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Enlarging Our Blue Footprint for PH Marine Biodiversity Conservation

July 28, 2023 | 9:00 - 12:00 | Westin Manila

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INVENTORY OF ASSETS A MUST FOR CARBON REDUCTION—LOYZAGA

ENVIRONMENT Secretary Maria Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga recently unveiled a roadmap to prepare the country against natural disasters resulting from climate change and to reduce its carbon footprint.

The first step is to conduct an inventory of the country's natural resources because "we can only manage (them) better if we measure what we have," Secretary Loyzaga said at the multi-stakeholder forum, 'Towards a Greener Footprint' in Iloilo City.

Secretary Loyzaga said local governments must work together since these risks know no political boundaries. She stressed the need for an urban development plan that local governments must follow so their political neighbors can jointly benefit from their investments in well-being and quality of life.



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'Save the Irrawaddy dolphins, their habitats'

By JONATHAN L. MAYUGA

RECENT news reports said that while the existence of Irrawaddy dolphins was discovered in San Miguel Bay in the Bicol Region, researchers said only a few of the critically-endangered species are left, expressing their risk of disappearing from the area.

A team of University of the Philippines Diliman-College of Science Institute of Environmental Science and Meteorology, led by Professor Dr. Lemuel Aragon, also the head of Marine Mammal Research and Conservation Laboratory, led the dolphin survey in the area from July 6 to 9.

The researchers sighted two Irrawaddy dolphins in the waters of Mercedes in Camarines Norte.

To protect and conserve the dolphins, Aragon urged the creation of an action plan on the protection and conservation of the critically-endangered dolphins, and to harmonize local ordinances with existing national laws regarding protected species.

More studies needed; habitat destruction

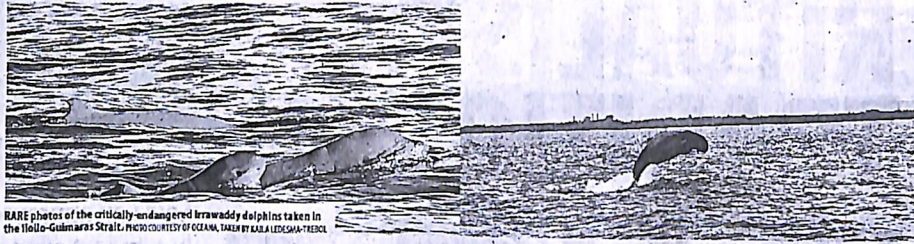
AA Yaptinchay, executive director of the Marine Wildlife Watch of the Philippines and project leader at Save Our Seas Foundation, said that more studies should be conducted to determine the trend of decline of a given population.

"One qualitative survey will not provide this information," he said. It should be done through regular surveys over several years.

Nevertheless, Yaptinchay said that like some marine wildlife, Irrawaddy dolphins are indeed endangered species.

Some of the threats to their populations are the degradation of their coastal habitats caused by pollution, reclamation or infrastructure development, fish populations decline, coastal development and boat traffic, as bycatch in coastal fishing, such as the use of gill nets.

The Irrawaddy dolphins' habitat preference is shallow, sheltered, coastal habitats that are close to shore, usually near river inputs, such as deltas, estuaries and mangrove channels with



RARE photos of the critically-endangered Irrawaddy dolphins taken in the Iloilo-Guimaras Strait. PHOTOS COURTESY OF OCEANA, TAKEN BY KALA LEDESMA-TRISOL

typically muddy bottoms, Yaptinchay told the BUSINESSMIRROR through Messenger on July 14 that.

"They feed on fish, crustaceans and cephalopods," he said.

As such, he said, the destruction of these areas would naturally affect the Irrawaddy dolphins' population.

He cited the population of the species in the Visayas, which is threatened by the building of the Panay-Guimaras-Negros Island Bridge that will destroy its habitat.

For her part, Atty. Rose-Liza Eisma-Osorio, acting vice president of Oceana, said one of the existing threats to the Irrawaddy dolphin population is stranding, leading to a high mortality rate above the 1 percent to 2 percent threshold.

The death of one dolphin each year indicates that the population decline is unsustainable, Osorio said via email on July 18.

