

Cockatoos call from the wild
By Jofelle Tesorio
Narra, Palawan

They used to poach the endangered Philippine cockatoos and sell for P50 each. Now, they swore never to go back to their illegal trade after being hired as wardens of the island that is home to hundreds of rare flora and fauna.

Aguilardo Deig, a Tagbanua, is among the eight wardens hired by the Katala Foundation, Inc that implements the Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Program (PCCP) in Palawan, to protect Rasa Island.

Rasa, the pilot site of the PCCP, is a 8.34sq km coral island in the Sulu Sea, just off Narra town, 85km from Palawan's capital Puerto Princesa City.

Deig, also called Agui, is tasked with monitoring Rasa and other mainland sites where cockatoos (*Cacatua haematuropygia*), known in Filipino as katala, usually dwell.

Deig is the president of the Sagip Katala Movement, which checks the cockatoos and other species of conservation concern, such as the green parrots, pigeon egrets, Nicobar pigeon, brown shrike, blue-headed racquet-tail, sea cow, (dugong), marine turtle and other species thriving in the forest and coastal marine areas.

Rasa has 98 recorded species.

Monitoring birds on the island is not an easy job; it requires special skills that not everyone can acquire. In the case of Deig and other wardens, being former bird poacher is an advantage.

More than listing down sightings of cockatoos and other species, they climb 30-meter trees, where birds' nests are found. They occasionally check the status of the hatchlings. When one of them is not well, the wardens act as nurses, feeding them with special food.

"We have a great responsibility to the birds," Deig said in Filipino.

Deig saw how the cockatoos decreased in number in Rasa when many people in his community turned to poaching. When he started his illegal trade in 1982, there were about 200 cockatoos in the island. He knew because a tree could be a roosting place for 30 birds.

From December to June, when the birds bred, his group could catch 30 birds in just five days.

Deig has realized that they gain nothing from poaching. They sold each bird for P50, but sellers in Manila were pricing for P500. Now, the bird is sold in pet shop for about P1,500 each.

Considering the costs of the birds and the effect of their absence on the ecosystem, Deig said that he now preferred to be a warden. Poaching, he said, was not sustainable.

As poaching activities continued, the number of birds dropped to only 24.

In 1998, the Katala Foundation, led by German conservationist Peter Widmann, started the conservation program. Widmann was later joined by another conservation expert, Indira Dayang Lacerna. Love for their work brought them together and led to marriage.

It was through the couple's effort that the Rasa cockatoos obtained help from funding agencies. The first thing that the Widmanns did was to recruit wardens from among the poachers.

Support

"It was never easy dealing with former poachers because they thought that we took away their livelihood," said Siegfried Diaz, Katala field operations coordinator.

Diaz, local conservation expert, recalled a lot' of brushes with the local community when they started the program. He was challenged to a fist fight and a knife duel because of the project. Today, he just laughs off the incidents because they have proven that it was worth all the effort.

Diaz said it was also important that the local government of Narra supported the program because facilitated getting the people's approval.

With assistance from local officials and international organizations such as the Loro Parque Fundacion of Spain, Chester Zoological Gardens of London, Conservation International of the United States, Cepa (Conservation des Especies et des Populations Animales) of France, ZGAP (Zoologische Gesellschaft fur Arten-und Populationsschutz e.V.) of Germany and United Nations Development Programme-Small Grants Program, Katala has sustained all the conservation activities in Rasa.

Since the project began in 1998, the number of cockatoos has gone up from 24 to 110.

"I have learned a lot here. We have learned good manners," said Deig, who never had formal education. Because of the exposure and training as a warden, he has become candid and smart.

Safety

Diaz said they taught the wardens to write their reports in English but did not force them to do it so long they could communicate what they had done and observed on the island.

The wardens have learned to become creative to make the climbing easier and less risky, he said. Wardens Doy Alisto, 27 and Edwin Batac, 33, showed how to use an improvised harness made of sack and the ladder they invented to climb the huge trees.

No matter hoe experienced the climbers may be, safety is still the paramount concern of the Katala Foundation, Diaz said. Beside, he said, it was almost impossible to climb a 30-meter tree with a trunk equivalent to the combined length of the stretched arms of five persons.

Some tree species could easily die with just a small cut.

For the wardens' protection, they were given insurance policies, Diaz said.

The morning for the wardens starts with coffee and a heavy breakfast of rice and dried fish. Then they go to their designated areas. Rasa is a huge island and circling it by foot could take a day or so.

Each warden climbs at least four trees a day, depending on the weather. When it rains, the trunks are slippery.

Climbing activities end after the breeding season. The wardens just monitor other species and guard the area against poachers.

Residents are still allowed to gather honey and other forest products, but they have to ask for permission from the wardens, who are deputized by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to apprehend poachers.

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