

Only in the Philippines

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Richest Biodiversity

A great number of rare and exotic animals exist only in the Philippines. The country's surrounding waters reportedly have the highest level of biodiversity in the world. But this distinction was soon overshadowed by the fact that the Philippines has been dubbed as the "hottest of the hotspots" by no less than the Conservation International.

The Philippines is considered as a mega diversity country and a global biodiversity hotspot. In the 2000 Red List of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), 418 of the country's 52,177 species were listed as threatened. The country is home to about 9,000 species of flora, a third of which is said to be endemic to the country. It hosts 165 species of mammals, 121 of which can be found only in this part of the world. The Philippine Biodiversity Conservation Priority-setting Program (PBCPP) described these 165 endemic mammal species as endangered or critically endangered.

There are also 332 species of reptiles and amphibians living in the country, 215 of them endemic to the archipelago. It is said that less than 14 of the 114 total species of snakes in the country are poisonous. Several species of frogs and other reptiles remain to be documented. Unfortunately, several species were believed to have vanished without being studied.

In 1953, Albert Herre identified 2,117 species of fish in Philippine waters. These included 330 species of endemic freshwater fish. Whales, dolphins and whale sharks have also been visiting Philippine waters near the islands, allowing sightings by both marine scientists and commercial fishermen. About 500 of the 800 known coral reef species in the world are found in Philippine waters.

The country also has the highest concentration of birds and butterflies in the world. There are some 86 species of birds and 895 species of butterflies in the country. About 352 species of butterflies are endemic to the Philippines.

Many of these biological wonders are now in danger. The main culprit is human's indiscriminate use of the country's natural resources, resulting in an unabated denudation of the Philippine rainforests. In the last 500 years, the Philippines saw the destruction of over 93 percent of its original forest cover. Only about 5 percent of the country's 27,000 square kilometers of coral reefs were in excellent condition.

According to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the country's total forest size dwindled to 6.7 million hectares in 1990 from 30 million hectares in 1930. At the same time, the forest-to-man ratio shrank to 0.1 hectare per Filipino in 1990 from 1.13 hectares per Filipino in 1930. By 1996, experts claimed that only 1.8 million to 2.4 million hectares or 6 to 8 percent of original vegetation were remaining.

A study by the Philippine Congress said that 123,000 hectares of the country's forest cover are lost every year. The study added that by 2036, there would be no forest left in the Philippines, unless reforestation is started.

In January 2003, a study by the Green Tropics International (GTI) claimed that the Philippines would need P30 trillion to reforest country's denuded mountains in over 85 years.

Rhinoceros and Elephants

With the discovery of different animal fossils in the past century, scientists believed that elephants, rhinoceros and stegodons used to live in the Philippines. Two species of elephants and one species of rhinoceros were identified, namely: *Elaphas beyeri*, *Elaphas cf. namadicus* and *Rhinoceros philippinensis*. Four species of stegodons were also listed by scientists, namely: *Stegodon cf. trigonocephalus*, *Stegodon luzonensis*, *Stegodon cf. sinensis* and *Stegodon mindanensis*. All of them are now believed extinct.

One of the World's Largest Eagles

Also known as the monkey-eating eagle, the endangered Philippine eagle is one of the largest in the world. With scientific name *Pithecophaga jefferyi*, the Philippine eagle lives in the rainforests of Isabela, Samar, Leyte and Mindanao. It has similarities with Papua New Guinea's Harpy Eagle (*Harpyopsis novaeguineae*).

Measuring about one meter in height, the average Philippine eagle has a 76-centimeter highly arched, powerful bill. It lives on large snakes, hornbills, civet cats, flying lemurs and monkeys - the reason why it is also called monkey-eating eagle. It creates its nests in large trees some 30 meters from the ground.

With an estimated population of 100 to 300 today, the Philippine eagle is in danger of extinction. It is one of the 400

exotic bird species in the Philippines, which, if not protected, would disappear from the face of the Earth. Along with the Philippine cockatoo, Palawan peacock pheasant, Mindoro imperial pigeon, Sulu hornbill and Cebu black shama, the Philippine Eagle might follow the Cebu flowerpecker which is now presumed extinct.

The Philippine Eagle has come to symbolize all efforts by the Filipino people to save the remaining rainforests in the country and preserve the wealth of the nation for the future generation.

Flying Lemur

One of the most distinct creatures on Earth lives in the Philippines. It doesn't have wings but it can glide across 100 meters of space in a single leap. Like the lemurs of Asia, it moves around at night. Its head resembles that of a dog while its body has similarities with the flying squirrel of Canada.

