

# The Real Score: Palawan's Forest Remains the Country's Largest

Amid the growing concern over the threats confronting Palawan's forest, its green velvety sprawl remains the largest expanse in the entire Philippines representing about 11.3% of the country's total forest cover. With the 2005 SPOT 5 satellite imageries using remote sensing techniques as the basis of interpretation, PCSDS' data show that Palawan still has 666,338 has., representing about 46% of its total land area. This is nestled mostly in the mountain ranges dissecting mainland Palawan. Palawan takes pride of its 46 % forest cover exceeding the regional forest covers of the 15 regions recorded for the 17 regions in the country not to mention the province's 58,000 has. of mangrove forest representing 38% or one-third span in the entire country.

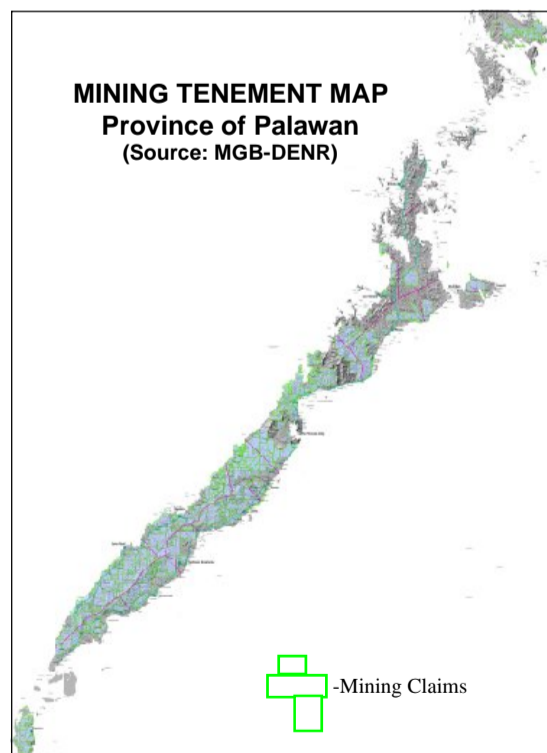
Apparently, the growing concern of the alleged alarming decline in forest cover was prompted by the comparative data on forest cover between 1992 and 2005. In 1992, Palawan's forest was recorded at 738,886 has representing about 52 % of Palawan's total land area. In 2005, forest cover went down to 46 % appearing to have declined by about 6% (5,500 has. per year) for the last 13 years (1992-2005).

One of the major factors for decrease in forest cover could be attributed mostly to conversion of public lands into alienable and disposable to support the government's land titling and agrarian land reform programs. The reported forest loss is comparatively very low as deforestation rate was a record high at 19,000 has./year in the early 80's before the SEP Law was passed" says Romeo Dorado, OIC-Exec. Director of the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development Staff (PCSDS).



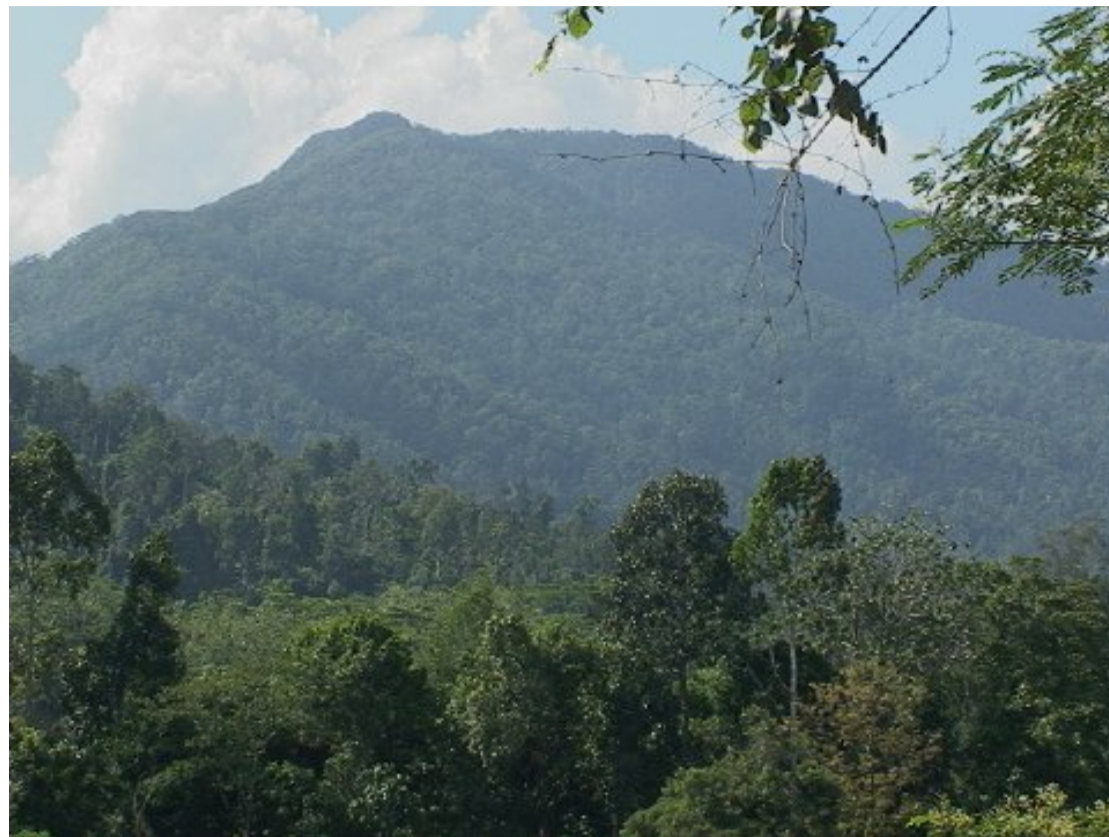
The 19,000 hectares annual deforestation rate was estimated by foreign and Filipino consultants of the EEC-funded Integrated Environmental Program (IEP) of the Palawan Integrated Area Development Project Office (PIADPO), the forerunner of PCSDS. The output of the IEP was the Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) which was later legislated into a special environmental law for Palawan by virtue of RA 7611.

