

Palaweña to be awarded in New York for amphibian conservation

By Celeste Anna R. Formoso May 23, 2017

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY, May 23 — Jessa Garibay, an attractive petite Palaweña working for the protection of a critical habitat in Palawan and its amphibian residents, is going to be accorded with the 2016 Sabin Award for Amphibian Conservation next week in New York, U.S.A.

Garibay is the project manager of the Centre for Sustainability (CS) based in this city that protects the critical habitat of Cleopatra's Needle, which extends across the famous Puerto Princesa Underground River, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The award, which was established in 2007, according to its website, recognizes valuable contributions of individuals to amphibian conservation. It provides an exceptional chance to salute and commend pioneering works to undertake the reduction and loss of amphibians in the world, and to obtain a sense of true passion and commitment of the individuals responsible for saving species.

Since it was established, only seven had been awarded from countries like Ecuador, Guatemala, Colombia and the U.S.A.

Garibay is going to be awarded for her “undying passion for amphibians and an incredible drive to see these fragile creatures protected.”

In a Q&A with Lindsay Renick Mayer for the Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC), Garibay said her passion for wildlife developed when she took biology as a degree and found her immediate environment filled with many living organisms co-existing and living interdependently with each other.

“Being based in Palawan, nature is your big learning and playing ground! Every nook, every bend of the river, hides many interesting creatures waiting to be discovered and noticed,” Garibay, who was born and raised in Palawan, told Mayer.

Garibay’s said working in the field is quite a learning experience "and what I know is incomparable to what the indigenous peoples know about the environment!”

She is always overwhelmed about finding how small plants or animals play big roles in nature for the benefit of the communities that live in it.

“Being able to see the spectacular views and the interesting species found in it adds to the thrill of working outdoors. I have also worked with scientists who were very generous with their knowledge, and so I look forward to every encounter to learn and be inspired by them,” Garibay informed Mayer.

Garibay’s passion is not only limited to caring for the amphibians. Working outdoors for her, she said, also means interacting with nature’s real heroes, who are the indigenous peoples (IPs), who have been living in harmony with the environment since time immemorial.

“Their amount of respect and richness in tradition around the forests fuels me to do this type of work,” she said.

For her, the most rewarding part of her job is being able to access her “hometown’s forest and communing with its jewels.”

Cleopatra’s Needle, where her work is centered, is one of the most diverse forest reserves hosting a gamut of endemic species in the Philippines.

It is where the Palawan toadlet and the Malatgan River caecilian were found again last year after experts thought they have gone inexistent many years ago.

Along with the two amphibian species, an unusual ant species was also discovered. It was named *Romblonella coryae* sp. in honor of the late president Corazon Aquino.

Garibay played a big role in lobbying for Cleopatra’s Needle to be declared a critical habitat for these wildlife species, and most importantly for its IP residents – the Bataks and the Tagbanuas.

“For me, it is always a rewarding day when I see one of the community member’s eyes sparkle because

he/she has learned something new from me, or if I pointed out something good that they are doing that we acknowledge as a big help for conserving wildlife,” Garibay said.

Growing up, Garibay told Mayer that she was not really a fan of amphibians because of the myths she was told.

“In the Philippines, they say that if you touch toads, you will get warts...or in some worse stories, you will go blind. It is so horrifying that you would want to stay away from them when you are young and have not yet discovered that all these myths are totally incorrect,” she said, adding she is lucky to have been corrected in believing these folklore by herpetologists who provided in-depth information.

From being a scared little girl, Garibay now loves amphibians which, she said, are “almost the unsung heroes of the forests.”

“What I love about them is that they are like a string that ties the environment: good indicators of environmental health, key role in the food chain, important in nutrient cycling and more. Plus, I think it is worth mentioning that they come in different sizes and colors, and make different sounds, which adds up to their fascinating distinctions,” she said.

Receiving the award next week in New York is special for her as it means people “do not have to be the smartest or the brightest student, researcher, or lobbyist there is in the field” as long as they have a strong resolve in what they are doing.

“I am certain that this award affirms that my hopes of being an instrument to conserve the remaining forests of the Philippines — especially of Palawan — are becoming a reality,” Garibay stated.

Garibay told Mayer that her first visit to Cleopatra’s Needle happened in 2010, and that lush forest, the Batak people, and the clear refreshing river would be forever etched in her memory.

“Every time I see it, I am always reminded of the positive image of my hometown,” she said, “even if ‘development’ is happening now in many places, Puerto Princesa will always be a ‘City in the Forest’ thanks to beautiful natural areas like Cleopatra’s Needle.”

Garibay now hopes “to do more research in other regions in the province, and look forward to having more areas in Palawan to be declared and conserved in the future.

She said the goal is also to look for more sustainable support to the IP communities that dwell in the surrounding communities of Cleopatra’s Needle.

She said the future looks bright as more young people her age loves to involve themselves in research and environment conservation.

“Also, there are a lot of environmentalists who are very supportive to younger people like me and have shared so much to inspire and educate their communities about wildlife. It will not be an easy thing — we are going up against unsustainable and damaging changes everywhere in the world. But, if we all do our share and continue to be advocates, there is no doubt that there is a good future for wildlife,” she said.

The Q&A with Mayer was published online on May 19 at the website www.globalwildlife.org of GWC.

Mayer is the associate director of communications for GWC and has a particular interest in leveraging communications to inspire conservation action.

Last week, another Palaweña, Indira Lacerna-Widmann, also received the Whitley Award for her efforts in safeguarding the critically endangered Philippine cockatoo at the Royal Geographical Society in London. (PNA)



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