In Mindanao, people call it "kagwang". Around the world, it is known as colugo or the flying lemur. Zoologists, however, claim that it doesn't fly and it is not a lemur, a large-eyed nocturnal mammal found only in Madagascar and Comoro Islands. The truth is that kagwang or *Cynocephalus volans* is one of only two species belonging to the primitive order Dermoptera. The other species is the *Cynocephalus variegatus* or the flying lemur of Malaysia.

An ordinary kagwang weighs from 1 to 1.7 kilogram and ranges in length from 14 to 17 inches. It has a wide head with small ears and big eyes. Its 12-inch tail is connected by a patagium, a membrane stretching from forelimbs to tail. This well-developed membrane enables kagwang to glide to a distance of 100 meters or more to escape from predators like the Philippine Eagle.

The continuous denudation of tropical forests in the country threatens the remaining population of kagwang, which used to abound in the wilderness of Basilan, Leyte, Samar, Bohol and Mindanao. The exact number of the remaining kagwangs remains to be determined. Alarmed by the situation, the Philippine government declared kagwang as an endangered species and banned its commercial exploitation.

Largest and Smallest Bats

The Philippines has at least 56 species of bats. It is home to the smallest and the largest bats among the 1,000 known species in the world.

The smallest bat in the world is the Philippine bamboo bat (vespertilionid), which belongs to the vespertilionid family. This bat measures about four centimeters (1 1/2 inches) in length and has a wingspan of 15 cm. Approximately, it weighs 1.5 grams (1/20 ounce).

The three-layered virgin forest of Subic Bay and Bataan is home to the world's largest bats: the giant flying fox (*Acerodon jubatus*) and the golden crown flying fox (*Pteropus vampyrus*). Over the years, these two species of giant fruit bats have roamed around the 10,000-hectare Subic Forest National Protected Area, which is considered the biggest roosting site of bats in the world.

An ordinary giant flying fox weighs up to 2.5 pounds (1.1 kilograms), heavier than a golden crown flying fox. The golden crown measures six feet in wingspan, the largest among all bats. The giant flying fox and the golden crown are just two of the 15 species of fruit bats in the country.

In other parts of the country, several bat species are now believed extinct. Among them were bare-backed fruit bat or *Dobsonia chapmani*, which reportedly disappeared from the forests of Negros and Cebu in 1964 and the Panay fruit bat or *Acerodon lucifer* which was last seen in 1892. The Philippine tube-nosed bat, *Nyctimene rabori* of Negros is considered highly endangered. Scientists warned that this breed would disappear before 2015 unless action is taken to protect its remaining population.

Last Remnants of Dinosaur Age

Scientists call sea turtles as the only living remnants of the dinosaur age, but maybe not for long. Unless sincere efforts are undertaken, sea turtles might follow dinosaurs into extinction.

Sea turtles, popularly known in the Philippines as pawikan, belong to the sub-order Cryptodira, and to the families Dermochelyidae and Cheloniidae. There are more than 220 species of turtles in the world, but only seven are considered marine (saltwater). Five of these species are present in the Philippines, namely: Green (*Chelonia mydas*), Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) and Leatherback turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*).

A typical Philippine Sea Turtle weighs between 180 to 210 kilograms and, unlike land turtles, cannot retract its head and limbs under its streamlined shell. The most common species in the Philippines is the Green Sea Turtle, which grows up to 1.5 meters long and weighs up to 185 kilograms. The largest species is the Leatherback Turtle, which grows more than two meters in length.

World's Smallest Hoofed Mammal

South of Palawan, lies the Balabac Island, home of the world's smallest hoofed mammal - the Philippine mouse deer. Locally known as Pilandok (*Tragalus nigricans*), this ruminant stands only about 40 centimeters at the shoulder level.

In other countries, it is called chevrotain, or simply mouse deer. Contrary to its name, pilandok is not a member of the deer family. It belongs to the family Tragulidae in the mammalian order Artiodactyla. The male species has no antlers like those of a real deer. Instead, it uses its large tusk-like canine teeth on its upper jaw for self-defense; in the same way a deer uses its antlers.

Aside from the Pilandok, other mouse deer species include the Malay mouse deer or napu and the African water chevrotain. They are found in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and India. While the mouse deer are widely distributed across Asia, their dwindling population has alarmed the World Conservation Union, which declared them as endangered in 1996.

Most Endangered Deer

One of the world's rarest mammals lives in the dwindling forest of Panay Island. It is the Philippine spotted deer (*Cervus alfredi*), considered by many as the most endangered deer in the planet.

