration with international partners to address the following broad areas of concern:

- Strengthening of community-based resource management systems;
- Capacity-building (training) of protected area managers;
- Improvement of tenurial security of park residents;
- Restoration of degraded habitats;
- Biological and social research; and
- Information, education and communication activities.

Although we still need to see a better policy environment being cre-

ated by government, we believe that enough goodwill have been established between civil society and its government partners to go a long way toward putting environmental concerns at the top of the policy agenda.

With two years left in the Conservation of Priority Protected Areas Project, one of the most important tasks of NIPA and its partners is influencing government, specifically the DENR, to integrate protected area management into its organization and elevate biodiversity conservation in its order of priorities, at a par with or even higher than its current resource-use priorities. Given the long period of time before the poverty of the Philippines is alleviated, this much-needed political will on the part of our government will at least give our protected areas a breathing spell.

Finally, influencing the public to create a society more responsible to its natural environment is definitely a linchpin. Without this, no effort in biodiversity conservation can be sustainable in the Philippines. NIPA believes that in its efforts to create workable models in protected area management, it is putting forward some of the most powerful arguments for creating just such an environmentally responsible society.

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