

■ LOCAL REGIONAL STUDIES NETWORK

BAGUIO'S BIODIVERSITY GREENPRINT

Conserving and Protecting the City's Natural Heritage

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INTRODUCTION

Baguio City's Natural Capital: Are we in it for the future?

Baguio City, an urban landscape nestled in the Benguet province, known to Filipinos as the “City of Pines” and the “Summer Capital of the Philippines”, is faced with a multitude of environmental and ecological pressures including urban sprawl, population growth, and unchecked development. These pressures have compromised the city's carrying capacity and ecological health leading to diminishing spaces and resources, environmental degradation, and deteriorating quality of

ecosystem services which human settlements of the city depend on (Estoque and Murayama 2013).

Current data and information from the City Environment and Parks Management Office (CEPMO) and the City Planning, Development, and Sustainability Office (CPDSO) revealed a deficit of 27.822 hectares (2.26%) in open spaces and a forest cover below the minimum 30 percent standard, with a 2 percent shortfall (Tabangin,

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2024). Green cover stands in the city or simply, green spaces (i.e., areas covered with vegetation) have dwindled, falling from a 60 percent ideal baseline to almost 50 percent. With the steady decline of the city's natural resources, human-influenced activities including land-use changes and an unstable resident and transient human population, have affected Baguio City's environmental and ecological quality with frequent water shortages, poor quality of air and water resources, declining biodiversity, and overall decay of the urban landscape. In 2043, Baguio City faces the possibility of an irreversible environmental decay if immediate, apt, and strategic interventions are not in place.

Initiatives to conserve, protect, and sustainably manage Baguio's green spaces and biodiversity require suitable and actionable policies rooted in science and evidence-based urban and environmental planning. Guided by city urban planning and environmental frameworks, Baguio City must proactively transform into a vibrant urban hub characterized by public spaces, low-carbon mobility, and a healthy environment. Baguio must also confront challenges such as the degradation of its major water systems (e.g., Ambalanga, Balili, and Bued Rivers), a growing urban heat island effect, and the diminishing protective functions of its pine forests that are critical for water recharge, runoff reduction, and other regulating and supporting ecosystem services.

Previous studies that focused on Baguio City highlighted the importance of integrating concepts and frameworks such as ecosystem services, urban landscape conservation and management into a holistic form of urban planning that considers a harmonious balance among economic development, environmental protection, and social well-being. Strategies including comprehensive mapping, assessment, and monitoring of land-use/land-cover changes and geospatial analyses and predictions were proposed. Similarly, Gonzales

and Magnaye (2018) stressed that uncoordinated and poorly-managed urban planning resulted in the decline of open areas, green spaces, and water provisions which amplified the city's vulnerability to disruptions and disturbances such as flooding, pollution, and water shortages. Morley (2018) added that sustainable urban management strategies will halt environmental decay while Estoque and Murayama (2011) highlighted that Baguio City should consider a climate-smart framework for urban environmental guidance.

This policy brief looks into the existing policies and legislations that are applicable in the context of Baguio City and its environmental facets—biodiversity, green spaces, climate change, sustainability, and urban planning. To be able to do this, we looked into published and unpublished literature, policy documents, and other important resources that tackle matters relevant to the city's natural and physical environment. We then reviewed and assessed these policy documents with two key considerations: (1) the empirical and scientific validity of environmental policies, whether existing or planned to be enacted, have to be anchored in current scientific evidence on urban biodiversity and focused on improving the quality of the urban environment and (2) city stakeholders' perception and experience regarding environmental policy enforcement within the context of Baguio City.

Finally, this policy brief concludes by identifying and proposing a comprehensive policy roadmap to conserve, restore, protect, and sustainably manage the remaining urban biodiversity of the city and enhance the ecological and environmental integrity of Baguio City for the years to come. Such an approach not only amplifies local level initiatives but also holds remarkable relevance to cities across the Philippines and a profound impact on local, regional, and national development.

ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE

Baguio City's Current Environmental Framework

Central to sustainable and holistic urban governance is biodiversity conservation and ecosystem protection, most especially in urban landscapes such as Baguio City. With the alarming progression of urban sprawl and decay, local policies and programs have been enacted to balance the city's development with environmental protection. The Department of Environment and Natural

Resources - CAR (DENR - CAR) and the City Environment and Parks Management Office (CEPMO) established legislative mechanisms that consider biodiversity conservation into climate resilience and adaptation, land-use planning, and disaster-risk reduction and management. These mechanisms highlight reforestation, watershed management, green infrastructure, among

others to decrease the impact of urban decay and human-induced climate change.

