



HABITAT, FOREST DESTRUCTION
Studies say Palawan animals' extinction looms

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY, Palawan, Philippines—Scientists and leading conservation experts raised warnings Friday about the imminent extinction of some of the country's most important species that are found only in Palawan due mainly to the destruction of their habitats and the illegal wildlife trade.

“All threatened species in Palawan are endemic and they are facing total extinction because of our neglect in protecting their habitats which are the low elevation forests,” Aldrin Mallari, a foremost ornithologist [expert on birds], told the Inquirer.

Mallari presented a study at a three-day bird festival organized here by a global network of bird watchers and conservation groups.

The study said all of Palawan's endangered animal species live in low elevation areas and forest fringes that are classified as “buffer” areas and open to human intrusion.

Mismatch

Palawan is covered by a special law, Republic Act No. 7611, which categorizes old growth forests and areas above 1,000 meters in elevation as “core zones,” or areas exempt from human development.

“There is a mismatch in the protected area systems and the requirements of important species. All threatened species in Palawan live in what had been designated as buffer areas and these are open to exploitation, primarily mining,” Mallari said.

Mallari was alluding to dozens of mining applications all over Palawan, particularly in the nickel and chromite-rich southern Palawan, as he criticized government agencies issuing mining permits and endorsements for not taking into consideration Palawan's endangered species.

“It is easier to secure a mining permit than to request for a permit to conduct scientific expeditions,” Mallari said.

Center of illegal trade

In a separate study, the Katala Foundation, a group that monitors the illegal trafficking of birds and wildlife, raised concerns over the increasing trade of the Palawan talking mynah

(sp. *Gracula religiosa*), the blue naped parrot (*Tanygnathus lucionensis*) and the Philippine cockatoo, all of which are endangered species.

Rommel Cruz, a field officer of the Foundation, pointed out that southern Palawan is the hotbed of the illegal wildlife trade where birds are captured and sold to the black market in Manila.

“There are at least three wildlife trade groups operating in southern Palawan,” Cruz said.

The Katala Foundation study showed that there are 13 species of mammals that are endemic to Palawan, and 11 bird species that are threatened by the illegal wildlife trade.

Cruz noted that the Philippine cockatoo, classified as critically endangered, is the most threatened by the illegal wildlife trade because of its dwindling population of only over 1,000 individuals. Its market value in Manila’s black market, he said, ranges from P2,500 to P8,000 per individual.

He identified the municipalities of Rizal and Bataraza, both in southern Palawan, as the areas where most of the birds originate. *Redempto Anda, Inquirer Southern Luzon*

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