Decrease in forest cover is a common scenario in most of developing countries in Southeast Asia to accommodate development (activities) so as to sustain the needs of fast-growing population. "In Palawan however, forest utilization for economic endeavours is in safer grounds and at a slower pace, as we have ECAN, the main strategy of the SEP Law" says Dorado. ECAN is a graded system of protection and development control for the entire province.



## Mining Status under SEP

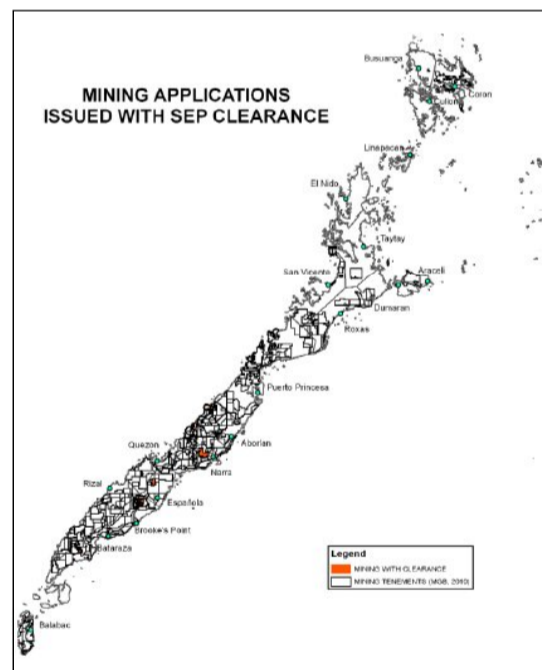
Further opening Palawan to mining has become a reverberating issue not only locally but nationally and internationally as well. NGO sector and some sectors of civil society blame mining as the main culprit for Palawan's deforestation. "But this allegation is grossly inaccurate and lacking in well established data support" stressed Dorado. For instance, PCSDS scientific findings directly relate actual loss of the standing trees in Palawan not primarily due to mining but to continuing harvest of timber for domestic consumption, forest land use conversion for agricultural development and continuous establishment of human settlements to



Lush forests still exist from the northern down to the southern part of mainland Palawan - a reality we can be proud of as we join the whole world in the celebration of 2011 International Year of Forests.

accommodate the Province's increasing population growth rate at an average of 3.5% per annum, mostly due to in-migration.

Moreover, the disastrous forest fires experienced in 1998 that engulfed southern Palawan particularly Bulanjao Range and Mt. Mantalingahan tip was aggravated by the El Nino phenomenon. The 1998 forest fires practically shaved off a substantial portion of the existing natural forest. Significantly, DAR's implementation of CARP Law for the past 2 decades which necessitate issuance of CLOAs including the national government's land titling program implemented by the land Management Bureau of the DENR likewise converted about 35,260 has. of the forest



lands in southern and central Palawan into A&D. This forest land use conversion represented almost 50% of the forest loss.

## Areas Approved for Mining

The national leadership of the Philippine government has identified mining as one of the key industries to be developed in its efforts to secure funds for financing public sector investments. The impact of this national policy is the influx of mining applications within the last five (5) years, especially in 2007. This served as leverage to SEP's sustainable development objectives.

The PCSDS, the agency tasked to implement SEP in Palawan realized that balancing development and the preservation of environment under varying interests and agenda of stakeholders and key players both within and outside Palawan with regards to mining is a gargantuan and difficult task.

Following the established ECAN guidelines, the PCSDS ensures that these areas are situated in less vulnerable areas such as the Controlled-Use, traditional-use and multiple-use zones. The PCSDS' records show that out of the total 47,957 has. applied for mining in the province, the Council only granted Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) Clearance covering an aggregate area of about 17,745 has. or only about 2.6 % of the 666,338 remaining forest. Out of these, only 1,557 hectares or 0.2% is allowed for actual mining operation while the larger part was restricted for mining exploration.

