

Nature Exploitation and Protection in Mindanao

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MOVIE classics of the late Fernando Poe Jr. depicted Muslim struggles against the backdrop of pristine Mindanao. Today Mindanao is still driven by conflict but its pristine environment is no more.

Mindanao—once described variously as 'land of promise', 'land of plenty', 'food basket'—confronts enormous challenges to its environment.

Mindanao accounts for a third of the country's agricultural output. Its mild climate and rich soil give us a great variety of fruits and vegetables and supply rice to city inhabitants within the island and around the country.

In the latest National Forest Assessment (Acosta 2003), Mindanao accounts for 28.8 percent of the Philippine forests, compared to Luzon's 59.2 percent and the Visayas's 12.0 percent.

Interestingly, the 2003 National Forest Assessment found that there has been some expansion of forest cover but forest composition and quality continue to decline. This is true for the whole country as well as for Mindanao.

It should be noted that Mindanao is a major site of industrial tree plantations, which might explain why there's some increase in forest cover despite the officially admitted failure of logging bans (cf. UN-FAO ROAP 2001).

This huge southern island group was once a 'cowboy economy' of sorts, where there's so much open space for settlement and colonization.

Mindanao might have now exhausted its ecological carrying capacity as its once expansive frontier has reached its limit. The situation is best typified by the rare Philippine eagle that has run out of place to hide.

Since the 1950s the region has been absorbing waves of settlers from different parts of the country, from the Visayan islands, the rebellion-racked Central Luzon, and even from as far north as the Ilocos region. Massive migration has intensified competing claims over land and other natural resources.

Big agribusiness corporations, like Del Monte and Dole, introduced the plantation economy and transformed the region's subsistence economy and smallholder agriculture. Large enclosures required by plantation-type farming crowded out demand for land. It caused massive displacement and dispossession for many small farmers hired as workers of the multinational companies or who became landless peasants.

The plantation economy hardly caught attention when space and environmental degradation were not yet on the table. The whole situation changed when Moro separatist movements, communist rebels, peasant organizations and their church allies raised landlessness as a major justice issue.

People also started to realize the effects of a farming technology focused on a few cash crops destined mainly for export, and highly dependent on

Mindanao forest cover (2003) by canopy density (in has.) by region

Region	Closed Canopy	Open Canopy	Forest Plantation	Mangrove (Natural)	Total	% of Country Total
ARMM	106,319	96,661	1,580	45,786	250,346	3%
Region 9	29,652	126,790	3,474	22,279	182,195	3%
Region 10	107,071	226,400	1,530	2,492	337,493	5%
Region 11	177,503	240,986	536	2,010	421,035	6%
Region 12	126,385	218,858	2,641	1,350	349,234	5%
Region 13	64,729	431,832	-	26,731	523,292	7%
Total					2,063,595	29%

Source: Romeo T. Acosta, *State of Philippine Forests: The National Forest Assessment of 2003*.



the use of heavy and high-technology machinery and massive doses of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. Soil degradation, land compaction, depletion and contamination of surface and ground water became widespread.

As in a gold rush, logging and mining corporations came in droves to Mindanao and created their own enclaves there like the big plantation companies did. In many parts of Mindanao, especially in the Surigao and Agusan provinces in the CARAGA region, we now see vast tracts of denuded forests and wasteland around decommissioned mining plants.

Under the Macapagal-Arroyo administration, Mindanao is once again the main target location for a policy-directed resurgence of mining operations.

Mindanao has been ushered into modernity with the construction of huge energy and infrastructure development projects, like big hydroelectric dams. It used to be that an inconsequential town like Gingoog in Misamis Oriental would pass for a city, even with only a minimal built-up around its tiny poblacion. Today much of mainland Mindanao is circumscribed and crisscrossed by superhighways dating back to the 1970s.

Yet along with this process of modernization one finds extremes of wealth and poverty. On one end of the social divide are big plantation owners, timber, mining, construction and services companies. On the other end, one sees landless peasants,

factory and plantation workers, tribal Filipinos and ordinary Muslims.

