




Photo By: Orange Omengan, Philippine ICCA Project

Protecting Biodiversity by Respecting Rights:

Recognizing and Supporting Indigenous Peoples and Local Community Conserved Areas in the Philippines

PROJECT FULL NAME	COUNTRY & REGION	IMPACT AREAS	EXECUTING AGENCIES
Strengthening National Systems to Improve Governance and Management of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCAs)	Philippines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Climate change adaptation Poverty reduction Local socioeconomic benefits Inclusion 	Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)—Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB); National and Local Responsible Partners: National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), Mandiga Community Center, Inc. (MCCI), Kalahan Educational Foundation, Inc. (KEF), Daloy ng Buhay, Inc. (Daluhay), Philippine Eagle Foundation, Inc. (PEF), Non-Timber Forest Products–Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP), Philippine Association for Intercultural Development (PAFID)
GEF PROJECT ID: 5826	FOCAL AREAS	IMPLEMENTING AGENCY	
PROJECTTYPE: MSP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Biodiversity 	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)	
GEF PERIOD: GEF-5 (2015-2019).....	GEF PROJECT GRANT \$1,751,484	CO-FINANCING TOTAL \$4,025,239	

Summary

The Philippines, an archipelago of numerous islands and many ethnolinguistic groups, is a tapestry of cultural diversity and unique ecosystems. The country harbors 20 percent of known plant and animal species, making it critically important to global environmental benefits.¹ Yet, between the 1930s and 1999, timber harvesting put this precious diversity at risk. The drop in forest cover from 70 percent to 18 percent destroyed many of the resources that Indigenous Peoples (IPs) rely upon. Today, biodiversity remains under threat from agricultural conversion, mining, illegal resource use, logging, and tourism.

With this project, the GEF aimed to support the conservation, protection, and management of vital biodiversity sites within the Philippines. It built on the successful outcomes of the GEF-supported Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities

Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCA) pilot initiative in the Philippines (2010-2015).²

Before the pilot, IPs and Protected Area (PA) managers often viewed each other as adversaries. Through these initiatives, “the former adversaries came to appreciate the role of the other in protecting biodiversity” to “they came to understand how they could work together to protect biodiversity”. This shift towards co-management, where IPs often take the lead, has become an important model — not only in the Philippines but also around the world.

This GEF-5 project improved the management of 154,868 ha of protected areas and expanded the PA estate by 3 percent across the ten pilot project sites.³ It also strengthened the governance of Indigenous Peoples’ Organizations (IPOS), empowering Indigenous communities to secure their land tenure and rights over ancestral domains.



Photo By: Orange Omengan, Philippine ICCA Project

Darmatia Dala, a Molbog weaver from barangay Melville in Balabac, Palawan is known for her intricate design of handwoven mats. Weaving pandan leaf mats is a biodiversity-friendly livelihood practiced by women.

The roots of ICCAs are growing, but more work is needed to institutionalize a national ICCA system and build the capacity of key stakeholders. The Philippines is showing the important role of ICCAs beyond traditional PAs. The project demonstrated how the recognition and support for ICCAs and their management can yield benefits in critical domains such as water and food security, climate change mitigation and adaptation, community resilience, and disaster risk management. Throughout the project, it was crucial to acknowledge Indigenous culture and history, including historical conflict among clans and the variations among different territories.

Environmental, Cultural, and Governance Challenges

The Philippines, an archipelago of 7,100 islands, represents roughly 6.7 percent of the land area in Southeast Asia. Yet it harbors 20 percent of known plant and animal species, making it critically important to global biodiversity. Some of the threats to this biodiversity include agricultural conversion, mining, illegal resource use, logging, and tourism.

The country has 15 biogeographic zones and 228 marine and terrestrial Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs). Of the 128 KBAs on land, 91 are on Indigenous ancestral territory. The National Integrated Protected Areas System Act⁴ was passed in 1992, and as of 2015 there

were 240 PAs covering 5.45 million ha (14.2 percent of the country).⁵ However, many of these PAs overlap with ancestral domains leading to conflict between PA managers and traditional landholders.

Such conflicts arise because the Philippines has more than 100 ethnolinguistic groups of IPs, who represent about 12–15 percent of the population (10–12 million people). Most of these groups live in the forests and depend on biodiversity to sustain their cultures and livelihoods. Yet, until recently, they have had little or no say in resource management, in part because they had no legal claim to their territories.

