



STEWARDS OF THE MOUNTAIN

Well before the arrival of modern societies, indigenous peoples have relied upon traditional knowledge and practices to benefit from the resources provided by their natural habitats.

As traditional managers of the Earth's natural resources, indigenous peoples (IPs) should not be treated as mere beneficiaries, but rather as primary stakeholders and actors in biodiversity conservation and sustainable development initiatives.

The Manobo and Talaandig of the Mt. Kalatungan range have for centuries taken care of their sacred mountain, on which slopes their people have lived in since the Philippines was first populated by humans.

They know every nook and cranny of the mountain and every plant and animal species they share it with. And it is this intense familiarity that breeds respect. A respect that ensures the mountain and its attendant bounty will not fall into harm as long as the tribes are there to manage and protect it.

For the Manobo occupying its slopes, Mt. Kalatungan is sacred, and it is essentially this perception that the tribe nurtured a close and protective relationship with the environment. The mountain's sanctity is explained in the tribe's belief that it is where unseen spirits live, where their ancestors came from, the source of all tribal knowledge, their pharmacy, and their source of livelihood.

To the Manobo, use of the mountain's resources has always been governed by their beliefs and practical knowledge of taking just enough at the right time and place, using the right method and with due permission and respect to the spirits. Otherwise, they might incur the wrath of the spirits and bring upon them sickness, crop and hunting failures, and disasters.

Datu Herminio "Minio" Guinto of the *Nagkahiusang Manobong Manununod sa Yutang Kabilin (NAMAMAYUK)*¹ in Barangay Bacusanon, Pangantucan, Bukidnon, gave a concrete example of this sustainable use of resources.

There was a bird the Manobo called *Mangawang*, which buried its eggs in the ground and covered it with dried leaves and other debris. On top of this covering, another bird lays its eggs, covering them also with dried leaves and debris. This process goes on until the mound is a little higher than the ground.

The Manobo would gather the eggs starting from the bottom-most nest, careful not to disturb the other layers and leaving enough eggs to sustain the bird's existence. When the outsiders came, they

¹ NAMAMAYUK is one of the seven indigenous peoples organizations (IPOs) of the Mt. Kalatungan range

Box 1. Mt. Kalatungan mountain range

Mt. Kalatungan is the country's fifth highest peak, with an elevation 2,287 meters above sea level (masl). It is part of the Mt. Kalatungan Range Natural Park (MKaRNP), which has an estimated area of 55,692 hectares (ha.). The natural park consists of 24,732.18 ha. classified as protected area (PA) and approximately 30,889.25 ha. categorized as buffer zone.

The MKaRNP covers parts of Valencia City and the three municipalities of Pangantucan, Talakag, and Maramag, all in Bukidnon province. A total of 21 barangays are located in and around the park.

Mt. Kalatungan is sometimes called the "twin" mountain of nearby Mt. Kitanglad, and the two mountain ranges have strong cultural, historical, and biological ties.

MKaRNP was declared a protected area under the natural park category via the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) through Presidential Proclamation No. 305 issued in May 2000.

The park is home to 429 species that endangered, endemic, economically, and socially important to Philippine biodiversity such as the Philippine eagle, Philippine deer and Philippine wild pig, several species of mountain rodents, as well as 109 species of mosses.

Source: Department of Environment and Natural Resources (http://faspselib.denr.gov.ph/sites/default/files//IEC/panels-05_0.jpg)

gathered the eggs at random, disturbing all the nests and leaving nothing behind. Thus, the bird has gone extinct.

The indigenous peoples of Kalatungan also cut down trees – they do have to build shelter and furniture, and need firewood to cook – but never indiscriminately, excessive, and with the accompanying rituals to appease the spirits.

From their sacred forests, the IPs source the trees for building their *Tulugan* (tribal hall and altar) and the medicinal herbs used by the *baylans* (priests and healers).



Even their governance structure is built around the protection of the environment.

Sacred forests

Their sacred forests, found deeper into the mountain, hold an even stronger significance. Called *Igmale'ng'en* by the Talaandig and *Idsesenggilaha* by the Manobo, these sacred forests represent everything that is pure and strong, and their conservation ensures the community's continued existence and survival.