"Other threats are net entanglement leading to incidental mortality in small-scale fisheries, especially gill nets (bycatch), fixed filter baggers, fish pens and fish corrals," she said.

Osorio agreed that one of the biggest threats to the Irrawaddy dolphin population is the planned Panay-Guimaras-Negros Bridge, where the Irrawaddy dolphin subpopulation in the Iloilo-Guimaras area is already small and declining.

"The proposed bridge is seen to increase noise pollution, heavier boat traffic, increased sedimentation and will change the water flow that will affect prey dynamics," she explained.

Populations of Irrawaddy dolphins in the Philippines can also be

found in Malampaya Sound in Palawan and in Iloilo-Guimaras-Negros Occidental area.

Habitat protection

YAPTINCHAY said since Irrawaddy dolphins are limited in preferred habitats, the main focus should be the protection of these areas by declaring them as marine protected areas or critical habitats.

To which Osorio agreed. "This can also trigger the development of a management plan for the protection of Irrawaddy dolphins," she said.

"This would ensure that activities and development in these areas are controlled and regulated," he said.

However, Yaptinchay said that even in protected areas, if there is no proper recovery program for the species and strict implementation of conservation measures, population decline will continue.

"This has been observed on the Irrawaddy dolphins population in the Malampaya Sound Protected Landscape and Seascape in Palawan," he said.

Other measures that can help protect the species include declaring zones as closed areas, fishing gear regulations for gears that may catch dolphins as bycatch, declaring "no boat/slow boat zones," reducing pollution and strict law enforcement.

According to Yaptinchay, the dolphin species may exist in other areas in the country.

"If the habitats fit that description, yes. There could be more areas in the Philippines, aside from the confirmed habitats of Malampaya Sound, Palawan; Guimaras Strait; Quezon province, Palawan; and San Miguel Bay,

Camarines Sur...but probably they were extirpated in other sites," he said.

Like other species, Irrawaddy dolphins play a significant role in maintaining a healthy ecosystem.

"The Irrawaddy dolphins, which are considered as top predators in their estuarine ecosystem, is highly productive in terms of fisheries, which they help keep robust," Yaptinchay said.

For her part, Osorio said the dolphins are important in fishery regulation—by feeding on various species, they control the population of fish.

Irrawaddy dolphins have added attraction—by providing eco-tourism a boost.

Dolphin shows, illegal wildlife trade

SHARING his experience in monitoring the illegal wildlife trade of large marine mammals and other marine wildlife, Yaptinchay said "victims" of illegal activities are usually those traded internationally for dolphin shows, which exploit animals that were caught from the wild.

"The Philippines was even identified as a transshipment point for dolphins from the Pacific for export to China. Somehow, the trader found a way to get 'legal' papers despite not providing a proper stock assessment of the wild population. It is a highly unsustainable trade," he said.

Oceana advocates for the protection of CITES-listed species as prohibited and/or regulated under the Amended Fisheries Code. Irrawaddy dolphins are listed under the CITES.

Dolphin stranding explained

EXPLAINING the phenomenon of

whales, sharks, or dolphin beaching or stranding, Yaptinchay said it happens when they are found near shore or ashore, alive or dead, caused by various factors, such as disease, injury and old age.

Stranding also occurs due to errors in swimming and navigation, or accompanying sick and dying members of a pod, owing to their tight bonds.

But Yaptinchay said it is usually difficult to determine the cause unless proper assessments are made.

"Stranding is a common occurrence in the Philippines," he noted.

Osorio, meanwhile, said stranding may also be due to disorientation because of changes in the environment, hunting, and predation.

Human activities like vessel strikes, entanglement in nets and pollution may also cause stranding.

Irrawaddy dolphins in Asean

ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity Executive Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim said that besides the Philippines, the Irrawaddy dolphins are also found in other countries in the Asean region.

"Irrawaddy dolphins have been reported in the coastal waters of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam," she told the BUSINESSMIRROR via Messenger on July 18.

She said Irrawaddy dolphins are considered migratory, as they are known to move across political and geographic boundaries.

Thus, to protect them, she said concerted efforts among the Asean member states are required.

"For instance, there is a need for

cooperation between Thailand and Cambodia for populations whose habitat range is within the Gulf of Thailand, while for Irrawaddy dolphins that cross the Sarawak-West Kalimantan and Sabah-East Kalimantan borders. Joint efforts by Malaysia and Indonesia in protecting these species are imperative," Lim said.

