

BIOSPHERE RESERVES IN THE PHILIPPINES

AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

PUERTO GALERA BIOSPHERE RESERVE

Puerto Galera Biosphere Reserve (PGBR) has been tagged as the Amazing Puerto Galera, because of its excellent biodiversity that is host to several endemic flora and fauna. It is a tourism destination that offers a nature healing experience.

The local economy of PGBR primarily depends on its Tourism Industry. During the past three years, Puerto Galera had been gaining almost half a million tourist arrivals annually catered by its pristine ridge to reef multiverse habitat.

But recently, PGBR had suffered a great loss in its economy when the National Government placed the town to a quarantine status due to the widespread of COVID19. Had the pandemic did not happen; the town's tourism could have gained its peak during the last few months since it is the summer season. Restrictions to reduce human interaction have created a great socioeconomic hardship. This disruption is truly unprecedented.

The 1,048 registered business establishments with 3,624 workers and 1,729 transport sector members suffered the most during the pandemic. The local economy had been struggling during the past months and the most essential needs of the populace had been the priority of the government. The Tourism industry and all its programs were literally sidelined.

Technically, placing the entire municipality into a strict quarantine status has had some beneficial effects to the biosphere reserve. Traffic congestion in many tourism sites had been significantly reduced, skies became clearer as reflected by the regular ambient sampling done by the environment office, water quality had improved a lot and marine species had obviously increased in number, forest ecosystem had also welcomed a more vivid presence of wildlife. While some of these impacts might be considered beneficial to the environment, negative consequences had also emerged, including cascading effects to poverty, food security, mental health, disaster preparedness and more demand from the biodiversity.

Understanding the immediate plea of the situation for a more concrete solution, the local government unit of PGBR has created a task force to specifically manage all the recovery programs and projects and enacted the Recovery Development Interventions - Plans and Operations (RDI-PO) that is aimed to help all the sectors in Puerto Galera to cope with the new normal. Specifically, the course of action is geared Recovery Development Interventions - Plans and Operations (RDI-PO) Republic of the Philippines Province of Oriental Mindoro MUNICIPALITY OF PUERTO GALERA towards providing a risk and health free environment for everyone.

Using of the rich biodiversity, both the forest and marine reserves, PGBR is aimed to focus on livelihood programs for a more sustainable income for the locals. New normal policies were implemented through enactment of ordinances and new

policies. The local government believes that the only way forward is to truly focus and invest on sustainable green recovery in order to prepare the biosphere reserve to face all the challenges of the current pandemic as well as the threats of climate change and biodiversity collapse.



Through “Serbisyong Responsible at Direktang Implementasyon – Serbisyong RDI” different programs were initiated for the members of the community of the PGBR and the environment, some of which are: distribution of chicks and goats for poultry industry to enhance economic recovery, seedlings for backyard garden and tree growing activities for greener environment, motor for fishing boats and fishing gears for fisher folks, financial grants for cooperatives and local organizations for people empowerment, deputation of more bantay dagat and bantay gubat personnel for regulation and sustainable use of the biosphere, conduct of information and education campaigns on health, sanitation, environment rehabilitation and green economy.



The local government stressed a reformatted branding of Puerto Galera Biosphere Reserve as an upgraded version of home away from home (a safe destination), being a more accessible destination (less movement/less exposure to risk) at a more cost effective and maximum value for money (expenses equates to quality of experience), where safety and security does not compromise a more exciting, fun, and one-of-a-kind experience anchored on:

- ✓ Reinvented Visitor Fulfillment
- ✓ Revitalized Social Equity
- ✓ Refreshed Employment Quality
- ✓ Rebuilt Prosperity and Economic Viability

PALAWAN BIOSPHERE RESERVE

The Republic Act No. 7611 or the Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) for Palawan Act, enacted in 1992, serves as an avenue for reinforcing and advancing sustainable development in Palawan. The SEP is armed with ECAN or the Environmentally Critical Areas Network which is a graded system that provides evaluation for environmental protection and development within the whole province. And through SEP Law, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development was tasked to be the implementer of its corresponding environmental programs and policies that are inclined to protect the Palawan biosphere.

