

Senator Loren Legarda's Keynote Speech
Launch of the Global Environment Facility-Small Grants
Programme Operational Phase 5
21 May 2014

Allow me first to congratulate the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), especially its Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB), for the Launch of the Global Environment Facility's Small Grants Programme (SGP) Operational Phase 5.

The state of biodiversity in the Philippines

We welcome the decision, designating the Philippines as a recipient of this program.

The Philippines is one of the megadiverse countries, a group of nations hosting two-thirds of the earth's biodiversity and about 70-80% of the world's plant and animal species. It also ranks fifth in the number of plant species, fourth in bird endemism, fifth in mammal endemism, and maintains five percent of the world's flora.¹ A lot more awaits to be discovered even as we now have one of the highest rates of discovery of new species in the world.²

¹ Assessing Progress Towards the 2010 Biodiversity Target: 4th National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity, Republic of the Philippines, 2009

² The rate of discovery of new species is likewise one of the highest in the world: a total of 36 new species (20 frogs, eight lizards, and eight snakes), or roughly 10% of the total herpetofauna, has been discovered in the last ten years.² In a recent expedition carried out 2011 in partnership with the California Academy of Sciences, a hundred new species were reported discovered. Undertaken over a three week period only from May 26 to June 10; it is considered the largest expedition in the Philippines, and was the first to make a comprehensive survey of both terrestrial and marine diversity in the country. The Philippine Biodiversity Expedition was composed of American and Filipino scientists. (GMA News Online 2011, as cited in Ateneo School of Government Report, 2011)². Of late, a study undertaken in Mt. Nacolod in Southern Leyte revealed two new species of frogs, including potentially new species of snake and lizard.² The same study showed four more potential KBAs in the province, thus expanding the number of terrestrial KBAs from 128 to 132. These findings suggest that new species remain to be discovered as studies are undertaken at more sites. The general lack of data on the ecology, distribution, population trends, and abundance of more than 85% of the amphibian fauna and more than 90% of the reptilian fauna impedes a more accurate assessment of their conservation status. Large-scale destruction of the lowland forest, which is now almost completely gone in many parts of the Philippines, suggests that a significant part of the amphibian populations may have been lost before it could be described.)

These numbers, however, should not give us a false sense of complacency. Great challenges face us in the task of protecting and preserving our rich biodiversity.

Our gathering today is propitious as the international community will mark the International Day for Biological Diversity tomorrow. It offers an opportune time for us to reflect on glaring issues that face us today – food security, water quality and supply, disasters, climate change and global warming. All these are relevant to biodiversity.

We are all consumers and we contribute to the decline of the world's resources because of our insatiable demand for new things. One is never enough for many of us.

The rate of extraction and consumption is way faster than the rate at which the Earth can replenish its resources.

This is consistent with the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment, which revealed that humans have altered ecosystems more rapidly and extensively in the past 50 years than in any period in history.

The increasing loss of biodiversity, particularly in Asia, is being attributed to habitat loss, over-exploitation, pollution, invasive alien species and climate change.

The threat of climate change

Further endangering the precarious situation of our country's biodiversity is climate change. Among the impacts of climate change is the loss of thousands of species as well as changes in natural ecosystems. The rise in average global temperatures render many species unable to quickly adapt to new conditions.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts that with a 1.5 to 2.5-degree Celsius rise in temperature in a span of 50-100 years will put 30% of species on the brink of extinction.³

3 4th Assessment Report of the IPCC

A 4-degree Celsius rise in global temperature is not far from impossible. The continuing rise in the Earth's temperature is expected to create impacts leading to slower economic growth and will create "new poverty traps" throughout the 21st century.⁴

Rich yet hungry

The biggest irony of all is the reality that in the midst of plenty and bountiful resources, millions of the world's humanity remain hungry.