In 1997, the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) was enacted and solidified the country's recognition of IP rights over their ancestral domains. Before the IPRA, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) had a process to recognize ancestral domains via certificates of claims backed by documentation, mapping, and ancestral domain management plans (ADMPs).⁶ Through this law, implementation of the IPRA and related programs were transferred to a newly created agency - the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP).⁷ DENR's Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) was expanding the PA network by recognizing ICCAs and locally managed conservation areas through the GEF project. However, logistics, language, and capacity hindered the progress.



Map of Project Site Locations @ UNDP Philippines

Relevant government agencies needed more capacity to manage PAs in collaboration with communities and local governments. At the same time, they needed to strengthen the legal and regulatory frameworks and simplify administration. These changes would integrate ICCAs and government management, harmonizing mandates, plans, and activities across government entities.

Integrated Approach and Key Features

By supporting the ICCA approach, the GEF project has changed the paradigm of conservation. At the project sites, IPs are now working with PA managers or being recognized and supported in leading management in their territories. In some cases, the use of traditional knowledge has increased the populations of threatened species.

Partnering with Indigenous Communities: A Path to Harmonious Conservation

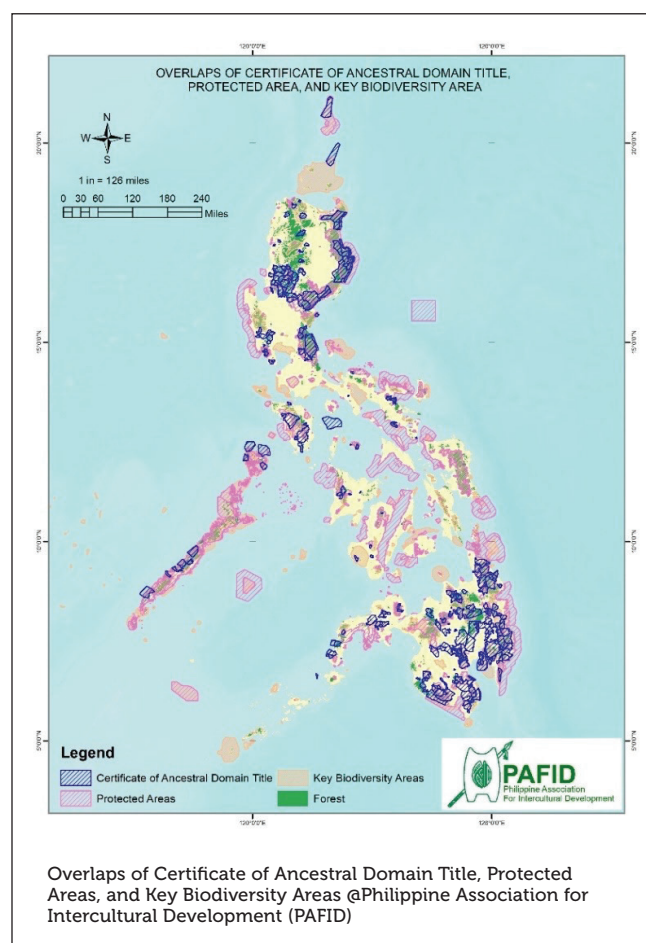
At its heart, the project supports Indigenous communities as managers of their territories, resulting in effective biodiversity conservation. This approach harmonizes public landscapes, seascapes, and Indigenous customary practices within ancestral domains. In so doing, the project fostered trust, collaboration, and comprehensive and supportive national systems.

Indigenous Implementing Partners

Six IPOs became local responsible partners (LRPs) in 10 diverse project sites spanning seven ethnographic regions. By engaging local elders, women, youth, and other stakeholders, the LRPs tailored project activities to address the diverse needs of their communities. Not only did this approach enhance conservation, it also empowered local Indigenous communities, building their capacity⁸ and making their livelihoods more environmentally-friendly. Regular meetings also enabled Indigenous communities from all over the Philippines to exchange experiences and learn from each other.

Fostering Government-Community Partnership

The strategic partnership of national and local governments and Indigenous communities recognizes Indigenous practices within ancestral domains, bridging historical conflicts⁹ and mistrust. Regular and ongoing dialogue designs governance for PAs, finding solutions to overlaps and discrepancies between government and Indigenous jurisdiction. For instance, DENR and IPOs agreed that IPOs would lead management in PAs even when DENR legally governs the PAs.



