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PRESS BRIEF

Petitions against coal plant near Rasa Cockatoo Sanctuary mounts

By: Katala Foundation Inc.

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY – Nearly 70,000 signatures here and abroad have been gathered petitioning the Chair of the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development, Gov. Abraham Kahlil Mitra, to revert its decision against the proposal of the construction and operation of the DMCI coal power plant in Panacan, Narra, Palawan, Philippines. Most of the signatories are from people showing a sincere concern for Palawan and who are actual or potential visitors to this Province. The construction of the coal plant could severely damage the so far well-maintained image of Palawan as last ecological frontier and one of the most desirable ecotourism destinations. The online signature campaigns were run in three different venues at Rainforest rescue <https://www.rainforest-rescue.org/mailalert/911/philippines-power-plant-threatens-rare-cockatoos>, www.change.org/katala and a locally initiated one at www.change.org/HindiCoolAngCoal.

“Sana po ay pakinggan nila ang daing ng mga petitioners. Hinihiling ko po na gaya sa Sanguniang Bayan ng Narra na naging katulong namin na umaayaw at ganun din po ang Punong Ehekutibo nila na aming Mayor na umaayaw din, ay suportahan nila ang desisyon na e-reject ang proyektong ito”, pleads lead local petitioner Rolando “Landot” Esperancilla from Panacan to PCSD. Nong Landot’s local petition has gathered more than 2000 signatures from directly hit barangays of Panacan 1 & 2. This had submitted to PCSD but fell on deaf ears.

PCSD did it again!

Contrary to Gov. Mitra's statement in the March 22nd PCSD meeting that the next meeting would be after the elections, a PCSD meeting was held on April 26 in Manila under the leadership of Vice Chair Dave Ponce De Leon despite the absence of a quorum. In this meeting, the “conditional SEP clearance” was lifted and gave DMCI full approval of their proposal. The four members who voted for this decision were Dave Ponce De Leon, Brown Sandoval, Ramon Zabala and PNP Director Macalan Jr. Ponce De Leon and Zabala are authors of Provincial

Resolution 4955-02 recognizing the significant contributions of the Sagip Katala Movement in the protection of the Philippine Cockatoo. Moreso, the Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Program coveted the Governor's Award for Environmental Protection in 2011. One wonders, why the rush? Are these not manifestations of a deeply flawed decision-making process? The six months or so that this issue is on PCSD's table is not enough reason to railroad its approval. Non-pollutive projects or sand and gravel permits also take even almost a year or more to get the nod of these politicians on seat. Why not allow more time to carefully study such a pollutive and destructive energy proposal?

In February, despite massive opposition and ignoring their own technical staff's recommendations, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development, chaired by Palawan Governor Abraham Mitra approved a "conditional SEP endorsement" to proponent DMCI.

Views of the many VS the right to private property

While the PCSD simply noted the submitted thousand signatures gathered against the proposed coal plant, it carefully heard one single cry of the owner of the property where the coal plant is proposed to be constructed in Panacan. Vice Chair Ponce De Leon has reiterated its concern over the right of this single person who happens to be according to research related to one of PALECO's Board of Directors. Conflict of interest, anyone?

The proposed coal-fired power plant of the DMCI to be constructed less than a kilometre away from Rasa Island Wildlife Sanctuary can "*has the potential to advance as single most serious threat for the survival of the critically endangered Philippine Cockatoo (locally known as Katala)*", says the resolution approved by the Wildlife Conservation Society of the Philippines (WCSP) and the Wild Bird Club of the Philippines (WBCP). Haribon Foundation opines "*that other considerations instead of sustainable development dominated the council's decision-making interests*".

Ella Jacildo from Pulpandan, Negros who fought against a coal plant in their town commented on change.org, "*There can never be sustainability with coal-fired power plants. Take it from our own experience here in Pulpandan of Negros Occidental where we had been rained and spewed with particulate matters, coal fines, obnoxious and acidic smoke from the smokestack of a coal-fired alcohol distillery in our town. Our plants and trees were affected due to wilting and searing of the leaves when hit by acid mists from the distillery. Our homes are dirty of dusts, fly ash and coal fines rotting our nipa roofs and rapidly corroding metal roofs and other metal fixtures inside and outside of homes. Chronic cough and obstructive respiratory diseases are experienced during periods when the pollution from the distillery falls toward our place*".

International organizations had been alarmed of the PCSD's action in particular how this could affect its stand as Man and Biosphere Program under the UNESCO. The International Union for the Conservation of Species and Natural Resources (IUCN) has already been notified of this unpleasant turn of events in the PCSD. PCSD also has a Memorandum of Agreement with the Katala Foundation for the conservation of the Philippine Cockatoo.