Outside Asean, there is a known movement of Irrawaddy dolphins from India and Bangladesh to Myanmar.

For this reason, the Convention on Migratory Species in February 2020 adopted a "Concerted Action for the Irrawaddy Dolphin" among countries where the species are found, Lim said.

In the Philippines, it is not confirmed whether the dolphin populations move across deep-sea areas, as they are known to live and stay nearer shore, in brackish areas, and can even adapt to freshwater areas, such as those in the Mekong River.

"This means that the subpopulations found in the Philippines may be confined only within the marine waters surrounding the islands where they have been sighted," she said.

According to Lim, threats to coastal and wetland areas that they inhabit also put this species at risk.

"During my time as the head of the DENR-BMB [Department of Environment and Natural Resources Biodiversity Management Bureau], the only areas where they were reported

were in Palawan and Guimaras, so it is welcome news that there is another Irrawaddy dolphin subpopulation found in Camarines Norte," she said.

"This should warrant further studies on where else in the Philippines they could be found, how healthy their populations/subpopulations are, how they are related to other subpopulations, and what the main threats to these species are in their locality," Lim explained.

By doing this, "we can gain a deeper understanding of their genetics, distribution and ecology, which will enable us to chart a science-based plan to save the remaining Irrawaddy dolphin populations and their habitat, while also safeguarding our health and socioeconomic well-being," she said.



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'ENTRENCHED INTERESTS' VERSUS LAND USE ACT DO NOT FAZE PROPONENTS 'HOUSE BILL 8162 WOULD BE A GAME CHANGER'

By Maricel V. Cruz

THE resident economist of the House of Representatives is optimistic that the proposed National Land Use Act will soon be enacted into law despite "entrenched interests" that oppose it.

Rep. Joey Sarte Salceda of Albay, one of the main proponents of the bill, said President Marcos "has proven that he can "get the historically difficult done," in

expressing hope on the eventual enactment of the bill that the lower chamber House of Representatives had passed on Third and Final Reading on May 22, 2023.

Salceda, chair of the House committee on ways and means, explained that the bill aims for the "optimal economic use" of land because "land is the most scarce of all economic resources.

"A national land use plan will enable us to protect ecology, use our farms in the most

efficient way possible, and reserve adequate space for our growing needs for energy, housing, irrigation and infrastructure," Salceda explained.

On May 22, 2023, the House of Representatives approved on third and final reading the proposed Land Use Act embodied in House Bill 8162 by a 262-3-0 vote.

Salceda and other principal authors of the bill seek to institute a national land use policy that has been years in the making.

Priority legislation

The bill is among the Legislative-Executive Development Council (LEDAC) measures of President Marcos and is still identified as among the priority legislation for the Second Regular Session of the 19th Congress which will open on Monday, July 24 in time for Mr. Marcos' Second SONA.

"This is a long-awaited measure and the President knows its importance. Through this proposed National Land Use Act (NLUA), the

government will have the tool to properly identify land use and allocation patterns in all parts of the country," Speaker Ferdinand Martin G. Romualdez earlier of HB 8162's passage.

"Through the guidance of the Chief Executive, the House members also made it so that the measure would pave the way for the Philippines to achieve food security," Romualdez said. President Marcos is the concurrent Department of Agriculture (DA) secretary.

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'Entrenched...

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Salceda said he sees many benefits of the bill once enacted.

On the conversion of agricultural lands for housing and other uses, Salceda said the basis of conversion should be "optimal economic use."

"We have a housing deficiency of at least four million units. So, I will not participate in the prejudice against land conversion towards housing. Same goes for land conversion for renewable energy."

A national land use plan, Salceda added, "will enable us to protect the ecology, use our farms in the most efficient way possible, and reserve adequate space for our growing needs for energy, housing, irrigation, and infrastructure."

Local governments' failure?

Salceda, and other proponents of the bill, want a specific National Land Use Act, saying the current land use implementation have been decentralized but the local governments have failed to issue guidelines as to how land

should be utilized.

Surigao del Norte Rep. Francisco Jose Matugas, chair the House special committee on land use, earlier said the measure would be a "game-changer" as it would attract more businesses and foreign investments.

