

Undertaking Biodiversity Research to Address Development Needs

The loss of biological diversity or biodiversity has indeed made everyone realize the value of life on earth. All forms of life, from the tiniest insect, to the tallest tree, and even to the biggest animal, have demonstrated interdependent and complex interactions that are necessary to ensure the survival of all, most importantly human life. Biodiversity interactions have shown how each depends on the other for survival, regardless of where they live. This is the reason why the irreversible loss of biodiversity is the most pressing environmental concern today.

As a country identified with having a rich biodiversity, the Philippines has always been studied by local and international researchers. Research projects have focused on the documentation, monitoring, rehabilitation, conservation, and protection of biodiversity in the Philippines. Since most of these projects were funded by foreign institutions, the sustainability of initiatives remains uncertain.

Initiating Biodiversity Research for Development

In 2000, the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) implemented the Biodiversity Research Programme (BRP) for Development in Mindanao. With funding support from the government of The Netherlands, BRP aimed at making biodiversity research more responsive to real-life problems and development needs of the communities in

Mt. Malindang, among other priorities. Mt. Malindang was chosen as the study site because its watersheds and coastal areas provide home to various endangered and threatened endemic flora and fauna species. As people continue to be irresponsible in their quest for survival, Mt. Malindang's lush resources will soon be lost forever.

BRP was perceived as yet another biodiversity research project in the Philippines. However, its completion in 2006 revealed a uniqueness that made it distinct in terms of concept, goals, process, and management in the aim of generating knowledge on the biodiversity status of Mt. Malindang.

Introducing A New Mode in Biodiversity Research

Through a series of consultations, joint meetings and conferences, the Filipino and Dutch partners developed BRP's guiding concepts and principles. These did not only guided the programme's six-year implementation but more importantly increased the relevance and usefulness of its research results. The following guiding concepts and principles made BRP distinct and unique from the usual biodiversity research projects:

- A research agenda that was developed based on the needs, problems, and potential solutions expressed by the people in the research sites which established the usefulness and relevance of the BRP studies;
- A research framework that used the

landscape approach to investigate the interactions of the natural, socioeconomic and cultural components of the ecosystems (spanning the uplands, lowlands, and the coastal areas) to provide holistic and integrated analyses on its effects on Mt. Malindang's biodiversity;

- A research process that involved the participation of the Mindanao research and academic community, local communities, local government units, NGOs, and other stakeholders in Mt. Malindang thereby enhancing ownership and accountability to BRP and its outputs;
- A research process that strengthened the capabilities of the local and community researchers for biodiversity research which also enhanced ownership and accountability to BRP;
- A research process that required constant interaction and feedback thereby making research more



responsive to present and future policy making, and biodiversity conservation and protection efforts;

- A research process that required the expertise of natural and social science researchers in developing cross-cutting and multidisciplinary studies;
- A research process that promoted genuine research cooperation between Filipino and Dutch partners; and
- An organizational set-up that managed policy and decision-making, policy implementation, and local and field-level implementation which emphasized consultation, participatory decision-making, monitoring and reviews, and coordination.

Sustaining Initiatives

BRP introduced a new approach to biodiversity research – one that utilized interactive, participatory, multi/interdisciplinary, and learning-based strategies to generate knowledge on biodiversity. However, sustaining these



initiatives need to be intensified through the following policy recommendations:

1. Creation of Local Teams

- Formal creation of local research and monitoring teams to:
 - continuously develop cross-cutting and multidisciplinary biodiversity studies that focus on the development of livelihood opportunities, biodiversity conservation and protection activities, and network establishment;
 - undertake regular monitoring and updating of data and information on Mt. Malindang's biodiversity;
- Formal creation of a local biodiversity management team to develop knowledge management mechanisms to preserve data and information generated by the local research and monitoring teams;
- Formal creation of a local information, education and communication (IEC) team to:
 - help develop training programs, and information and communication materials to continuously build the capabilities of the local research, monitoring and management teams;
 - serve as the information and extension arm of the community with regards to sustained awareness on the status of biodiversity in Mt. Malindang, and appreciation on the value of participatory planning and decision-making;
 - help develop mechanisms to recognize and maintain the efforts of the indigenous people, the Subanun, in the protection of Mt. Malindang's biodiversity;
 - help maintain consultations and feedback from the various stakeholders on biodiversity issues and other concerns; and
 - help establish linkages and develop networks.

2. Governance and Support

- Institutionalization of regular budget allocation at the local government (provincial, municipal and/or barangay level) to support the tasks of the local teams;
- Sustained participation and/or representation of the local government in the local teams and the various activities that the latter will implement;
- Sustained participation of the local government in community consultations, awareness campaigns, and other activities;
- Strategies to establish linkages and generate support for the activities of the local teams from foreign and private companies;
- Mechanisms to develop and/or improve the implementation of local policies with regards to biodiversity protection, and livelihood projects;
- Strategies to develop and help implement mechanisms to monitor the environmental impacts of farming and other livelihood projects;
- Institutionalization of mechanisms and/or strategies that will utilize the research and monitoring results, and other outputs of the local teams in policy formulation; and
- Political will with regards to the protection of biodiversity in Mt. Malindang.

The success of any project lies on its sustainability. What happens after project completion? How can BRP's research results be effectively used to improve the lives of the people in Mt. Malindang in the next 5-10 years?

These policy recommendations aim to ensure that the initiatives of BRP remain not just a milestone in biodiversity research but more importantly a legacy to the people of Mt. Malindang. (*Leah P. Arboleda*)