Crafting Institutional Policies for ICCA Integration

Building on results from a previous GEF-supported project,¹⁰ this project formulated policies and guidelines that further institutionalize ICCAs in the Philippines. For example, in 2017 the government passed the Expanded National Integrated Protected Area Systems (ENIPAS) Act, which incorporated ancestral domains and customary rights. Meanwhile, the partners developed Guidelines and Procedures for Recognition of ICCAs. These mandates streamline ICCA documentation, mapping, and registration, and a Manual of Operations and BMB Technical Bulletin support their implementation. Establishing an Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) on ICCAs further solidified the approach, making it easier to register ICCAs and implement the process in new areas. The IAWG also continues to provide technical assistance for the draft ICCA bill.¹¹

Forging Synergistic Policy Collaboration

This project created a model of PA management that harnessed the collective strengths of diverse governmental bodies and IPOs.¹² Local governments play a crucial role in integrating IPs' community conservation plans (CCPs) into local land-use planning. At the ICCA site in Santa Fe Nueva Vizcaya, for example, the local government incorporated the CCP into the Municipal Development Plan, positioning conservation at the heart of local development. ICCAs emerged as a valuable tool for Indigenous communities, supporting them to engage with stakeholders vested in tourism, infrastructure, and road development. Recognizing the attraction of ICCAs, local government tourism offices charge access fees, directing 30 percent to Indigenous communities.

Lasting Conservation through Community-Led Approaches

Environmental sustainability is inherent to the daily lives of Indigenous communities, but it was important to ensure that ICCAs would last when project support ended. By using the ICCA approach for planning, such as micro watershed conservation in Palawan, the management approach also respects human rights and gains community buy-in; the plans ensure clean drinking water while advancing biodiversity conservation. Payment for ecosystem services (PES) initiatives in Bataan Natural Park, for example, put a price on the use of water for downstream industry, households, and agriculture – and the community receives compensation from water users for their conservation work. Support for eco-tourism and community-based enterprises in the ICCAs also created jobs for community members.¹³ Communities developed the rules and the penalties for their violation to ensure compliance with ICCAs and long-term conservation outcomes.

Reviving Traditional Knowledge and Empowering Youth

Through the revival of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP), the project worked to ensure traditional knowledge is passed down to future generations. Documenting traditional knowledge created a new bond between youth and elders. The younger generations, who are often removed from nature, are rediscovering ancestral values, culture, rituals, and spirituality. At the same time, the project matched traditional and contemporary scientific indicators. By merging scientific insights with traditional knowledge, the project affirms the crucial role of Indigenous management of ancestral domains in biodiversity conservation.



June Camingan, an Egongot Indigenous Person, balances on a bugok (yantok) as he crosses from one tree to another. He demonstrates how to trim the tree branches so sunlight can get to understory crops - part of their swidden farming. (March 2019)



Photo By: Orange Omengan, Philippine ICCA Project

ICCA Declaration in Tinglayan, Kalinga

Results and benefits

- Improved the management of 154,868 ha of protected areas and expanded the PA estate by 3 percent across the 10 pilot project sites. The project exceeded its initial area target by 30 percent.
- Supported 10 communities to map and document their ICCAs and Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices, supporting their submission to the ICCA Registry managed by UNEP-WCMC.
- Advocated effectively to include ancestral domains and customary rights in the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas Systems Act in 2017.
- Formulated draft Guidelines and Procedures for Recognition of ICCAs, developing a more structured and standardized approach for ICCAs.
- Collaborated on the Manual of Operations, integrating procedures for ICCA documentation, mapping, and registration into the preparation of the Ancestral Domains Sustainable Development and Protection Plan.
- Drafted a BMB Technical Bulletin that provided supplemental guidelines on integrating CCPs and local governments' Comprehensive Land-Use Plans.
- Established the IAWG on ICCAs, which continues to provide valuable technical assistance during legislative sessions related to the ICCA bill.

- Held 20 consultations, complemented by five Technical Working Group meetings, providing a platform for robust discussions of the draft ICCA bill.
- Supported 10 partner communities to focus on the creation of biodiversity-friendly livelihoods.
- Enhanced the capacity of government agencies to provide technical support to ICCAs, increasing capacity scores¹⁴ from 2.35 to 2.75 (BMB) and 1.15 to 2.20 (NCIP).

Lessons learned

Traditional Knowledge and technology reinforce each other

A cornerstone of the success of this approach was marrying traditional knowledge and contemporary science and technology. The project facilitated a two-way transfer of knowledge: IPOs learned how to use remote sensing technologies for mapping, resource inventory, and monitoring while scientists and technical experts learned from and gained respect for traditional knowledge. This partnership resulted in greater biodiversity conservation results.

