



## A FLAGSTONE IN THE FOREST DEEP: PHILIPPINE EAGLE CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

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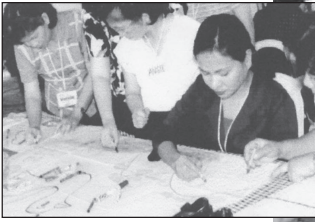


Dennis Salvador,  
executive director of  
Philippine Eagle  
Foundation

**K**abayan sat quietly on the branch of a tree, unsure of what to do next while the residents of Davao waited anxiously as they watched the live feed on their TV sets. International Earth Day of year 2004 was liberation day for this Philippine eagle (*Pithecophaga jefferyi*), the first monkey-eating eagle bred in captivity that was released to the wilds of Mt. Apo, the highest peak in the country.

Had Kabayan grown too accustomed to being caged? Assured of his prey during his 16-month captivity, had he shed off his real nature as the largest predator of Mindanao's forests? Or was he in fact just surveying his new territory, the first instinct of a general before executing the battle plan?

At last, after a good half hour, Kabayan spread his wings, seven feet in span, and took off. From the streets, one could hear the lusty cheer of Davaoños watching in their homes, in restaurants and offices, their delight and relief giving way to a thunderous burst, for here was the pride of Davao, nay, the pride of all of Mindanao, reclaiming sovereignty over his domain.



Teachers at work during their training in how to conduct wildlife education



For the Philippine Eagle Foundation (PEF) that bred and raised Kabayan, the release was a historic moment. Dennis Salvador, the foundation's executive director, admits little is still known of the Philippine eagle. "The best available estimate is that there are 500 pairs in the wild," he said, "but their habitat is getting increasingly smaller." With Kabayan's release, the foundation hopes to complement the wild population. The latest microchip and satellite-tracking technologies will help the foundation monitor Kabayan's progress.

### Not Easy

The project of Kabayan's release was not at all easy, according to Dennis. "Do you know we had to get more government permits and clearances than the loggers would need to cut down the remaining trees in the forests?"

PEF is especially sensitive to logging, the main reason for the loss of the Philippine eagle's natural habitat. Timber became a major export earner in the seventies, and even as the laws designed to discourage logging are in place, this continues, although admittedly at a smaller scale. "Well, to begin with, there are fewer trees to cut," was Dennis' laconic explanation. About the most stringent requirement before one can secure a logging permit from government is a replanting scheme good enough on paper.

PEF engages in captive-breeding and maintains an eight-hectare reservation park called Philippine Eagle Centre in the Malagos Watershed in a district of Davao City, an hour off the city proper. Kabayan was bred and raised in the laboratory in the reservation park.

Designed to simulate a tropical rainforest, the park is home to 29 Philippine eagles, 14 of which are captive-bred. It also houses 14 other bird species, three species of mammals and two species of reptiles.

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The park offers guided tours to visitors and includes an exhibit hall and audio-visual room where children and adults can watch films and read an assortment of posters on the Philippine eagle. The animal keepers obviously have intimate knowledge of their ward eagles, and will take the time to familiarise those interested in their habits. “These ones here are caged, but the other eagles not for public viewing are at the back,” said a young woman keeper.

The eagles within sight can be fed by the animal keepers without wearing an eagle mask; the ones kept in the isolation area can not.

### Upland Rehabilitation

Well realising the odds against any eagle conservation programme, the PEF is not engaged in the scientific enterprise of conservation alone. Central to its strategy is environment education, both formal and non-formal. A recipient of support from Canada Fund for Local Initiatives since 1989, the foundation’s community-based organising and education campaigns take the staff to the foothills of Mt. Apo that straddles the provinces of Davao, Bukidnon and North Cotabato. Here, they conduct education sessions with the uplanders, mostly indigenous Higaonon, Talandig and Mandaya communities that stress the importance of forest biodiversity and ecology, and the imperative of conservation.

Up to the eighties, the bounty of logging somewhat trickled down to the grassroots in the form of employment as casuals. No campaign, however urgent and impassioned, could have succeeded if this had been divorced from the basic issue of the people’s livelihood. PEF had to address the problem too, and integrated into its education project the transfer of knowledge and skills



Students have a lesson in biodiversity at the Philippine Eagle Centre in Malagos, Davao City.



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The eagles for public viewing are in large domed cages, one bird or a pair to a cage.

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in sustainable (organic) agriculture, agroforestry and overall resource management.