The Philippine spotted deer is only about 80 centimeters in height (shoulder) and has soft and moderately long hair covering its spotted dark brown body. Its most distinct physical characteristic is its oval yellowish white spots on its back and sides. This species has long been classified as endangered, which means they have been reduced in number to a critical level, or whose habitats have been damaged, altered or reduced.

By 1985, a survey reported that only a small population of the Philippine spotted deer was found in the remote regions of Panay.

Calamian Deer

Calamian Islands, north off Palawan province, keep a species of deer that cannot be found elsewhere. Scientists referred to the hog deer in the islands as Calamian deer in order to distinguish them from other hog deer in the world.

An ordinary Calamian deer measures 105 to 115 centimeters in length and 60 to 65 centimeters high at the shoulder and weighs about 36 to 50 kilograms. It is said to have longer and darker legs, compared with other hog deer. From a relatively large number in the 1940s, the population of Calamian deer dropped to "dangerously low levels" in the 1970s. By 1996, its population further declined to only about 900, prompting conservationists to declare it as an endangered species.

Largest Endangered Animal

People used to call Mindoro as the "Land of the Tamaraws". About 10,000 heads of these unique pygmy water buffalos were roaming around the island-province of Mindoro in the 1900s. But that was a century ago. Today, the Tamaraws in the province are in danger of extinction, and Mindoro might lose the symbol that it once proudly introduced to the world.

The Tamaraw, scientifically known as *Bubalus mindorensis*, is endemic to Mindoro. Belonging to the family of buffalos, the same categorical group of the Philippine carabao, the Tamaraw is the largest endangered land animal in the Philippines today. In 1996, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) listed it as one of the ten most endangered species in the world.

The Tamaraw measures between five to six feet in length and weighs about 300 kilograms. While it shares many similarities with the carabao, the Tamaraw is most known for its horns, with a "V" form, unlike the horns of the carabao, which take a curved shape. The Tamaraw's horns grow about 14 to 20 inches long.

From 10,000 heads in the 1900's, the Tamaraw population went down to 369 heads in the late 1980's. Today, reports say there are as few as 20 heads roaming in the wild.

World's Smallest Monkey

In many respects, the Philippine tarsier (*Tarsius syrichta*) is different from other animals. Considered as the world's smallest primate, it measures only about twelve centimeters in length. Its two big eyes cannot move and do not have a tapetum - the upper protective tissue. Because of this, the Philippine tarsier has learned to turn its head 180 degrees. It has also two grooming claws on each foot and an almost bald tail extending about nine inches.

Found in the islands of Samar, Leyte, Bohol and Mindanao, the Philippine tarsier got its name from its elongated tarsus bone. An ordinary tarsier weighs between 117 and 134 grams. It is able to move between trees by leaping as far as three meters. It also has keen senses of hearing and sight.

Today, there are only about 1,000 tarsiers inhabiting the wilds of Corella town in Bohol province where the biggest concentration of these rare animals was once reported. Ensuring the continued existence of the Philippine tarsiers is the Philippine Tarsier Foundation Inc.

Neither A Bear Nor A Cat

Palawan bearcat is neither a bear nor a cat. Known in Southeast Asia as binturong, the bearcat is a species of its own, with population in the forests of Palawan, Borneo, Burma and Vietnam. It belongs to the family of Viverridae (civets).

The Palawan bearcat has a long body and a pointed face leading to the nose. Its head and body measure 61 to 96 centimeters in combined length while its tail is almost as long. It weighs 9 to 14 kilograms and lives up to 20 years.

It has thick black fur, which hunters use for making clothes and caps. It is usually awake at night when it finds food and uses its tail to climb tall trees where it hides among the leaves. Like other wild animals, Palawan bearcat's population is threatened by human activities.

Endangered Cockatoos

The Philippines is home to some of the world's most exotic birds. Scientists have documented 577 bird species around the Philippine archipelago. Of this number, 185 species are endemic to the country. The Bird Life International listed 116 of them as "threatened" or "near-threatened".

One of the most endangered species is the exotic Kalangay or the Philippine cockatoo (*Cacatua haematuropygia*), which belongs to Psittacidae or the family of parrots. Some cockatoos can live up to 50 years. They are known for mimicking human voices. Most of them measure 33 centimeters in length and weigh 0.29 kilogram.

The remaining population of kalangays, between 1,000 and 4,000, is now restricted to Palawan, particularly in St. Paul's Subterranean River National Park, Pandanan Island and El Nido Marine Reserve.