As it is designed to withstand the different environmental issues and bear the responsibility of protecting Palawan, a model biosphere reserve in the Philippines, the PCSD, on its 28th year in 2020, was confronted with the dangers brought by the COVID 19-pandemic.

Consequently, the operations of the agency have been adjusted in line with the safety protocols that are strictly observed in and out of the office. The Palawan Council for Sustainable Development and its staff have relied heavily on technology in terms of conducting meetings and events. For the past year, the Council adopted the “blended” type of meeting, where participants can opt to attend virtually or personally in a session. Also, events were successfully conducted virtually in 2020; two of which were: The Youth Sustainability Virtual Camp and the Blue Environment: Coastal and Marine Ecosystems Webinar, attended by a total of 150 participants.

In so far as the agency’s regulatory functions and activities, the PCSD has commenced the operationalization of the Biodiversity Resource Access Information Network or the BRAIN System in 2020-- a “user-driven online and offline platform” developed by the agency in partnership with USAID through the Protect Wildlife Project. Its function is to cater to all the permit applications, as well as reports regarding the wildlife and other administrative functions that were normally processed manually in the office. Although the PCSDS has encountered problems due to the limitation in staff mobility that issues permits due to COVID-19, it was given remedy by the efficiency of BRAIN to virtually process different transactions.

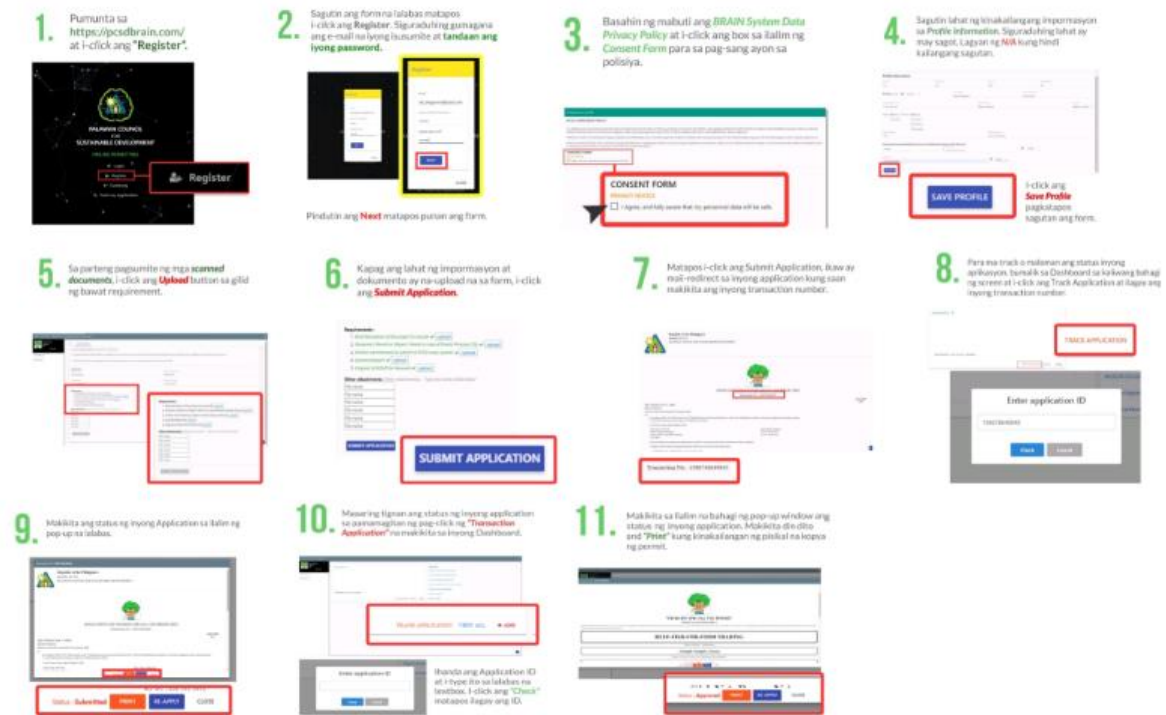


Figure 1. BRAIN System registration process

The website of Palawan Knowledge Platform (PKP) was also productively used during the first year of the pandemic. The PCSDS was still able to maintain PKP as a knowledge sharing hub, utilizing it as an archive of data, including that of the Geographic Information System (GIS), agency’s published literature, and summaries of PKP meetings, both personally and virtually.