National: Urban Biodiversity Management Framework

The Philippine Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (PBSAP) 2015-2028 that is vertically and horizontally aligned with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) serves as the national framework that guides local urban policies on biodiversity conservation and environmental management (DENR BMB 2016). Additionally, the DENR BMB Technical Bulletin 2018-02 emphasizes that biodiversity assessment in urban landscapes such as Baguio City is to be employed to provide supporting evidence for policy making. Consequently, the formulation of the City Biodiversity Index (CBI), also known as the Singapore Index on Cities' Biodiversity, ensures that biodiversity is accounted for in local development planning and the formulation and implementation of conservation and protection strategies for organisms and habitats (DENR BMB Technical Bulletin 2021-04).

Baguio City adheres to an Urban Biodiversity Management Planning Process based on existing technical bulletins issued by the DENR (DENR BMB TB 2021-04; DENR BMB TB 2018-02) and these guidelines provide the structure for considering biodiversity conservation and requiring important mechanisms such as biodiversity impacts assessments for urban development projects and infrastructure. Moreover, the framework incorporates a collaborative and multi-stakeholder participatory approach, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and sustainable financing mechanisms to ensure that urban environmental resilience is achieved (DENR BMB 2016).

Local: Baguio City's Urban Forestry and Green Space Management Plan

The Urban Forestry Management Plan (UFMP) 2021-2030 is a significant initiative geared towards conserving and protecting Baguio's urban terrestrial ecosystems such as forests and other green spaces. The plan outlines reforestation and community stewardship to expand and improve the breadth of urban forests and other green spaces in the city. Mechanisms such as integrating tree protection in zoning policies, requiring tree planting in new infrastructure developments, and financial incentives for private landowners that maintain a certain fraction of tree cover are laid out in the plan.

Urban reforestation and greening programs harness citizen participation through tree planting programs, green space preservation initiatives, and environmental education that is carried out in primary and secondary schools. Baguio City has also adopted forestry practices such as coppicing, afforestation, and pollarding to improve the quality and stability of forest ecosystems. Furthermore, the proposed parking and congestion fees for tourist-owned vehicles could potentially finance urban reforestation initiatives as per Baguio City Ordinance No. 93-2023.

Local: Baguio City's Legislative Framework for Biodiversity Conservation and Environmental Management

Baguio City, through its Sangguniang Panlungsod, enacted numerous ordinances that promote biodiversity conservation and sustainable urban development. Several ordinances, including the Green Patch Ordinance (City Ordinance No. 03-2006) and City Ordinances No. 44-88 and No. 05-2011, focus on reforestation and tree planting initiatives in public and private spaces and require construction permits for

infrastructure within the city for these activities. The Environmental Code of Baguio City (City Ordinance No. 18-2016) which serves as one of the key local environmental policies of the city, emphasizes and reinforces the national policies on land use, biodiversity conservation, watershed protection, and sustainable infrastructure development

The city's efforts to conserve and protect biodiversity and important ecosystems such as green spaces remain insufficient, despite an array of international, national, and local policies, frameworks, and ordinances. Findings from our stakeholder consultations and policy review revealed a multitude of challenges of varying magnitudes that may impede or hinder the effective formulation and implementation of policies and initiatives that govern biodiversity and environmental management. One core issue is the implementation of environmental policies with overlapping mandates and inconsistencies in its framework. Additionally, weak enforcement and implementation of these policies dilute the goal of promoting conservation and protection in the city. The lack of resources—both financial and human coupled with political will exacerbates this issue. Furthermore, resistance emanating from various stakeholders including private property owners, business entities, developers, and a number of community stakeholders,

hinder conservation and protection initiatives for a variety of specific reasons but mainly because setting environmental policies in place may put constraints to economic growth not realizing the essential role of biodiversity and environmental resources to these

entities. Lastly, multiple missed opportunities to leverage evidence-based policies, public-private partnerships, and citizen engagement especially of young people, indigenous cultural communities, and civil society groups have been identified.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A Holistic Science-Policy Greenprint for Baguio City

As Baguio City moves toward a future of balancing socio-economic development with environmental sustainability, efforts to conserve and protect the remaining natural heritage becomes more important than ever. The following key recommendations offer contextualized, appropriate, and feasible ways forward that are congruent with local, regional, national, and international policy frameworks on biodiversity conservation and sustainable development in urban landscapes.