For the Talaandig, the sacred forests of Mt. Kalatungan are home to the tallest and hardest trees, it is where the cleanest waters will always flow, where the waters never run dry, where the deer and wild boar will always roam, and most importantly, where the *Kalumbata*² will always fly free (De Vera and Guina, 2008).

Datu Johnny Guina, head of the Talaandig from Barangay Portulin and president of the Portulin Talaandig Tribal Association, Inc. (PTTA, Inc.),³ reveals that members of the tribe hunting for deer and wild boar frequently sighted the Philippine Eagle on the mountain. They even know when the eagle is around because the monkeys will suddenly be restless.

² Local term for Philippine Eagle (*Pithecopaga Jeffryi*)

³ PTTA, Inc. is also one of the seven IP organizations of the Mt. Kalatungan range

It is forbidden for the Talaandig and Manobo to hunt the eagle because, according to lore, it is the mount of the gods.

“Before I was born, there was a member of the tribe who shot down an eagle. He got sick and the *baylans* tried everything to treat him. He eventually died. The *baylans* said that the man incurred the ire of the gods because he shot down an eagle, which is being ridden by one of them. After that, nobody tried to shoot down an eagle again,” Datu Johnny reveals.

The sacred forests are restricted even to members of the tribe. Only the *baylans* are free to enter. Ordinary members have to ask for permission from the *baylans* and undergo a ritual before being allowed to enter. No person may establish residence within the sacred forest.

Strict rules are followed whenever members of the community enter the sacred forest. These include talking at a very low volume, not using any foul language, not pointing at any unique flora and fauna, and not leaving any foreign objects behind.

Indigenous forest management and conflict resolution mechanisms

Enforcement of these rules falls on the shoulders of the *datu* and the *baylans*, with help from indigenous forest guards called *bantay lasang* (literally *forest guards*).

The Talaandig and Manobo believe that the rules governing their interaction with their environment are defined by the forest spirits and are then passed on (through dreams according to the elders) to the *baylans*. These rules are strictly enforced through the intercession of the *datu*.

The *datu* resolves conflicts arising from actual or perceived transgressions against the forests through dialogue and a ritual offering ceremonial sacrifices to appease the spirits. Punishment for a proven transgression is left to the spirits who are believed to cast a spell on the offending party or parties, although the *datu* may also

impose a fine and confiscate the contraband and materials used in the transgressions.

While large-scale logging activities on Mt. Kalatungan have entirely ceased due to the lack of hardwoods which were decimated during the logging boom in the area from the 1960s to the 1980s, the forests of Mt. Kalatungan and the ancestral domains of the Talaandig and Manobo are still under threat from small-scale logging and the influx of migrants to the area. These migrants conduct clearing activities to make the land fit for planting and also poach flora and fauna.

Some indigenous people, in desperate times, also conduct illegal activities but these are dealt with by the tribe's governance structures. It is the migrants – with their modern tools and funding from businessmen – which the tribes are wary of. They still remember the destruction brought about by the government's various resettlement programs in the 1930s to the 1950s, and the logging boom from the 1960s to the 1980s. Thus, the Manobo and Talaandig are more on guard this time.

In fact, even children are employed by the community to watch out for poachers and illegal entrants, as children are least likely to be suspected of reporting to the authorities by those who wish to do harm to the forest. This way, the adults also pass on to the children the importance of safeguarding their forest and ancestral lands.

Helping hands in the forest

It is very easy to get lost within the dense foliage of Mt. Kalatungan. Even the IPs living on its slopes sometimes encounter a situation in which they have to decide which trail to take. Once again, indigenous systems provide an answer.

Indigenous people inhabiting the slopes of Mt. Kalatungan, could easily spot signs left behind by others. Sometimes these signs are obvious for all to see, such as an 'X' formed from grass or leaves warning travellers not to take a particular trail. Sometimes, the sign

is not so obvious as when a small knot (also using a blade of grass or a vine) is made on a trunk of tree, informing passers-by of a “lost and found object” safely secured higher up on the tree.

