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## Endangered cockatoo amid a storm

By Redempto Anda

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THE PHILIPPINE Cockatoo PETER WIDMANN/CONTRIBUTOR

Biologist Peter Widmann and his conservation group the Katala Foundation Inc. (KFI) has added their voice to the chorus of groups opposing the construction of a coal-fired power plant in Rasa Island in Narra town, two hours south of Puerto Princesa City, saying the facility would pose dangers to the habitat of the nearly extinct Katala, local name of the Palawan cockatoo.

For over two decades now, KFI has been working to save the critically endangered bird species (*Cacatua haematuropygia*) from near extinction.

The bird is in the highest rated category in the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) red

list, according to Widmann, scientific director and vice president of KFI.

"At least one-third of the world population of the species is by now restricted to project sites of KFI's conservation work for the bird," said Widmann.

Among the five project sites of KFI, four are in Palawan, "the stronghold of the species," he said. Another is in Polillo Island in Quezon.

The protected Rasa Island is home to 75 percent of the endangered bird's entire population, said Widmann.

Within 12 years of KFI's work to breed and repopulate Rasa Island with the species, the cockatoo population has made a dramatic recovery "from 25 to presently around 280 individuals," a project study of KFI showed.

"This is at or close to the carrying capacity of the island," said Widmann.

The 15-megawatt power plant being proposed by the Consunji-led DMCI Powers Inc., which will supply the Palawan Electric Cooperative (Paleco) grid, is only awaiting completion of mandatory permits before construction begins.

Among these permits are the final endorsement of the quasi-government agency Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) and the environmental compliance certificate (ECC) from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

PCSD is a body that grants all environmentally sensitive projects in Palawan a Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) clearance which is a prerequisite to the DENR-issued ECC.

Environmental activists, who banded themselves into a group called Palawan Advocates for Clean Energy (Pace), and the KFI, have submitted to the PCSD over 70,000 signatures they have gathered at the start of their campaign, hoping to pressure PCSD into slowing down the granting of a turnkey permit to the project.

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## Coal technology

On May 18, Pace members trying to raise issues against the coal plant tried to storm a general assembly meeting of Paleco. The chair of Paleco tersely adjourned the meeting and the lobbyists regrouped to plan their next move. They went radio hopping the next day blasting Paleco officials for their defense of the coal plant.

Anticoal proponents claimed coal plants generate high levels of carbon dioxide harmful to both the atmosphere and to communities surrounding them.

Proponents of the coal-facility project, however, asserted that coal technology is allowed by the Clean Air Act governing such projects and is in accordance with the Department of Energy's overall policy strategy.

Pace said they have offered an alternative, which is to allow DMCI to operate its 25-MW diesel-fired facility "until such time that the province is ready to put online a power mix of traditional and renewable energy sources that will address local demand for a long time."

"Once those coal plants are constructed, Palawan will be stuck with this technology and there will no longer be any room for renewable energy," said Bart Duff, a member of the Palawan Chamber of Commerce.

Paleco General Manager Rohima Sara, however, countered that they have been actively engaging with smaller power generators to supply power to remote areas of Palawan not reached by the backbone electricity grid.

"We just signed a contract for solar power for the entire Cabayugan in Sabang which hosts the Underground River," Sara said. The 8.2-kilometer river is a popular tourist draw noted as a significant biodiversity area.

## Rigging

Pace has accused the PCSD of rigging its own permitting procedures to favor the DMCI plant.

"They have ignored the fact that their own technical people have recommended against the site and that the municipality of Narra is opposed to the location of the project," Beth Maclang of the Palawan NGO Network said.

Narra Mayor Clarito Demaala has vowed to oppose the project and accused PCSD officials of having been bribed.

The PCSD, which has already "conditionally" approved the project, is scheduled to meet again before the month is over to consider the recommendation of its legal committee to grant DMCI full and unconditional SEP clearance.

"There is no final approval yet, the project has only been endorsed by the executive committee," Maclang said.

DMCI officials have stated plans to get the coal plant into operations by October 2014. Before that, the company is installing a 27-MW diesel-powered plant to address immediate power needs of Paleco. Also under its contract, it plans to put up a second coal facility, also 15MW, by January 2017.



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