

Raising public awareness about forest plants and ecosystems at the Makiling Botanic Gardens, Philippines

Roberto P. Cereno

Makiling Botanic Gardens, University of the Philippines Los Baños, Laguna, Philippines

The Makiling Botanic Gardens (MBG) was established by Presidential Proclamation 60 on 30 November 1920 and later by Republic Act 3523 dated 20 June 1963 to “support professional instruction and research relating to forestry and plant sciences and to serve the educational and recreational needs of the general public.” Under the operational management of the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB), MBG aims to promote appreciation and to increase knowledge and understanding about plants, their diversity, importance and conservation. Its 300-ha area features a living collection of endemic and exotic flora and a repository and sanctuary of endangered plant species of the country. It serves as an important outdoor laboratory for the advancement of scientific knowledge on rainforest ecology and biodiversity conservation.

Located at the lower slopes of the Mount Makiling Forest Reserve and just 65 km southeast of Manila, MBG receives an annual average of 150,000 foreign and Filipino visitors. Majority of its visitors are students and teachers of high schools and colleges from and around the country’s capital.

MBG has facilities and services for visitor inquiries, reception, orientation-briefings, and audio-video presentations. Brochures, flyers and posters are made available to the general public.

Visitors can avail of the services of UPLB ENTs or Educators for Nature Tourism are students of the University of the Philippines - Los Baños who were trained to provide guided walk and nature interpretation services to the visitors of the Makiling Botanic Gardens (MBG). Their mission is for the visitors to understand and appreciate natural places, especially rainforests like Mt. Makiling, while enjoying it.

This conservation education program encompasses six modules delivered through a video show and a two-hour walk around MBG. The first module is about the values and conservation status of tropical rainforests. The second module concerns the characterization and classification of plants according to habitat and taxonomic groupings. The “TreeWorld” is the third module that covers a discussion on the economic importance of trees. For instance, almaciga (*Agathis philippinensis*) is a natural source of varnish, while betis (*Madhuca betis*) lumber is good for furniture and shipbuilding. In the fourth module, common queries like “Why dipterocarps grow tall?” and “Why there are invasive trees?” are tackled. An introduction to the world of raptors - eagles, hawks, falcons, kites, buzzards, and owls – follows through a visit to the Center for Philippine Raptors. The last module teaches visitors about watershed values of mountains and the ecological connection between Mt. Makiling and Laguna de Bay.

The ENTs also remind the visitors about MBG's house rules like refraining from picking any flowers, fruits or seeds, vandalism, littering, and others. MBG receives an annual average of 150,000 visitors mostly high school students from Metro Manila and Southern Tagalog regions.

While visitors benefit a lot from the discussions, the ENTs themselves also gain from their task. Aside from earning money that they can use for their daily school expenses, their presentation and speaking skills are also honed. Advanced booking is required to avail of their services.

UPLB forestry students and volunteer faculty and staff members are serving as cogents who provide guided walks and nature interpretation services upon request. Current learning modules put emphasis on Philippine flora, rainforest ecology, Philippine raptors, and riverine habitats.

Conservation education and information are also delivered through the following projects and activities: annual biodiversity training course (BIOCAMP) for science teachers and community leaders, youth ECOCAMP, summer nature encounters, nature arts classes, annual Arbor Day and Festival of Trees events.

MBG is expected to further play a prominent role as a nationally and globally significant conservation education area and as a convenient site for nature-based outdoor recreation and ecotourism.