There are 3.9 million hungry families in the Philippines in the last quarter of 2013.⁵ In coastal communities, you would expect people to have access to marine resources, yet they are among the most deprived, with 4 of 10 coastal residents living under the poverty line.⁶

The PAGASA warns of an impending El Niño in June. This threatens food security. Prolonged drought would drastically cut down the production of local crops like rice, corn, sugar cane, vegetables and other agricultural products, and can also cause a decrease in fisheries yield. We cannot just dismiss these threats.

The solution within

The solution begins with us. If we want to avoid hunger, we need to stop our practice of exploiting the world's resources as if there is no tomorrow. The world is not just about us. There is a future and resources need to be protected and conserved for those who will be born beyond our time.

The first step towards building a sustainable community, one that respects biodiversity, is to correct one of the biggest misconceptions about the

⁴ *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*, from Working Group II of the IPCC

⁵ Fourth Quarter 2013 Social Weather Survey

⁶ Philippine Environment Monitor 2005 on Coastal and Marine Resource Management

environment—that natural resources are infinite. It can no longer be business as usual. We all need to stop craving for and taking more than what we need.

Second, building sustainability is a collaborative effort. Protection of our resources is a joint responsibility of local government units and the community. Local communities should be empowered through a transparent system that clarifies access and ownership of resources. People need to understand what is at stake. Only then can we expect them to be a part of the solution.

Third, we need tools and the medium by which to effect change. We need to promote green skills and green jobs. There has to be incentives for our citizens to take interest in acquiring green skills such as management in agriculture, forestry, horticulture, environmental, information technology and other careers that contribute to environmental preservation.

We should also strengthen efforts to encourage more renewable energy investments in the country because this industry does not only promote clean and indigenous energy, but can also provide thousands of jobs for our people. The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) estimated that 800,000 new green jobs were generated in 2013 with countries like the Philippines still with vast untapped potential in the field of renewable energy industry.⁷

Legislative solutions

At the level of legislation, several proposed measures aimed at strengthening climate adaptation mechanisms and conserving biodiversity are pending in the Senate.

Senate Bill 100 or the Integrated Coastal Management Act, seeks to put in place a comprehensive framework that will promote the sustainable development of the coastal and marine environment and resources. Section 8 of the said measure ensures the participation of the civil society and of

⁷ IRENA “Renewable Energy and Jobs. Annual Review 2014.”

the corporate and private sectors in the planning, investment and training programs of the integrated coastal management program, among others.

Meanwhile, Senate Bill 1369 or the National Land Use Act seeks to institutionalize a national land use policy to ensure a rational, holistic and just allocation, utilization, management and development of the country's land resources.

I encourage everybody to give your insights to further enhance these legislative measures.

The Climate Change Act was adopted in 2009 to mainstream climate change into government policy formulation. The Climate Change Commission developed the National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP), which addresses seven priority areas: food security, water sufficiency, ecosystem and environmental stability, human security, climate-smart industries and services, sustainable energy, and capacity development.⁸

Among the priorities under the action plan for the initial period from 2011 to 2016 is the identification of eco-towns. An eco-town is "a planning unit composed of municipalities or a group of municipalities located within and around boundaries of critical key biodiversity areas, which are at high risk to climate change. Eco-towns will be built around protected areas and key biodiversity areas, using ecosystem based approach that will scale up best practices."⁹

As I have said before, the ground level work and the parallel environmental initiatives in the Senate may not get screaming headlines. But they represent big, determined steps for the Filipinos and the rich biodiversity we thrive in.

Conclusion

⁸ Climate Change Commission

⁹ Ibid.

In conclusion, I wish to thank and laud the UNDP, NEDA and DENR for operationalizing the Global Environment Facility's Small Grants Programme (SGP). This will help the support projects that will conserve and restore the environment, while providing well-being and livelihood to the nation.

This Programme will serve as launch pad for communities to act together toward striking a delicate balance between human needs and environmental imperatives.

I look forward to the expanded initiatives under the fifth phase of SGP.

As we celebrate the International Day for Biological Diversity tomorrow, let us renew our commitment to preserving what remains of our natural resources by taking action today.

Thank you and good morning.