As of date, there are 429 pending mining tenement applications with the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB)-DENR covering approximately 742,438.38

has. or roughly 50% of the total Palawan area. If all these will be subjected to mining, one can imagine that practically no more forests will be left in Palawan. But the PCSDS confidently say that with SEP Law's main strategy - the Environmentally Critical Area Network or ECAN, most of areas covered by these applications will not prosper since most of the mining claims fall within the restricted and core zones (or protection zones) where mining activity is definitely not allowed.

## The ECAN, SEP Law and the PCSD

The central strategy of the SEP Law is a zoning strategy called the ECAN (Environmentally Critical Areas Network). ECAN is a graded system of protection and development control over the whole province.



It is strategically configured to protect environmentally critical habitats. Generally, the core area is strictly protected to meet conservation objectives.

Around the core area, the buffer zone is delimited for non-extractive uses, while the transition area is where sustainable development activities with local communities are organized. All 23 municipalities of Palawan and the City of Puerto Princesa have adopted their ECAN zones maps for their respective planning and regulatory agenda.

Innate in the Law is the PCSD (Palawan Council for Sustainable Development) charged with implementing the Law in Palawan. It is practically composed of a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary representations of Palawan leaders and sector-representatives. It is presently headed by the Governor of Palawan as chair.

## SEP Law is for Sustainable Development

PCSD's mandate is to ensure sustainable development and not merely environmental protection. And as a national government agency, it has to be supportive of the national policy where mining is one of the national government's flagship projects.

Issuance of SEP Clearance to mining claims is a shared responsibility among the stakeholders such



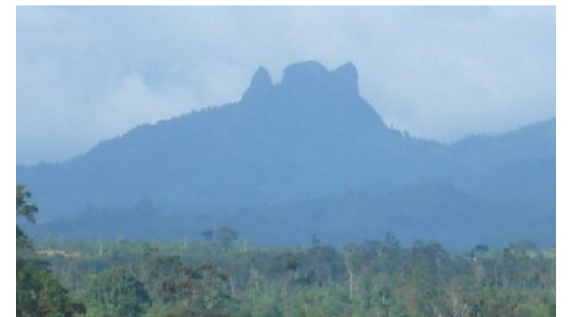
Palawan's local government units took part in crafting each municipality's Environmentally Critical Areas Network map.



that before PCSD acts on all project applications, the endorsements of the Local Government Units (Barangay/ Municipal Council, Provincial Board) and the Indigenous People Communities are required.

Unlike in other provinces, ECAN of the SEP Law assures that highly vulnerable areas in the province will not be subject to any (not just mining) extractive development activities, and will be maintained free of human shovelling hands. This means a long-term guarantee of protecting around 565,400 has. located in the core and restricted zones, it follows that these are guaranteed for protection.

Dorado opined "balancing environmental protection with that of economic development is a tough job but to favor 0.2% for mining operations or 2.8% (including exploration) of its total area located in allowable areas for mining will definitely not tilt down the balance between environmental protection and development. PCSD is aware, that the future should not be compromised to ensure intra-generational equity," he said.



## SEP Clearance Compliance Monitoring

Companies whose mining applications were issued SEP Clearances are strictly required by the PCSD to engage in responsible mining. This concern is spelled out in the terms and conditions of the SEP Clearance.

To minimize negative environmental impacts, mining companies have to make sure that mitigating measures are followed (i. e. every felled tree has to be replaced), including the installation of anti-erosion and other measures. Non-compliance of these may lead to cancellation of the SEP Clearance.

## A Positive but Challenging Indicator

The appreciable change in deforestation rates from 19,000 hectares per year (1978-1983) to 5,500 hectares (1992-2005) can be a positive indicator that the pressures on the forest have somehow eased. However, PCSDS believe that there is a need to pause considering the consequent loss of biodiversity and the loss of ecological service values brought about by land conversion.

With the changing climate, rains are heavier and more intensified, dry spells are as extreme. The PCSDS is now assessing these changes so that immediate policies will be posted to serve as early warning device. As it did in banning small scale mining before, once scientific justification signals, pushing the button for the ban of large scale mining operations in Palawan may soon be a possibility.

The remaining forest cover of Palawan is a huge foam for carbon stock sequestrations calculated at 206.6 million metric tons of carbon (PCSDS 2010). Using a conservative carbon price of US\$15/tC, the total economic value of carbon stocks of Palawan forests can be estimated at PhP 130.1 trillion. Carbon stock market for Palawan therefore is feasible.

"We should take pride that despite all these, Palawan maintains its status as the province with the largest carbon sink in the country. PCSD continuously commit not to compromise the sustainable development agenda of Palawan that it is mandated to do. However, it is important for everyone to understand that sustainable development is not just environmental protection. There is a growing number of mouths to feed, roads to build, and contributions to national vision



of economic stability without forgetting its commitment to making it truly a "Man and a Biosphere Reserve". We believe it can be done as sustainable development is just a matter of striking the correct balance" says Dorado.

PCSDS Executive Director Romeo B. Dorado