Against all odds

PCSD has ignored the absence of the endorsements from the Local Government of Narra and the Provincial Council for this proposed project when even renewals of sand and gravel permit calls for the submission of complete requirements from barangay, municipal to provincial endorsements. In most cases, a proposal cannot even be calendared as part of agenda in the PCSD council meeting when any of these endorsements is lacking. Why such an exclusion to the rule for this particular pollutive project? They say in the name of development and the purported power shortage in Palawan? Have they also considered studying or spending time if such claims are true? Or conveniently wax their ears and stay mum about the recommendations of their own technical staff? Since when is a project proposal approved without relevant documents submitted being used for its evaluation?

Apart from these obvious reasons, does this leadership forget about the investment they had done for environmental protection? The Municipality of Narra is and has been appropriating funds yearly for the protection of Rasa while the Provincial Government once spent some thousands also to help the Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Program. Is it government practice to give and forget?

The question is will DENR follow suit? Now that a full approval is pending, a full ECC could be easily at hand. Note that the official representative of DENR in the PCSD, USEC Adobo abstained during the voting for the full approval of the project in the April 26 meeting in Manila!

Palawan, the last stronghold of the Cockatoo

The Philippine cockatoo is listed as “Critically Endangered”. Only around 1,000 individuals are left in the wild of which about 750 is found in Palawan Biosphere Reserve and at least 260 (one quarter of the world population of the species) is found on Rasa Island Wildlife Sanctuary and the adjacent mainland), the proposed site for the coal plant. “Critically Endangered” is the highest threat category in the red list of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN); the next highest category would be ‘extinct in the wild’. Critically endangered species have an ‘extremely high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future’ according to this organisation.

The location of the coal plant would “*cut off the flight path of the cockatoo which is established through many years of monitoring of the species*”, says Peter Widmann, Scientific Director of the Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Program. KFI is working since 14 years in the area and has recovered the cockatoo population from originally 23-25 individuals to its present number applying intensive conservation efforts. Monitoring of the species commenced long before the coal plant was proposed on the site. Consequently, Rasa Island and the adjacent mainland have been recognized as “priority conservation sites” in the “Surublien: Strategies to Conserve Palawan’s Biodiversity, a joint action plan for which PCSD is a major project partner.

Risking lives of locals

Coal and its combustion can lead to a wide array of illnesses due to physical (mechanical, thermal, radioactive) and chemical properties of the material. These illnesses lead to premature deaths, as indicated in large-scale and statistically valid medical studies. In a recent study

conducted in Germany indicates that 67 assessed coal plants there lead to 33,000 years of premature death among the affected population and cause the loss of 700,000 working days per year due to illness. These connections are well established in the technical literature, although disputed by single members of the PCSD. The proponent DMCI Power Corporation intends to burn low-grade coal from their own mining site in Semirara. Local NGOs and community members are particularly worried by the heavy metals found in this coal which caused problems already in the mining site in form of elevated mercury concentrations in marine sediments and reported stunted growth of mangroves.

The affected communities near the planned plant in Palawan are mainly fisherfolks, and therefore there are concerns of bioaccumulation and –magnification of mercury and other long-lived pollutants in the relatively long marine food chains. A screening of wild fish tissue already indicated elevated levels for some heavy metals (0.012 mg/kg for carnivore fish, 0.048 mg/kg for a plankton-feeding fish for mercury), probably caused by runoff from mining sites in the foothills of Palawan. We now fear that an additional source could elevate these concentrations to unacceptable high levels.

Rasa Island supports a moderate ecotourism influx mainly through birdwatching which benefits local hotels, restaurants and boat operators. Rasa Island is promoted as one of the top-ten bird-watching destinations in the Philippines. Narra itself promotes rightly as the “Philippine Cockatoo Capital of the World”. Construction and operation of a power plant just beside Rasa Island would certainly negatively affect visitor numbers due expected impacts on biodiversity, particularly the Philippine Cockatoo.

Coal plant - a climate killer

Low grade coal like the one from Semirara remains the dirtiest fossil fuel and would contribute disproportionately high to human-caused climate change. No economically feasible technology exists to capture carbon dioxide. The tree planting schemes proposed by DMCI (windbreakers, mangrove afforestation) would not capture but the tiniest fraction of the carbon dioxide generated by the plant. The Philippines belongs to a group of countries which is most heavily affected by man-made climate change. Our communities’ ability to adapt is low and our vulnerability to climate change is high on global scale.

Power shortage, anyone? Or false claims?

Bart Duff, an economist and member of the Palawan Chamber of Commerce who had been studying energy requirements of Palawan calculated that a diesel-hydropower mix would result in a lower price for electricity than coal alone. Hydro power does not only mean cheaper energy, but also would encourage conservation of the watershed in those areas. PALECO members would save 115 million pesos and the government 340 million pesos every year “*There has been no energy or power shortage in Palawan. 80% of brownouts are distribution problems*”, refutes Bart. One asks, is this electricity meant for Palawenos who really need the electricity they deserve? Or will it cater to projected mining companies that continually reap the fundamental rights of Palawenos to a healthy environment?

Join the fight against those who continue to trample Palawan's beauty and pride – its unique island ecosystem and wildlife - in the guise of development and progress. Be counted! Get involved. Contact the Palawan Alliance for Clean Energy at 09062484366