1. Strengthening Environmental Governance

A. Promoting cohesive inter-agency coordination and existing policy integration

- Local governance bodies in the city (e.g. CPDSO, CEPMO, DENR-CAR, etc.) should strengthen their multi-stakeholder coordination to ensure that urban conservation policies are consistent.
- Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRRs) for existing environmental codes and city ordinances should be crafted clearly to avoid inconsistencies in implementation and enforcement.
- Ensure that future assessments, evaluation, review, and reimplementation of policies align with local, national, and international biodiversity and sustainability frameworks and strategies such as the Philippine Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (PBSAP) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

B. Creating Long-term Monitoring and Evaluation Metrics and Methods

- Establish and implement a system of tracking efforts and initiatives that focus on biodiversity (forest cover, species diversity,

etc.) and consider a Baguio Biodiversity Report Card that integrates metrics from the Seal of Good Local Governance (SGLG) to herald accountability and proactive compliance.

- Employ on-the-ground checks to assess the effectiveness of biodiversity-related policies that are being implemented.

2. Harnessing Culture and Community: Indigenous Knowledge and Community-led Urban Conservation

A. Complementing Environmental Solutions with Indigenous Conservation Approaches

- Integrate the Indigenous Peoples' Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (IPBSAP) at the city level to institutionalize indigenous knowledge in urban environmental planning.
- Designate an Indigenous Biodiversity Management Zone for citizens within specified ancestral domains while strengthening the protection framework for such sites.
- Consider placing a financial incentive scheme for indigenous groups who are maintaining ecologically-important zones.

B. Encouraging Citizen-led Conservation Initiatives

- Enhance citizen participation in biodiversity conservation and pro-environment behavior through urban greening efforts, formal and informal integration of environmental education especially in schools and local youth councils, and promoting citizen science programs.

3. Balancing Urban Development with Environmental Sustainability

A. Enacting an Ecosystem-based Urban Planning and Zoning Regulations

- Enforce stricter zoning regulations in areas with high probability of urban sprawl and encroachment such as the city's remaining green spaces which are mostly privately owned areas.
- Encourage and promote conservation and protection easements for landowners on which they receive incentives for protecting biodiversity resources and habitats on identified private properties.

B. Mitigating the detrimental impact of urban development on the city's natural environment

- Strengthen the implementation of Environmental Compliance Certificates (ECCs) and ensure that developments incorporate facets aiming to curb environmental decay.
- Explore financial offsets for developers implementing greening initiatives commensurate with the degree of environmental disturbance.

4. Promoting Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for enhancing Biodiversity and Climate Resilience

A. Enhancing Biodiversity and Greenspaces through Nature-based Solutions

- Use geospatial data and on-the-ground assessment in identifying high-priority conservation areas and habitats.
- Craft an ecological connectivity strategy that interlinks urban green spaces, forests, watersheds, and other ecological habitats to promote species movement and enhance the delivery of urban ecosystems services.
- Strengthen the Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP) and watershed rehabilitation programs to maintain the delivery of provisioning ecosystem services such as food and water.

B. Applying NbS for Soil and Water Health, and Waste Management

- Provide opportunities to initiate organic composting and vermiculture initiatives in communities.

5. Institutionalizing Scientific Research and Evidence-based Environmental and Urban Planning Policymaking

A. Adopting a Centralized Biodiversity and Environmental Health Information System

- Establish a Baguio Urban Biodiversity Data Repository System that will be managed by academic institutions, select government agencies, environmental groups, and citizen scientists.
- Adopt and integrate global and national biodiversity assessment frameworks (e.g., IUCN Urban Nature Index, Singapore Index on Cities' Biodiversity) with local metrics to improve the assessment and monitoring of Baguio City's biodiversity and ecosystems.

B. Integrating Science and Socio-cultural Contexts into Environmental Policy and Planning

- Conduct biodiversity impact assessments as a requisite for policy proposals and city development plans while employing long-term ecological assessments on significant conservation challenges such as introductions of non-native species and re-greening initiatives.
- Harness and empower collaboration and meaningful partnerships between scientists, policymakers, citizens, and other stakeholders through regular policy dialogues and knowledge-sharing avenues.