World's Largest Fish

Donsol, a fishing town in Sorsogon province, serves as a sanctuary to a group of 40 whale sharks (*Rhincodon typus*), which are considered as the largest fish in the world.

Locally known as "butanding", whale sharks visit the waters of Donsol from November to May. They travel across the oceans but nowhere else have they been sighted in a larger group than in the waters of Sorsogon. They measure between 18 to 35 feet in length and weigh about 20 tons. In 1996, a marine biologist discovered that whale sharks are ovoviviparous, which means that the females produce live offspring from eggs hatched in the uterus.

The Philippine government declared whale sharks as endangered species in 1998, thereby banning its plunder and exploitation. Right now, the Department of Tourism is promoting eco-tourism to protect the whale sharks in Donsol.

World's Smallest Fish

The world's smallest freshwater fish is found in the Philippines. The dwarf goby (*Pandaka pygmaea*) measures 1.2 centimeters or less than half of an inch, the tiniest known vertebrate. American Ichthyologist Albert Herre first discovered it in Malabon River in 1925.

The Philippines is also the home of sinarapan, the world's smallest commercial fish. Sinarapan, scientifically known as *Mistichthys luzonensis*, is a goby found only in Lakes Bato and Buhi in Camarines Sur province. Sinarapan grows to an average length of 1.25 centimeters, only slightly longer than the dwarf goby. Today, unabated fishing in the two lakes threatens the population of sinarapan.

Herbivorous Marine Mammal

Dugongs or sea cows, the only herbivorous marine mammals, are often sighted in Philippine waters, particularly near Palawan province and southern Mindanao.

According to marine scientists, an ordinary dugong grows up to three meters in length and weighs 400 kilograms. It feeds on sea grass so it always reaches for the bottom of the sea. Whether dugong's appetite has something to do with its long life remains to be verified. It is said that a dugong can live more than 70 years. The Philippine government has banned the commercial exploitation of dugong since 1991.

Exotic Seahorses

More than 500 of the world's 700 coral species are found under the waters of the Philippines, which is a part of the Coral Triangle - a region in the Pacific Ocean.

Seahorses are small saltwater fish belonging to the Syngnathidae family (order Gasterosteiformes), which also includes pipefish and sea dragons. Most seahorse species, probably the most peculiar creatures in the water, live in the Coral Triangle. There are at least 50 known seahorse species in the world. They inhabit temperate and tropical waters but most of them are concentrated in the warm coastal waters of the Philippines.

The seahorse's scientific genus name, *Hippocampus* is a Greek word, which means, "bent horse." Seahorses range in

length from about 2 inches to 14 inches. They are known for their small compressed body covered with 50 rectangular body plates. At least 47 nations and territories around the world are involved in buying and selling seahorses. The largest known importers are China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Among the largest exporters is the Philippines.

Largest and Smallest Shells

Both *Tridacna gigas*, one of the world's largest shells, and *Pisidium*, the world's tiniest shell, can be found under Philippine waters. *Tridacna gigas* grows as large as one meter in length and weighs 600 pounds while *Pisidium* is less than 1 millimeter long. A shell called glory of the sea (*Connus gloriamaris*) is also found in the Philippines and considered as one of the most expensive shells in the world.

World's Largest Reptile

The saltwater crocodile, which can be found in the Philippines and other Asian countries, is considered as the world's largest reptile. Scientifically known as *Crocodylus porosus*, it is different from Mindoro's freshwater crocodile (*Crocodylus mindorensis*), which is a relatively smaller species.

An adult saltwater crocodile measures between six to seven meters (20-23 feet) and weighs about two to three tons. There were tales that a 27-foot saltwater crocodile was killed near Lake Taal in Batangas in 1823. It reportedly took 40 men to bring the body ashore. When the men cut the crocodile's body open, they found the body of a horse in seven pieces. The largest crocodile ever sighted was a 33-footer in Borneo in 1920. It was believed to be 200 years old.

Endemic Plants

The Philippine archipelago also teems with different types of plants. It is said that as many as 9,000 flowering plants can be found in the country, including 200 fruit trees. Among the endemic fruit trees in the Philippines are durian, mabolo, pili and bignay.

They Were Vanishing

Vanishing were not only the animals endemic to the Philippines, but also several things and cultural traditions that Filipinos in the 1950s grew up with. Among the items that are no longer found in the Philippine market are bakya, banig and salakot (If you still remember them). Bahay kubo is also disappearing in towns and barangays and it would be hard to find a house, with a bataan today. Who still observe cultural traditions like harana, bayanihan and balagtasan. And where did the makata go?