

Social Mediatization of Biodiversity: The Case of Mount Pulag National Park in the Northern Philippines

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ABSTRACT

In January 2018, the Mount Pulag National Park in the northern Philippines caught fire. As a key biodiversity area and popular ecotourism and mountaineering site, the burning also lit a fire among social media users. This article follows the viral posts and the social media commentary using social mediatization as a lens. It aims to look into the constructs on biodiversity of social media users using textual analysis. Without using scientific terminology, social media users have been able to show a profound understanding of biodiversity. These includes the concepts of natural regeneration, ecological balance, deep ecology, and normative constructs on how the public should treat nature following the 'leave no trace' philosophy. They have also issued calls for better management of the national park and bringing to justice of those responsible for its degradation.

KEYWORDS

Constructs on Biodiversity, Facebook, Key Biodiversity Area, Leave No Trace, Mediatization Theory, Mt. Pulag National Park, Philippines, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

People understand and appreciate the natural environment in different ways and to different degrees. One of the natural features of the environment that remains so complex but integral to human survival is the variety of life, known as biological diversity, biotic diversity, or biodiversity. (Catibog-Sinha and Heaney, 2006)

On January 20, 2018, a butane stove being used by a group of mountain climbers accidentally exploded. In panic, the group fled, and fire raged near the mountain summit consuming around 5.9 hectares of grassland. This happened on Mount Pulag National Park, a key biodiversity area in the Northern Philippines.

For the most part, Mount Pulag gains public attention only when an accident happens in the locality such as when a tourist died of heart attack while camping in 2015, a helicopter crashing in the area in 2009, or fire occurring such as in 1998 and 2003. Because there is little opportunity to arouse the sentiment of people in biodiversity conservation, incidents such as the burning of Mount Pulag provide an arena for discussion.

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The Philippines is one of the world's 17 "megadiversity" countries (Conservation International et al, 2006). This means that along with the other 16 countries, it could collectively claim two-thirds of the earth's biodiversity within its territory, having more than 20,000 endemic species of plants and animals. However, the country is also one of 34 global biodiversity hotspots, where the high biodiversity and endemism is under a high level of threat of loss and destruction (Conservation International et al., 2006).

Catibog-Sinha and Heaney (2006) noted that indiscriminate and excessive use of the country's natural resources has resulted in rapid destruction. They further added that the root causes to biodiversity loss are the increasing demands for natural resources, failure of policy makers and market economy to provide appropriate valuation, and loss of incentives for communities to protect biodiversity.

Site conservation measures for biodiversity centers in the country are in place. "To effectively conserve biodiversity as a whole, we must ensure that conservation action focuses on its key components: on the individual species at the greatest risk of extinction, and on specific sites and landscapes that are most important for their protection" (Conservation International Philippines et al., 2006). And, one of these measures is the naming of protected areas such as that of the Mount Pulag which was officially declared a National Park by virtue of Presidential Proclamation 75, series of 1987 signed by President Corazon Aquino.

The Mount Pulag National Park is a priority conservation area in the Philippines. Fernando and Cereno wrote that the park is recognized as a:

1. Center of Plant Diversity in the Philippines, owing to its richness in plant species, large number of endemic species, and diverse range of habitats;
2. Priority Important Bird Area (PH004), supporting populations of many threatened birds, including most species restricted to montane habitats;
3. Biodiversity Conservation Priority Area, based on a combined assessment of plants, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, arthropods, and socio-economic pressure;
4. Key Biodiversity Area, based on the occurrence of one or more globally threatened species, i.e., Critically endangered (CR), Endangered (EN), or Vulnerable (VU), and presence of restricted range species or endemic species (2010).

The park boasts of many unique features such as pine forests, misty lakes, dense upper montane or mossy forests with oaks, rhododendrons, tree ferns, rare cloud rats, and rolling grasslands with dwarf bamboos. Mount Pulag covers approximately 11,500 hectares and three provinces in the Luzon Island. It houses several mountain peaks among which are Mt. Pulag, Mt. Tabeyoc, Mt. Akiki, and Mt. Panotoan (Fernando and Cereno, 2010). As a protected biodiversity site of the Philippines, Mount Pulag is at threat from encroachment and expansion of vegetable farms, timber poaching and wildlife hunting, infrastructure development, bioprospecting, invasive species, and overlapping land claims (Fernando and Cereno, 2010).

The most popular of the mountain peaks in the national park is Mt. Pulag, sometimes called Mt. Pulog, with an elevation of 2,922 meters above sea level. It attracts both seasoned and amateur climbers, with numbers reaching up to 500 on weekends. This has forced the park superintendent to issue a partial closure order on weekends to prevent tourists from trampling the vegetation at the peak (Alimondo, 2018).

Primary interest of both national and local government in the preservation of Mount Pulag is the grassland vegetation near the peak of Mt. Pulag which is composed of the dwarf bamboo, *Yushania niitakayamensis*, and other rare plants such as *Danthonia oreoboloides*, *Aniselytron agrostoides*, *Deschampsia flexuosa* var. *ligulata*, *Deyeuxia suizanensis* var. *stenophylla* (Fernando and Cereno, 2010). Endemic plants such as *Scirpus pulogense* and *Hypericum pulogense* are also abundant in this area (Fernando and Cereno, 2010).

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