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Ancestral Domain and National Park Protection: Mutually Supportive Paradigms?

A Case Study of the Mt. Kitanglad Range Nature Park, Bukidnon, Philippines¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the close relationship of Bukidnon tribes with the forested slopes of the Mt. Kitanglad Range Nature Park in Mindanao, Philippines, and how their claims for ancestral domain may interact with the park's conservation mandate. The study is placed into historical context by reviewing attempts to assimilate the tribes under successive Spanish, American and Philippine governments, and their steady displacement by waves of migrant settlers. Natives were quickly relegated to marginalized minorities in this new society, and invariably responded by retreating further up the mountain slopes. It was through this process that the tribes now find themselves pressed around some of the last intact remnants of their ancestral homeland, the Mt. Kitanglad Range.

The park's rich biodiversity is threatened by rapid deforestation on its lower slopes, fueled by logging, wildfires, vegetable gardening, swiddening, and rising population densities - from both high in-migration and fertility rates. Native belief that nature is controlled by a hierarchy of spirits whose wrath must be avoided, guides the tribes in a respectful attitude to the environment. Indigenous practices such as safe havens for wildlife, preservation of keystone tree species, and restricting swidden size indicate a conservation approach to resource management. The tribes reacted to the degradation of their ancestral lands in 1993 by organizing and creating a network of 'tribal guardians' to maintain vigilance on the forest margins. Some seizures of poached lumber have been made and the initiative appears to be gaining momentum. The community-based park protection (CBPP) that is evolving spontaneously in these forest margin villages is internally-driven and has been enabled by reviving and strengthening existing tribal institutions. This determined and highly organized surveillance of the forest warrants recognition by DENR, and argues for further empowerment of these communities by formally decentralizing forest protection to their control.

The tribes' demonstrated commitment to conservation suggests that granting them ancestral domain would not be antagonistic to National Park objectives - but could form the basis of a contractual agreement in which the tribes would guarantee protection of the forest margins in exchange for commensurate development programs. The cultural diversity of the tribes has contributed to maintenance of the park's biodiversity, suggesting that cultural conservation should be an integral goal in National Park protection.

Key Words:

Mt. Kitanglad Range Nature Park, Philippines, Bukidnon, Tala-andig, ancestral domain, tribes, buffer zone management, community-based park protection, tribal guardians, indigenous knowledge, migration, ICDP

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