There is also a sign that the Manobo call *banga-banga*, that points out food and other survival stuff left for those who get lost in the forest. This usually takes the form of an unlighted safety match (*posporo*) left outside a seemingly abandoned hunter’s hut. When a Manobo sees this, it means that there is food inside and anyone can partake of it. The person who partakes of the generosity then leaves a sign, sort of a tribal thank you note. If the beneficiary is feeling more generous, she or he may leave an item of value as a token of gratitude.

“Even though we are poor, we think of other people’s welfare. We think of the possibility that someone may get lost in the forest so we leave food behind so that others may benefit from it.”

“Even though we are poor, we think of other people’s welfare. We think of the possibility that someone may get lost in the forest so we leave food that we were not able to consume behind so that others may benefit from it,”
Datu Minio shares.

This system was even used by the enumerators of the Social Tenure Domain Model (STDM) participatory survey and mapping activity conducted under the

project: *Improving Tenure Security of Smallholder Farmers in Select Areas in the Philippines.*⁴

⁴ Implemented by Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) and Xavier Science Foundation, Inc. (XSF), the project is supported by the Global Land Tool Network (GLTN) as facilitated by UN-Habitat and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

During the survey of agricultural lots, the enumerators put signs on lots that they were not able to survey, so that when they return they would know which lots to work on next.

Mitigating the effects of tourism on the sacred mountain

Being the country's fifth highest mountain, Mt. Kalatungan is a draw for hikers and mountaineers. The Mt. Kalatungan and Mt. Lumpangan (also known as Mt. Wiji) traverse have become quite popular that mountaineers from as far as Manila visit the area. The climb is being managed by the Pangantucan Tourism Office, who employs Manobo and Talaandig as guides.

Portulin and Bacusanon are among the entry or exit points for the climb and whose local government units have been authorized by the Tourism Office to collect fees, which the locals appreciate but still deem too small for the potential destruction tourism will bring to their sacred lands.

The Talaandig of Barangay Portulin take cash, but the Manobo of Bacusanon require climbers to buy five seedlings, which the tribe will plant on the mountain. This way, the Manobo believe that they appease the spirits and somehow mitigate the disturbance and potential destruction that climbers will bring.

As is the custom of tribal communities, a ritual is performed before the start of the climb, to ensure that the climbers will find favor with the spirits.

Tenurial security key to sustaining the forest

The Manobo and Talaandig communities who live on Mt. Kalatungan continue to maintain their ancestral lands, including the mountain forests, in spite of tremendous pressures by various factors and interest groups.

In spite of the challenges they face, the Manobo and Talaandig are committed to maintain their sacred lands as these ensure their existence as a distinct indigenous cultural community.

Their indigenous conservation practices ensure that the lowland farming communities continue to benefit from irrigation and drinking water, and that the sound ecological balance of the province of Bukidnon perdures due to the maintenance of the forests.

Thus, they demand official recognition for their role as stewards of the forest and for the invaluable service that they continue to render.

Realizing the importance of tenurial security and to be able to gain official recognition, the Manobo of Bacusanon and the Talaandig of Portulin have each applied for a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT), which have been languishing for over 10 years.

They demand that the government immediately approve their application for CADT, as this will give them the benefit of “legal” recognition, lay the framework for their interaction with other entities such as government and private institutions, and allow them to better conserve and manage the resources within their ancestral domains.

Protected area: a boon and a bane

The declaration of Mt. Kalatungan as a Protected Area under the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) Act of 1992 has provided an additional layer of protection to the biodiversity of the Manobo and Talaandig ancestral lands. However, the rights and roles of the indigenous communities in the management of their ancestral domain must not be sacrificed in the name of collective participation, efficiency, and legality.

They have been stewards of the mountain since time immemorial, and this must be respected not only now but also for generations to come.

Collaboration a key to recognition

As challenges to their stewardship become more complex, the Manobo and Talaandig recognize the need for collaboration with other groups. They welcome the support of government and private entities as long as their interventions are culturally sensitive and not environmentally destructive, and respect the IPs' primary rights as stewards of the land.

The Manobo and Talaandig of Mt. Kalatungan see these initiatives as very important to broadening their and others' understanding of communities and conservation efforts. Collaborative opportunities will also make everyone aware of the stakes in conserving Mt. Kalatungan's valuable ecosystems. ■