



LAYSID

## OPTIONS IN WAR AND PEACE: DUCK RAISING AS LIVELIHOOD AND REFUGE

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Kim Bagundang, president  
of the Liguasan Youth  
Association for  
Sustainable Development

**T**he Liguasan Marsh is found in one of the Philippines' richest river basins, the Cotabato-Agusan River Basin. It covers an area of about 288,000 hectares spread in the provinces of Maguindanao, Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat. Easily one of the richest natural resources of Mindanao, where the daily fish catch reaches as much as 10 to 30 tons, the marsh is actually composed of three marshes and their confluent rivers: Liguasan (Pulangi, Maganoy, Buluan and Allah rivers); Libungan (Pulangi and Libungan rivers); and Edpanan (Pulangi and Tamontaka rivers). The Muslims in Mindanao, however, refer to all three marshes as Ligawasan Marsh.

Declared a bird sanctuary in 1941, the marsh has much historical, political and cultural significance to the Muslims in the Philippines. During pre-Spanish times, it facilitated trade and commerce in the region. During the Spanish, American, and Japanese periods, the marsh was the bastion of resistance against colonisation. From 1979 onwards, the marsh became sanctuary to Muslims fleeing the war.

The houses on the marsh are on stilts, with the ducks swimming freely underneath.



“There was no one living in the marsh before the seventies, we would just go to the marsh to fish and farm, then return to our homes,” recalls Kim Bagundang, president of the Liguasan Youth Association for Sustainable Development Inc. (LYASDI). But just as the indigenous communities were driven to the mountains by aggressive development, particularly the arrival of settlers that were promised by the Philippine government land to own, the Muslims were driven further inside the marsh. Today, around 280,000 Muslims live in the marsh, which occupies parts of Cotabato City and 19 municipalities.

The marsh’s occupants live off its fishing and farming resources. Yes, one can plant *palay* (rice) in the marsh because in the Philippines, rice agriculture refers specifically to the irrigated rice varieties that thrive when inundated. During the dry season once every three years when the marsh is completely dry, the communities plant corn.

According to a World Bank-sponsored biodiversity study of the marsh, aside from its rich soil, it is home to about 30 fish species, 24 of which are of commercial value. Crocodiles, turtles, crabs, clams, wild duck and shrimp can also be found.

### **Income and ecology**

Because the homes on the marsh are rickety constructions on stilts, wild duck raising is common. Once fully grown, the ducks require virtually no maintenance. They live under the houses, and feed on the shrimp, fish and snails in the marsh. For that matter, duck raising was one of the livelihood sources in the marsh suggested by the World Bank’s biodiversity survey because the ducks are a natural restraint on the spread of snails, which are harmful to rice.

LYASDI pursued this recommendation and in 2002, developed a duck-dispersal and *balut*-making project.

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“Our goal was to make Ligawasan Marsh the *balut* capital of Mindanao,” Kim said.

*Balut* refers to an embryonated duck egg. The egg is subjected to intense heat for 16 to 18 days and the product is an incubated fertile duck egg. Called by a Filipino poet once as the “national street food” in the Philippines, it is a delicacy for some. Others, however, say that like other exotic foods, one has to acquire a taste for the protein-rich *balut*.

The association’s model was a household that raised 5,000 ducks. The proceeds from the eggs enabled the owners to employ a full-time caretaker for PhP1,000 (Cdn\$25) monthly.

Canada Fund for Local Initiatives supported the plan. The grant went to the purchase of duck eggs, the fabrication of an incubator that can hatch as many as 4,000 eggs at a time, a duckling nursery, and a *balut* maker. It also went to the purchase of duck eggs and the training of the project participants, the youth in three barangays in the municipality of Paglat, in the province of Maguindanao.

The participants trained in duck hatching took turns watching the eggs in the incubator. “You have to turn all 4,000 eggs every three hours, or else they will not be ducklings. You can’t even eat the eggs afterwards,” Kim said.

When about four to six months old, each duck lays one egg daily. Depending on the egg size and the season, fresh duck eggs fetch PhP2.50 to PhP3.50 (6 to 8 Cdn



(left) Duck eggs in the balut maker; (right) Feeding time for the future “money layers”

LYASDI

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cents) each; a *bahut*, PhP4.00 to PhP5.00 (10 to 12 Cdn cents). The best prices are from distributors in Cotabato City, according to the association members.

The participants were also trained in the care of ducklings, which should be administered a vaccine in their early days. Otherwise, when fully adult, the ducks can be left to fend for their own. Amilodin Mama received 118 ducks from the project. From the “numerous trainings” he attended, he learned that in their infancy, ducks require special care. “Bathing them should take not more than 30 minutes.”

In addition, the ducklings are voracious eaters of the dried *palay* grain. “But as they grow older, they get easier to manage. Ducks are ‘trainable,’” Amilodin said. “They wade around in the marsh all day to feed, then somehow know how to return to their owner.”

“I love my ducks,” said Fairods Midtumeḡ, another beneficiary. “Why will we not love them? In Liguasan Marsh, we call ducks ‘money layers’ because that’s what they are.”

### Unplanned benefit

In all, 19,000 birds were dispersed by the project within the first six months. (The project’s original target was the dispersal of 50,000 ducks per year.) Depending on the size of the family and the floor area under the house, an average of 30 ducks were distributed per household.

The project however was to yield unplanned payback.

In early February 2003, as Muslims gathered for a communal prayer at the break of day, bombs dropped in Liguasan Marsh. About 2,000 military troops backed by tanks, planes and artillery assaulted the marshlands. The government was flushing out elements of the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) operating in the marsh, as well as a kidnap gang called Pentagon, which is on the US watchlist of terrorist organisations.

Two weeks after, the conflict had spread to all four provinces bordering Liguasan Marsh — Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, South Cotabato and North Cotabato.

This attack on Liguasan Marsh was still another test on the ceasefire agreement signed between the MILF and the government in 2001. Sporadic violence in the areas of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao has tested this severely. But the real tragedy behind the latest resumption of hostilities in Mindanao was the mass evacuation this again triggered. A week into the war, the government recorded about 100,000



Project beneficiary  
Fairods Midtumeḡ: “I love  
my ducks!”

Unplanned payback: the association members distribute relief to war evacuees.



refugees, at least 70 percent of them women and children. The parish priest in Pikit municipality in North Cotabato called them “balik-evacuees” as they had barely begun to heal from the ravages of the war of 2000. (See related story on the children refugees of Pikit in 2000 on pages. 15 to 20.)

Relief supplies were good for only 10 days. The worst-case scenario for the social welfare and development agency was a full month of skirmishes as this meant a serious shortage of food supplies for the evacuees in the school buildings and makeshift tents that had sprouted in the plazas. But the war dragged on.

Three months after the evacuation, some LYASDI members ventured back into their communities. Most of the ducks were gone. They gathered the remaining ones and tried to barter these for rice to distribute to the other evacuees. Even though duck is not the meat of choice in the communities, the ducks that could not be sold were slaughtered and cooked, then again distributed in the evacuation centres.

“The project beneficiaries were now victims,” Kim explained. “We had to do what we could.” Luckily, he added, Canada Fund for Local Initiatives understood the situation and approved an extension of the project.

A year after the war, despite the continued presence of the military in the marshlands, LYASDI resumed the duck-raising project and has dispersed 9,000 ducklings so far. Amilodin, Fairods and the others attend to the tasks of caring for the ducklings with a sense of anticipation. In three more months, the ducks will have grown to adult size and should have started laying eggs.

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