
The Philippines: The decline of a megabiodiverse giant

Vegetation maps published in Geography books still show the archipelago of the Philippines, as covered by dense tropical forests. Unfortunately, this does not correspond to reality any longer. Over the past 50 years almost two thirds of the country's forests --most of them primary-- have been lost, and nowadays forest cover is only 17 % --far below the original 60% of the country area. In 1990 the country's forest was down to only 16 million acres, 1,75 million of which was primary forest and only 50% of the original mangroves remained standing. The situation has since worsened.

The loss of forests has exacerbated floods, soil erosion, deprivation of livelihoods for local communities and loss of aesthetic and recreational values --not to mention the damage to biodiversity. The Philippines is considered a megabiodiverse country. It harbours about 8,000 species of flowering plants distributed in about 1,600 genera and 191 families. There are more than 6,490 registered species of non-flowering plants (i.e. algae, fungi, mosses, ferns, etc.) which sum up about 14,500 plant species in the country. Between 30 to 40% out of them are endemic (nowhere else found in the world). Accelerated deforestation and forest degradation pose a grave threat to this heritage.

Logging has historically been the most important direct cause of deforestation in the Philippines. Successive governments have not only turned a blind eye on the illegal activities of transnational logging companies, but even encouraged them through lack of control, corrupt practices and the promotion of an export oriented model. The country was Asia's greatest exporter of rainforest timber since the 1920s and remained so until the 1960s. By the early 70s it was obvious, even for the authorities, that forest resources were dwindling rapidly. A logging ban was introduced in 1973, which was never implemented. As a matter of fact it only served to concentrate the ownership of timber licenses in the hands of a few supporters of dictator Marcos. A new ban established in 1986 was equally ineffective. Even after 1991, when logging was prohibited in sensitive areas such as primary forests and some watershed areas, compliance with the mandatory conditions and prevention of illegal logging was impossible due to insufficient resources. At the same time that forests were disappearing and biodiversity was decreasing, loggers were amassing huge sums of money and the vast majority of the population was getting poorer and poorer.

But logging is by no means the only destructive activity. Mining is also resulting in further forest loss and degradation. About 40% of the country's territory has already been given away by the government under the form of concessions to multinational mining companies. Additionally, another important threat to biodiversity at the local level is industrial shrimp farming, which is resulting in widespread mangrove degradation and destruction.

Official initiatives towards forest conservation have repeatedly failed, in spite of the large sums of money from international sources spent in a number of projects. The basic reason is that the multiple value of forests --as a basic resource for local economies, a tool for environmental control, and a harbour for biodiversity-- have been ignored. More importantly, the issues of land tenure and indigenous peoples' rights, strongly related to the forest problem, have not been addressed.

Unless the above and other direct and underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation are urgently addressed, megabiodiversity in the Philippines will continue being under threat and future Geography book vegetation maps may show a totally different picture.

Article based on information from: "Deforestation in Philippines Preview of Things to Come",
Worldwide Forest/Biodiversity Campaign News, 6/3/2001;