ICCA as a Comprehensive Management Approach

Through the project, government officials and communities came to understand ICCAs as a

multifaceted strategy for comprehensive landscape and seascape management. This approach extended beyond biodiversity conservation, encompassing critical areas such as water and food security, climate change mitigation and adaptation, community resilience, and disaster risk management. By recognizing and communicating the many values of ICCAs, such as ecosystem services, government officials came to see a more holistic perspective. Recognizing the transformative potential, the Philippine government aims to integrate ICCAs into local land-use planning, harmonizing traditional practices and broader developmental objectives.

Gender Mainstreaming for Equitable Participation

Because most tribes are historically male-dominated, special attention must be given to promote women's active involvement. Empowering women through training, participation in decision making, and capacity building allows them to play a vital role in planning, documentation, and community engagement. This inclusive approach elevated women's contributions and strengthened community resilience through entrepreneurship and traditional practices, such as traditional crafts and tourism. During the project, women led crucial tasks in planning, documentation, and community work. For example, the Bayanihan Egongot Women and Farmers Association helped sustain traditional handicraft-making and herbal medicine practices as a part of their livelihoods.

Capacity building is a necessity to build institutional support

Building awareness and capacity among stakeholders was critical to sustaining momentum to formalize ICCAs and integrate the approach into government processes. While the Philippines recognizes ICCAs, it still needs policy reforms, alignment with PA laws, and clear mandates.¹⁵ As one example, further integration of Indigenous CCPs into local land-use planning needed diligent engagement with local governments, NCIP, and indigenous communities. Scaling up ICCAs to the provincial level also required navigating overlap with PAs and gathering support from diverse sectors. DENR is applying the ICCA approach to other projects¹⁶ and sharing its experiences internationally.¹⁷

Acknowledge cultural nuances and IPs' existing management

Acknowledging the intricacies of indigenous culture is paramount for successful ICCA implementation. IP governance is often clan-based with boundaries passed down orally,¹⁸ which can result in conflicts among communities requiring sensitivity and careful consideration.¹⁹ In addition, there are site-specific conditions and circumstances that must be accounted for to have a successful ICCA. Building trust and maintaining open lines of communication between facilitators and indigenous communities is essential. Approaching ICCAs through a landscape lens and collaborating with various stakeholders, including local governments and national agencies, enhances effective territorial management.



Photo By: Orange Omengan, Philippine ICCA Project

Molbog elders in barangay Melville sharing stories over coffee (Balabac, Palawan – one of the 10 ICCAs)