PEF’s community-based initiatives are found in six watershed areas in Bukidnon, and in Arakan Valley in Cotabato.

Sustainable development, for PEF, is the successful integration of human needs with those of wildlife, which is why it lunges into concerns such as land tenure and ancestral domain claim. “You will find that the communities are very responsive, also because biodiversity and conservation speak to their day-to-day experience in meeting their families’ basic needs,” Dennis said.

In one community, the residents will now literally chase off loggers, he added.

### Teachers’ Training

Another strategic target audience of the foundation is the children. The goal behind its education programme for grade school and high school teachers — mostly from the public schools — is behavioural change and values formation among schoolchildren. “It’s better to go after the young ones because once they’re convinced (of the need for conservation and environmental protection), you can see real change in their habits. And they’re very industrious in convincing the others — their parents and siblings — to drop their environmentally harmful habits,” said Angelito “Lito”

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Cereño, the education programme manager.

A specific activity that Canada Fund for Local Initiatives supported was the development of modules and workbooks that teachers use for their wildlife education classes. Initially conducted only in Davao, the teachers’ training sessions are now held throughout five of the six regions of Mindanao. Teachers from Luzon also attend the training, which is accredited by the Department of Education as continuing-education courses for teachers. So far, the group has reached 1,800 school teachers, or in terms of reach, 147,000 students.

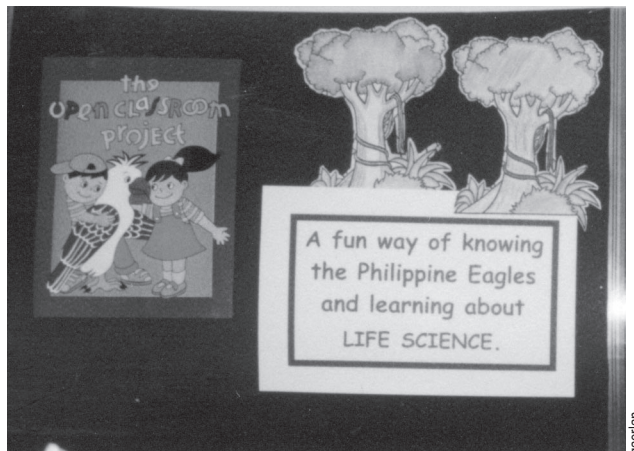
The programme began with a 1996 survey of the teaching materials and books available to teachers planning to hold environmental education classes. The finding was that there was no suitable tool the teachers could use. Modules and workbooks were then designed as one-week lesson plans in the natural and social science subjects. These were pilot-tested, then finalised for use during the training.

Held twice a year, the Teachers’ Training comes in two levels: the first consists of a basic orientation and demonstration-teaching session; the second, of an evaluation of the modules and a visit to the reservation park. Participation has to be voluntary, Lito stressed, as this is one effective measure of the teachers’ resolve to pursue conservation education in class.

The teachers pay for their own travel while their respective schools shoulder the per diem. The teachers from Luzon pay a course fee of PhP240 (Cdn\$6).

### From the Eagle and Beyond

The sessions are animate and characterised by structured learning exercises that encourage



Posters and pages from the workbooks designed to foster wildlife education



The 21-year-old Junior and his keeper, Ben

knowledge and appreciation of the environment. One activity is self-description based on a plant. “The teachers act very much like their students. They ask a lot of questions, they argue energetically among themselves,” Lito said.

Several teachers have also echoed the sessions attended with PEF to their colleagues. For many schools in and near Davao, a visit to the eagle reservation is a standard *lakbay-aral* (travel-study) activity every school year even though the education department discourages off-school activities in general.

PEF will not pass up a speaking invitation from any school either. “Our long-term goal is to reach as many young people as possible and encourage them to go into wildlife education and become wildlife conservation specialists,” Dennis said.

“You see, the eagle is our flagstone,” he stressed, “to call attention to the problem of environmental degradation. In the end, we’re talking of a bigger issue.”

Beyond the protection and propagation of the Philippine eagle, PEF stands for a kind of development that upholds environmental integrity. Its release of Kabayan into the wild is an investment not only in the eagle’s survival instincts. It is an act of faith in the Mindanaoans’ understanding of the inextricable link between themselves, the environment and their quest for development.

Months after its release, Kabayan, according to Dennis, darts in and out of the radar, probably exhilarant while exploring the ravines and pinnacles of the ranges of Mindanao. All augurs well for the eagle and the people.



Seedling nurseries of the communities are part of the reforestation effort and also serve as income source.