Mindanao gave so much of its resources to the nation and got little in return. Neglect by central government is most pronounced in this part of the country.

Many of the poorest provinces in the Philippines who will most likely fail to achieve the targets set in the Millennium Development Goals are to be found in this island.

Since the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio we have witnessed a leap in environmental awareness in the country. The Philippines was among the first countries which translated the Rio agreements (Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, conventions on climate change and biodiversity and statement on forest principles) into a comprehensive national plan—the Philippine Agenda 21. And being among the early birds, the country was also among the first beneficiaries of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) that emerged out of that summit. As one of the world's environmental "hot spots" the Philippines was top priority in GEF funding for biodiversity conservation.

Half of the Philippines' 10 priority areas for biodiversity conservation funded by the GEF are found in Mindanao. These are the Siargao Islands and the Agusan Marsh in the CARAGA or Region 13; Mount Apo in the Davao and Cotabato provinces of

Region 11; Mount Kitanglad in Bukidnon in Region 10; and the Turtle Islands in Tawi-tawi of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao or ARMM.

The case studies and brief accounts presented here are part of the overall environmental protection and conservation efforts by various groups around Mindanao. The cases are by no means complete and representative. But they should provide a sense of what's happening at the local level and how local initiatives boost overall efforts to save and sustain Mindanao's threatened environment.

One case study looks at the impact of coastal resource management initiatives on the local community and coastal resources. It describes and examines the many years of experience of a Moro fishing community organization, the Sarangani Bangsa Moro Affiliates (SBMA). It tells of how SBMA has been enabled by partner NGOs, like the Tambuyog Development Center, to exercise their share of sovereignty over a common property resource and to build a comanagement regime in parts of Sarangani Bay in SOCSARGEN or Region 11.

An interesting part of this experience is the practical demonstration of the principles of Community-Based Coastal Resource Management (CBCRM), a new mode or approach in conservation and management of natural resources. The principles include people/community empowerment, equity, sustainability, ecosystems orientation and gender equality.



The difficult job of protecting biodiversity in the mining and logging region of Mindanao was featured in the articles of environmental activists and NGO workers Bona Abigail Hilario and Ma. Theresa C. Jabon. Both belong to the Convergence for Community-Centered Area Development (CONVERGENCE), a coalition of NGOs which comanaged, together with Spanish NGO partner IPADE, a string of conservation projects in the CARAGA region.

Funded from Spanish development assistance, the CONVERGENCE program was about setting up community-managed ecotourism and livelihood infrastructure. This entailed building broad-based cooperation and partnership between the indigenous peoples (IPs) and their NGO partners and the local governments. Experience proved that this was a difficult task in light of growing conflict generated by the impending mining operations in the region. Already, the areas have seen the massive displacement of local and indigenous communities due apparently to conflict between the military and communist insurgents. Campaigns hyping the plight of indigenous peoples extended beyond the program areas. An example is the campaign timed with the annual Lakbayk-Tribo, a nationwide biking tour involving young IPs.

Martiniano L. Magdolot, executive director of Mahintana Foundation based in South Cotabato, tells the story of a project on resource mobilization for forest protection. The project involved the protection of Mount Matutum, a forest reserve in southeastern Mindanao. The case talks of project experiences in the broad-based mobilization of various resource actors and suggests ways of integrating conservation with local governance.

Tomasito Villarin of SIMCARRD, an NGO advocating agrarian reform and rural development, describes the history and operation of an ecological enterprise for fishing communities in Governor Generoso, Davao Oriental. The project aims to strengthen the organizational capacity of small-scale fishers for managing coastal resources, and to promote food security through income-generating activities, fair trade and environment-friendly fishing practices.

In all, the case studies speak of varied stories about resistance as well as partnerships for environmental conservation being undertaken by local communities, indigenous peoples, Moro people, NGOs, local authorities and a number of other players. They tell about how local communities, especially those of indigenous people and rural poor, are struggling against odds to protect their environment, sustain their livelihood and preserve their traditional cultures.