CONCLUSION

Baguio City Beyond 2043: Blooming and Thriving

With Baguio City aspiring to realize an urban landscape that is inclusive, creative, and livable by year 2043, proactive and decisive actions are requisites to meet this goal. As one of the Philippines' most economically and environmentally significant urban landscapes, Baguio City sits between balancing economic growth and sustainable development. The city must be able to harmoniously align its ecological and environmental policies and urban development plans with ambitious, but realistic and feasible conservation and protection goals for biodiversity, ecosystems, and the benefits that we gain. Achieving all these requires a paradigm shift—

one that acknowledges that mainstreaming biodiversity conservation and ecosystem management compels stakeholders—citizens, policymakers, academics, and other groups to participate and collaborate actively. Moreover, this shift should not only focus on rethinking and redefining environmental policies and local frameworks but also on considering the behavioral aspect of community stakeholders when it comes to economic progress and environmental sustainability. With policy coherence, effective enforcement, and strong societal participation, Baguio City can truly achieve a livable city for all.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who contributed to the development of this discussion paper. We extend our deepest appreciation to the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Local and Regional Studies Network (LRSN) for their invaluable support and guidance throughout this research. We are also grateful to the Cordillera Studies Center (CSC), the University of the Philippines Baguio, and the College of Science for providing institutional backing and resources that facilitated this study. Special thanks go to the dedicated researchers, policymakers, local government units, and environmental organizations whose insights and expertise enriched our analysis of urban biodiversity governance. We acknowledge the participation of indigenous communities, civil society organizations, private sector representatives, urban planners, and the academe in the stakeholder consultations, whose perspectives were instrumental in shaping our policy recommendations. Their collective efforts and commitment to sustainable urban biodiversity conservation in Baguio City have been invaluable in advancing this initiative.

Specifically, we would like to thank the following:

- Baguio City Office – City Environment and Parks Management Office (CEPMO)
- Baguio City Office – City Planning, Development, and Sustainability Office (CPDSO)
- Department of Environment and Natural Resources – Cordillera Administrative Region (DENR-CAR)
- City Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO)
- National Commission on Indigenous Peoples Baguio (NCIP-Baguio)
- Barangays Happy Hollow, Imelda Marcos and Lualhati
- University of Baguio
- University of Cordillera
- Saint Louis University
- John Hay Management Co.
- BLISTT (Baguio-La Trinidad-Itogon-Sablan-Tuba-Tublay) Tour Guides Inc.
- Partners for Indigenous Knowledge Philippines (PIKP)
- Baguio City People's Council
- Zero Waste Baguio Inc.
- Climate Crisis Advisory Group (CCAG)
- Tebtebba Foundation
- Cordilleran Youth Center Inc.
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- Girl Scout of the Philippines – Baguio City Council
- United Architects of the Philippines Inc. – Summer Capital Chapter
- Lifeline Counseling Center, PRO-LIFE Baguio
- Jaime V. Ongpin Foundation Inc.
- Transcending Institution and Communities Inc.
- Cielo Mae D. Marquez

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research was conducted in adherence to ethical standards to ensure the integrity of data collection, the protection of research participants, and compliance with relevant legal and institutional guidelines.

1. Informed Consent and Anonymity of Informants

All participants in the stakeholder consultations, focus group discussions (FGDs), and interviews were informed of the study's objectives, methods, and intended use of the data. Participation was voluntary, and written or verbal consent was obtained prior to engagement. To protect privacy, participant identities have been anonymized in the report, and no personally identifiable information has been disclosed.

2. Data Privacy and Confidentiality

In compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173), all personal data collected during FGDs, surveys, and stakeholder engagements were handled with strict confidentiality. No sensitive or personally identifiable information was disclosed, and data were used solely for the purposes of this study. All records were securely stored and accessible only to the research team. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any stage without repercussions.

3. Ethical Statement on Data Privacy in FGDs

During FGDs, participants were informed that discussions would be documented for research purposes. No audio or video recordings were made without explicit consent. Transcripts and notes were anonymized to protect identities, and any potentially sensitive information shared during the discussions was excluded from public dissemination. Participants had the option to review and withdraw their statements if they wished.

4. Exemption from Ethical Review and Permit Requirements

This study does not pose any risk to participants, as it only sought their perspectives on urban biodiversity governance and related policy issues. No personal, medical, or sensitive data were collected. As such, there was no need for an institutional ethics review or additional research permits. However, the study adhered to general ethical guidelines to ensure respect, transparency, and voluntary participation.

5. AI Use and Declaration

In accordance with the AI guidelines adopted by the University of the Philippines and the UP CIDS, AI was not used to generate the content of this discussion paper, particularly in the "results and discussion" sections. The AI tool (i.e., ChatGPT) was solely used to "improve readability and language", specifically for grammar and style checking. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of this publication.

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