Endnotes

1. Heaney, as cited in Ong, P.S., L.E. Afuang, and R.G. Rosell Ambal (eds.) 2002. Philippine Biodiversity Conservation Priorities: A Second Iteration of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. DENR-Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau, Conservation International Philippines, Biodiversity Conservation Program—University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, and Foundation for the Philippine Environment, Quezon City, Philippines.
2. The project is called the Expanding and Diversifying the National System of Terrestrial Protected Areas in the Philippines (NEWCAPP) (3606, UNDP, BD, GEF-4) (2010-2015).
3. The sites were selected because they are where KBAs overlap with ancestral domains and represent a variety of governance models. Luzon: 1) Mount Taungay (Tinglayan, Kalinga), 2) Tinoc (Tinoc, Ifugao), 3) Ikalahan/Kalanguya CADT (Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya), 4) Egongot CADT (Maria Aurora and Dipaculao, Aurora, PA), 5) Kanawan (Morong, Bataan, PA); Palawan: 6) Balabac (Balabac, Palawan <seascape>); and Mindanao: 7) AGMIHICU CADT (Impasugong, Bukidnon), 8) Mount Apo, CADT (Magpet, North Cotabato, PA), 9) Sote (Bislig City, Agusan Del Sur), 10) Mount Kaluayan-Mount Kinabalian (Esperanza, Agusan Del Sur).
4. In June 1992, the Philippine Congress passed the NIPAS Act, introducing a new perspective on the management of the country's protected areas. This law embodies the ideals of stakeholder participation, priority to conservation for the present and future generations, and equitable access to resources.
5. Of these, 4.07 million ha are terrestrial areas and 1.38 million ha are marine areas.
6. The government adopted decentralized management of natural resources, focusing on partnerships with communities and local governments. It provided secure tenure to community forest managers by placing about 5 million ha under community-based forest management agreements.
7. The certificate of ancestral domain claims (CADCs) issued by DENR were revalidated and converted to certificates of ancestral domain titles. IPs' community plans were developed as ancestral domain sustainable development and protection plans (ADSDDPs) converted from ADMPs.
8. The local researchers from Indigenous communities became part of a research team, which consisted of the DENR and NCIP field personnel and locally based organizations. Specific competencies have been provided as part of the training through the learning by doing and mentoring approach: 1) community mobilization, 2) resource inventory, 3) documenting Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP), 4) community mapping, 5) community conservation planning, 6) ICCA declaration, 7) ICCA case documentation, and 8) ICCA registration. The community led the entire process, which was participatory, inclusive, and transparent.
9. For example, one of the sites, Balabac, Palawan, is ancestral waters. The Palawan province is frequently described as the "last frontier" regarding the environment and is covered by a special law, Republic Act 7611 or Strategic Environmental Plan for Palawan (SEP). Thus, there was tension between implementation of the SEP and of the IPRA when it came to identification and management of Indigenous territories in the province.
10. Key lessons learned from the previous project, NEWCAPP, were the importance of: realistic policy goals; engagement with local implementation partners from the beginning in design; flexibility of design; building partnerships with local governments and civil society organizations that will implement the project on the ground; and stronger emphasis on livelihoods.
11. IAWG on ICCAs is composed of NCIP, DENR-BMB, Forest Management Bureau (FMB), Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DA-BFAR), and representatives of Indigenous groups to continue advocating for support in the enactment of the ICCA bill and providing technical assistance during congressional and senate committee meetings on the proposed ICCA bill.
12. The Project Board coordinated the project and was composed of 35 designated agency partners, including UNDP, National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), DENR, NCIP, Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board (HLURB), Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic (DA-BFAR), BUKLURAN, PAFID, and IPOs.
13. Other CCPs include establishment and implementation of community-based biodiversity-friendly enterprises such as sustainable coffee, bags with local materials, bamboo products, and cultural tourism. The GEF Small Grants Program (SGP) provided grants to start the enterprises while the ICCA project provided technical advice and support for Indigenous communities.
14. These capacity scores are based on the Monitoring Guidelines of Capacity Development in GEF Operations (GEF, UNDP, UNEP), available at <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgk326/files/publications/Monitoring%20Capacity%20Development-design-01.pdf>. The scores review capacities for 1) Engagement, 2) Generating information, 3) Policy development, 4) Management, and 5) Monitoring.
15. For instance, it includes an amendment of IPRA (IPRA is too strict on certain aspects), an executive order regarding a provision of the protected area law with IPRA, and a joint agreement among DENR, NCIP, and DILG to implement and administrate ICCA.
16. The ICCA approach has been part of other GEF projects in the Philippines including the Integrated Natural Resources and Environmental Management Project (ID 3980, ADB, BD, GEF-4) (2010-2022), Integrated Approach in the Management of Major Biodiversity Corridors (IA-Biological Corridors) (ID 9584, UNDP, BD/LD, GEF-6) (2021-), and the Implementing the National Framework on Access and Benefit Sharing of Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge in the Philippines (ID 10079, UNDP, BD, GEF-7) (2021-27).
17. In 2019, the Government of Myanmar sent a high-level mission to the Philippines to learn about implementing ICCAs.
18. The territorial boundaries set by their ancestors, orally transferred to the next generations, are respected by the clans through their elders and tribal council, with their selected chieftain serving as their voice.
19. For example, one must understand the historical clan conflicts that have occurred, how the ancestral lands have become subdivided, how they have been passed on, and the differences in the site-specific conditions for every territory.

References and multimedia

- Project Document (2015), and Project Terminal Evaluation (2019). <https://www.thegef.org/projects-operations/projects/5826>
- Video documentary on the Philippine ICCA Project. https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ppxfEi_2Ltaz8rjDrF03N7MGuY10HeyY
- Book of Knowledge and Conservation: Obo Monuvu of Magpet, Cotabato (PEF). https://www.philippineaglefoundation.org/_files/ugd/d08c94_b07f363599684f83bfce09d9d41004b9.pdf
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The GEF Good Practice Briefs showcase examples of GEF investments that align with GEF strategies and GEF programming directions and policy recommendations. The GEF Secretariat selected featured projects from a pool of nominations by GEF agencies, taking into consideration approaches used to generate multiple global environmental benefits and co-benefits, and to achieve clear results and/or sustainability. Because the Good Practice Briefs include projects implemented under different contexts, the practices highlighted should not necessarily be considered universally applicable.

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