Additionally, the PCSD has rightfully expanded its role from protecting our natural resources to the protection of our territory by being a member of the Information and Education Task Group (IECTG) of the Area Task Force - West (ATF-West). The PCSDS currently serves as the Chairperson of this Strategic and Operational Planning (SOP), in partnership with local government agencies in Palawan to stand firmly in our jurisdiction of the West Philippine Sea (WPS) and formulate programs and activities geared to compiling reports and disseminating relevant information to the Filipino laymen, especially those communities who reside within the Kalayaan Island Group, about the current condition of the West Philippine Sea.

Amid the dangers of COVID-19 and in terms of Wildlife Conservation, Monitoring, and Enforcement, the PCSDS organized 8 Consultation Planning Workshops for Victoria-Anepahan Mountain Range (VAMR) and Cleopatra’s Needle Critical Habitat (CNCH), and an in-house study focusing on the population status and current distribution of Palawan’s two threatened and endemic wildlife species, the Palawan bearded pig (*Sus ahoenobarbus*) and the Palawan peacock-pheasant (*Polyplectron napoleonis*), among others.

The PCSDS Enforcement Team, on the other hand, was able to continue the apprehension of wildlife species, more importantly so, given that the lockdown measures in most areas mean an opportunity for the environmental perpetrators to heighten their operations. For 2020, the team has recorded a total of 125 rescued and

turned-over wildlife: 61 of which are mammals, 38 are reptiles, and 26 birds. These wildlife species are worth Php 65,870,090.



Figure 2. Buried Giant Clams, locally known as “Taklobo,” were confiscated during one of the apprehension procedures of the PCSD Enforcement Team on 10 December 2020 in Sitio Marangbuwaya, Igang-Igang, Bataraza, Palawan.

All of these while passing a total of 61 resolutions for the year 2020. These data were under the following core/concept areas formulated by the PCSD and the PCSDS, which are:

1. Rule Setting and Governance
2. Behaviour Change
3. Systems and Networks
4. Knowledge Generation and Management
5. Partner Engagement

Indeed, the PCSD, despite the drastic adjustment it went through for the sake of safety and prevention of the spread of the COVID-19 virus, continues to be productive and resilient for Palawan, Palaweños, and Filipinos.

ALBAY BIOSPHERE RESERVE

The Albay Biosphere Reserve (ABR) was not spared from the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the restrictions in movement of the people as recommended by the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on COVID-19, only a few projects and activities as stated in the approved ABRM plan were implemented. Below are the activities in the ABR implemented within the pandemic period.

For the Management Strategies in the Core Zone, the ABRMC secretariat participated in the meeting of Albay Tourism Officers Association (ALTOA) to campaign for the inclusion/adaptation of the ABR Management Plan in their respective Local Tourism Development Plans (LTDPs).



As for the Transition Zone, only two (2) Management Strategies, namely, Promote ABR Ecotourism Circuit and Encourage Responsible Tourism had activities for the pandemic period. The activities were the production of the “Albay Muna, Albay Naman “ AVP featuring the ABR Ecotourism Circuits. The aim is to promote the local destinations, culture and the arts and trade and industry in the ABR to entice more visitors when the situation allows. In preparation for the arrival of the tourists, the ABRMC conducted an inspection of the destinations within the ABR to ensure health protocols are in place so as not to spread COVID-19 in their respective areas.



Another project implemented in the ABR was the Albay For Beautification Clean and Green (AFBCG) where a barangay and city/municipal based competition was held to beautify the surroundings and to plant vegetables to ensure food security amidst the pandemic.

