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Philippine Home of Pangolin and Indigenous Tribe Wins Protection

An island wildlife paradise that is home to a tribe of hunter-gatherers, the most trafficked mammal in the world gained new protections today.

BY JEN VIEGAS (http://www.seeker.com/community/jen_viegas/)



Photo: Members of the Batak tribe at a river in the forests of Palawan, the Philippines. Credit: Robin Moore

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Today it was announced that 101,766 acres of forestland on the island of Palawan in the Philippines (<http://www.seeker.com/will-the-philippines-break-up-with-the-us-2047366273.html>) will be protected, helping to save the most trafficked mammal (<http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20161006-pangolins-are-the-worlds-most-trafficked-mammal>) in the world – the pangolin – as well as the last 200–300 members of the indigenous Batak tribe.

The newly declared Cleopatra's Needle Critical Habitat is now the largest critical habitat to be designated in the Philippines.

"The critical habitat designation is made on the basis of the best scientific data regarding the presence of threatened species, taking into consideration species endemism and/or richness, presence of man-made pressures and threats to the survival of wildlife living in the area, among others," Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC) conservation biologist and communications director Robin Moore told Seeker.



A pangolin. Credit: ThinkStock

Moore visited the region a few years ago and said the project is the culmination of three years of work. He explained that the Philippine government has now committed to protecting the land that includes some of the oldest and most diverse forests of Southeast Asia.

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The unofficial poster animal for the region is the quirky pangolin (<http://www.seeker.com/most-trafficked-animal-pangolin-finally-gets-protection-2020954557.html>).

"They are highly unusual in that they are covered in scales made from keratin, and are sometimes referred to as scaly anteaters (<http://www.seeker.com/spiny-anteater-gets-a-breeding-boost-1770271844.html>), although this is misleading because they are not related to anteaters," Moore said.

"Pangolins are highly sought after in Asia because their scales are used in traditional medicine, and the meat is a delicacy in China," he added. "They are also solitary and nocturnal, making them elusive and poorly understood animals."

The charismatic mammals have impressive tongues, which start at their pelvic and can be longer than their bodies. They use their tongues to eat ants and termites, says Moore.

Many other endangered, threatened or otherwise rare species will also gain protection. They include the Palawan hornbill, Palawan forest turtle, Palawan bearcat, Palawan horned frog, Philippine flat-headed frog, seven-foot-long Palawan monitor lizard and others.



Photo: Palawan horned frog. Credit: Robin Moore



Photo: Philippine flat-headed frog. Credit: Robin Moore



Photo: Palawan monitor lizard. Credit: Robin Moore

The protection couldn't come soon enough. Just last year, for example, 4,400 freshwater turtles – the majority of them the critically endangered Philippine forest turtle – were seized in southern Palawan. They were collected from the northern part of the island and were being readied for sale in the pet trade and for consumption.

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Jessa Garibay, project manager of The Center for Sustainability in the Philippines, told Seeker that the Batak tribe of hunter gatherers can still hunt, as permitted by The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act. "Lowlanders" (non-indigenous people), however, cannot collect or hunt threatened plants and animals as part of the new declaration.

Garibay added that "there will be a Wildlife Enforcement Officer training for the community members around Cleopatra's Needle (<http://mtcleopatrasneedle.palawanshore.com/>) to ensure monitoring and strict implementation of the law."

Already The Center for Sustainability has started to train some Batak to be ecotourism guides. 17,290 acres of the Cleopatra's Needle Critical Habitat came from ancestral lands belonging to these and other indigenous Palawan people. Their livelihood has been largely dependent upon the collection of resin, rattan and honey (<http://www.seeker.com/wild-african-bird-willingly-helps-people-find-food-1936074990.html>), which they sell to traders.

In recent years, however, the Batak's way of life has been challenged by illegal logging, charcoal production, land conversion for agriculture, quarrying and other activities.

It's now hoped that the Batak may benefit from the ecotourism (<http://www.seeker.com/using-dozens-of-elephants-to-save-rhinos-2012688757.html>) opportunities. An "Eco-Tourism Livelihood Program" launches this week. In January of next year, a forest management plan will be implemented involving patrol officers who will work to enforce the conservation measures.

"The first half of the year (the summer season in the Philippines) is the best time to visit the area," Garibay said. "Rivers are relatively easier to cross and the trails are dry and easier to hike."

The area's newly protected status was spearheaded by the Center for Sustainability (<http://www.centreforsustainability.org/>), the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (<http://pcsd.gov.ph/>), City Environment and Natural Resources Office of Puerto Princesa and the Batak tribe, with support from Global Wildlife Conservation (<http://globalwildlife.org/>) (GWC), Rainforest Trust (<https://www.rainforesttrust.org/>) and the Amphibian Survival Alliance (<http://www.amphibians.org/>).

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