"This bill being passed into law will be a sure-fire game-changer in terms of foreign investment for the Philippines," Matugas said. "One of the objectives is for our friends from all parts of the world — who carry with them the right resources and good intentions for our country — to immediately see an organized, prepared and detail-oriented Philippines ripe and ready for their investments," he added.

'Land misuse bill,' critics charge

The Makabayan Bloc opposed the bill, with one of its members, Gabriela Rep. Arlene Brosas feared that it would only be a tool to convert lands for farming and peoples' residence to commercial spaces.

Brosas termed the bill as a "land misuse bill." The measure she said "will enable widespread conversion of lands for subdivision and commercial housing, when these lands could be used for food production."

She also warned that the bill could result in more evictions of informal settlers without providing them alternative options.

Under HB 8162, the National Land Use Commission (NLUC) is created under the Office of the President (OP). It shall exercise the powers and responsibilities of the current National Land Use Committee, which is hereby abolished.

Among the powers and functions of the Commission is to advise the President of the Philippines on all matters concerning land use and physical planning; Integrate and harmonize all laws, guidelines, and policies relevant to land use and physical planning to come up with a rational, cohesive, and comprehensive national land use framework. It would also prepare, periodically review and if necessary, update the national framework for physical planning to provide the general framework for the spatial development directions for the entire country and sub-national levels

The NLUC serves as the heart of the legislation and acts as the highest policy-making body on land use and resolves land use



policy conflicts between or among agencies, branches, or levels of the government.

The NLUC commissioner will have the rank of Cabinet Secretary, while the two deputy NLUC commissioners will be given the titles of undersecretary.

The National Land Use Office (NLUO), which shall serve as the technical secretariat to the NLUC, shall also be created under the OP.

"All lands of the public domain, waters, minerals, coal, petroleum, and other mineral oils, all forces of potential energy, fisheries, forests or timber, wildlife, flora and fauna, and other natural resources are owned by the State. With the exception of agricultural lands, all other natural resources shall not be alienated," the bill said.

"Pursuant to the constitutional provision or mandate, it is the policy of the State to provide for a rational, holistic, and just allocation, utilization, management, and development of the country's land to ensure their optimum use to promote sustainable socio-economic development and ecological protection," it added.

Through HB 8162, the State institutionalizes

land use and physical planning as mechanisms for identifying, determining, and evaluating appropriate land use and allocation patterns that promote and ensure, among others, the sustainable management and utilization of natural resources; disaster risk-reduction and climate change resiliency; and protection of prime agricultural lands for food security in basic commodities with an emphasis on self sufficiency in rice and corn.

Iron-clad protection for PH natural resources

They likewise seek the perpetual protection of permanent forests and watershed and ecosystem services for the attainment of food, water, and energy sufficiency; and the protection, preservation, and development of the country's historical, cultural, archaeological, and built heritage resources for the deeper understanding of our history and culture as a people.

The bill also provides mandatory consultations from the regional, provincial, city, and municipal levels, as well as harmonizes existing rules and regulations governing the allocation, utilization, development, and management of land resources.



'Swimming is still not allowed in Pola'

CALAPAN CITY, Oriental Mindoro: Contrary to the statement by Gov. Humerlito Dolor on his social media page on Friday that all water activities in the coastal areas of Pola town are allowed, Pola Mayor Jennifer "Ina Alegre" Cruz said that they were banned.

In a telephone interview on Saturday, Cruz told *The Manila Times* that she concurred with the order of the governor to allow fishing in the municipal waters 10 kilometers from the shoreline but not swimming or other water activities related to tourism.

"In reality, even my constituents see for themselves that water activities are not possible because there are still traces of the oil spill. Even though the Philippine Coast Guard has declared that the oil spill is already contained and they have ceased all their activities here,

there are still lumps of oil that we see on our coastal waters," Cruz said.

The mayor added that she signed an executive order on Friday declaring the continued ban on swimming and other water activities in the town's coastal areas.

"As local chief executives, we are the ones who know the local situation. I even asked the office of the governor to show me the findings of a study that they claim comes from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources declaring that the oil and grease level met the standards, but until now, they have not provided me with a copy of the findings," Cruz further said.

