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## UN seeking to preserve life in all precious forms in 2010

First posted 23:55:29 (Mla time) January 02, 2010  
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Philippine Daily Inquirer

WHY stop with the zodiac?

If you really want luck to be on the side of humanity, 2010 should not be just the Year of the Tiger but of life in all its precious forms.

It might as well be the year of the endangered Visayan warty pig, the river turtle your grandma used to talk about, the disappearing fireflies of your childhood, the herbs and flowers that once carpeted a patch of your city until it gave way to a shopping mall.

It is the time to be finally conscious of how deforestation could induce not just killer floods but also unleash the next deadly virus; to heed nature's subtler omens, hidden in the way you itch, sweat or sneeze.

### **Cut off from nature**

The United Nations has declared 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity (IYB), but advocates worry the campaign may not go beyond sound bites and slogans with over half the human race now living in cities and their wildlife experience often limited to googling.

"Human beings are becoming increasingly cut off from nature," said Ahmed Djoghlaif, executive secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

This "estrangement," he said, could only get worse with 70 percent of the world's population expected to be urbanized by 2030.

"Without contact [with nature], people are not aware that their patterns of consumption lead to habitat loss, pollution and other drivers of biodiversity loss," Djoghlaif said in a CBD-sponsored workshop held in Jakarta last month.

An international treaty in force since 1993, the CBD seeks to slow ecosystem destruction and species extinction while promoting the sustainable use and sharing of biodiversity resources among countries.

### **Not sexy enough**

Together with the Philippine-based Asean Center for Biodiversity (ACB), the CBD brought together journalists and wildlife experts from the region in a seminar aimed at making biodiversity a "sexy" enough topic that could get governments, corporations and individuals to act with the same urgency that they have shown in addressing the threat of global warming.

As one Filipino official put it, this particular green campaign is green with envy in terms of media mileage.

"While climate change has (former US Vice President) Al Gore who raises public awareness and mobilizes support to combat its effects, biodiversity remains faceless," said Rodrigo Fuentes, the ACB executive director.

"Biodiversity loss is a forgotten crisis. (It) rarely makes the headlines. Other than occasional stories like the discovery of new species or the latest Red List (of endangered species), it is often buried in the inside pages," he said.

Funded by the European Union and based in Los Baños, Laguna, the four-year-old ACB facilitates cooperation on biodiversity issues among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

### **Extinction levels up**

The 10-member Asean is said to be home to 20 percent of all known plants and animals in the world despite occupying a mere 3 percent of the Earth's surface.

Citing a 2005 study, Fuentes said deforestation, large-scale mining, massive wildlife hunting and other "irresponsible human activities have increased extinction levels dramatically over the past decades at 100 to 1,000 times the normal rate."

The IYB is primarily a campaign against ignorance and apathy, a challenge to educate urban and rural populations on the perils of biodiversity loss.

Djoghlaif noted with alarm, for example, how schoolchildren in a highly educated First World country now find it hard to tell a bee from a wasp.

With so many subjects being taught in campuses, he said, "biodiversity [has] to compete with HIV, human rights or climate change education."

Fuentes recounted the case of a Filipino farmer who, after shooting down a rare eagle for food, claimed he didn't know he was breaking the law.

### **Hidden dangers**

Fuentes spoke of the hidden yet more serious danger posed by destroying ecosystems at the "molecular level."

What is not being highlighted, he said, is the role of biodiversity in health.

Studies have shown how viruses, for example, could "jump from being animal-based to human-based" because of unnatural changes in animal habitats or even in people's diets.

Fuentes cited one study on the HIV virus that made just such an observation, involving an African tribe which gradually shifted from eating mostly fish to bush meat.

"The HIV virus was actually traced to Africa. What they found was because of the shift from eating fish to bush meat, there was a jump of the virus to humans, because HIV is basically animal-based," he said.

Viruses from birds or bats could "transfer faster" to human communities when natural barriers between people and animal habitats, like forests, disappear because of urban development, the ACB official added.

## **Biodiversity major meeting**

“There are still a lot of things in the health sector whose connections to biodiversity loss don’t seem to be very much appreciated by the public,” he said.

The IYB will be highlighted by a major CBD meeting, its 10th Conference of Parties, in Nagoya, Japan, next October, an occasion for the 192 signatory countries—including the Philippines—to assess if they have gone anywhere close to slowing biodiversity loss.

Next September, the UN General Assembly—with presumably a new Philippine President in attendance—will hold for the first time a one-day, high-level segment devoted to biodiversity.

“In the meantime, it is fair to conclude that we will fall short of the mark,” Djoghlaif said. “We still have a long way to go before the current extinction crisis will be resolved.”

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