Fishermen and tourism establishments welcomed the declaration of Dolor, as this would mean the return of their source of livelihood.

IRE JOE V.C. LAURENTE



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Water level drops anew in Angat, 4 other dams

By **BELLA GARIASO**

The water levels of Angat and four other dams started to drop again after days of improvement, according to latest monitoring of the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA).

PAGASA said that as of 6 a.m. yesterday, the water level of Angat Dam dropped by 22 centimeters after it recorded 180.74 meters compared to its previous level of 180.96 meters. The current water level of Angat Dam is still within its minimum operating level of 180 meters.

Sevillo David Jr., executive direc-

tor of the National Water Resources Board, said that when the water elevation of Angat Dam falls below the 180-meter level, its water allocation will solely be dedicated to the potable water needs of Metro Manila residents.

Maynilad has announced the indefinite suspension of water interruption with the improvement in the levels of Angat Dam and Ipo Dam following rains brought by Tropical Storm Dodong and the southwest monsoon.

Angat Dam supplies more than 90 percent of Metro Manila's potable water needs and provides for the irrigation needs of 25,000 hectares of

farmlands in Bulacan and Pampanga.

PAGASA said aside from Angat Dam, the water level of Ipo Dam in Bulacan also dropped by 0.18 meters after it recorded 99.62 meters compared to its previous level of 99.80 meters; La Mesa Dam in Quezon City dropped by 0.02 meters after it reached 79.15 meters compared to 79.16 meters; Ambuklao Dam in Benguet decreased by 0.90 meters after it reached 740.49 meters compared to its previous level of 741.39 meters and Caliraya Dam in Laguna declined by 0.33 meters after it reached 286.05 meters compared to its previous level of 286.38 meters.

For his part, Metropolitan Water-

works and Sewerage System division manager engineer Patrick Dizon said based on the forecast of PAGASA, the water levels of Angat and other dams will improve until September with the expected rains during these months.

"We expect rains in the watersheds to help recharge the dams," Dizon added.

New dam

A new dam for irrigation purposes was approved to be built at the Bayabas River System in Doña Remedios Trinidad town, and is expected to prolong Angat Dam's water supply to Metro Manila.

The National Irrigation Administration Central Luzon office recently informed Bulacan officials that detailed engineering, design, plans and drawings of the dam have been approved and are ready for bidding. Ma, Gloria Carillo, provincial agriculturist of Bulacan, told **The STAR**.

Upon completion, Bayabas Dam will lessen the irrigation water allocation coming from Angat Dam to ricelands in Bulacan and parts of Pampanga during the summer months, thus providing Metro Manila with additional volume for its potable water requirements.

- With Ramon Lazaro



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Mayon logs slight increase in rock falls, PDCs – Phivolcs

The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) on Saturday, July 22, monitored a slight increase in rock falls and pyroclastic density currents (PDCs) in Mayon Volcano.

In its bulletin, Phivolcs said Mayon Volcano Network recorded 175 rock falls and four PDCs on July 22.

The data is slightly higher than July 21 when 151 rockfalls and three PDCs were recorded.

Slow effusion of lava flows from the crater with lengths of 2.8 kilometers (kms) in Mi-is (south), 2.7 kms in Bonga (southeastern), 600 meters in Basud gullies, and the four-km lava collapse from the crater were also noted.

Phivolcs also recorded 22 volcanic earthquakes, including a short-lived lava ejection with an ashing event that lasted 28 seconds.

"Short-lived lava ejection that lasted 28 seconds accompanied by seismic and infrasound signals also occurred at 7:56 p.m. 21 July 2023," Phivolcs said.

Mayon produced 1,758 tons of sulfur dioxide flux and spewed a 500-meter-tall plume that drifted west-northwest.

Phivolcs said Mayon Volcano remains under Alert Level 3 (intensified or magmatic unrest).

Entry within the six-km Permanent Danger Zone (PDZ) is still prohibited and pilots of any aircraft are barred from flying close to the volcano.

The prohibition is due to possible hazards that can occur like rockfalls or landslides or avalanche, ballistic fragments, lava flows and lava fountaining, pyroclastic density currents, moderate-sized explosions, and lahar during heavy and prolonged rainfall. (Sonny Daanoy)