

To Resist is to Survive: Lived Experiences of the Untenured Migrants in the Watershed Protected Areas

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Abstract:- Many watersheds in the country are being occupied by untenured settlers who are not aware of the danger it will cause to our protected areas.

Watershed provides a “well-balanced” system. Healthy watersheds also offer commercially viable natural resources (such as wood and non-wood products) and water for residential, agricultural, and industrial applications, well-maintained and balanced watersheds also provide environmental services. Furthermore, watersheds act as homes for different kinds of plants and animals. This study is qualitative research which delved into the experiences and struggles of occupants of informal settlers, within the Olongapo Watershed Forest Reserve, which is reflected in the results and discussion. Results and findings were discussed by forming themes and meanings elicited from informants’ responses. The study revealed that participants chose to stay in the protected area because of the demands of their job, access to basic services, and poverty. People were drawn to occupy the watershed protected areas because they could not afford a decent house to call their own. Furthermore, illegal occupants and DENR representatives face inherent problems due to a lack of knowledge and strict implementation of certain policies, which explains why these tenants continue to stay in the said location. It is also fascinating that, considering the tenants’ anxieties brought by the threat of termination or eviction, they still hope that the government will give them consideration to have a full legal right to own a piece of land from the protected area or give them justifiable relocation sites where they can start anew. On the other hand, while it is difficult for them to grasp the reality of the consequences of living there, they are all open to dialogue and prepared to follow the rule of law. In addition, the government must set the proper conditions and benefits for the informal settlers to have a successful peaceful and humane manner of relocating informal settlers if they want to conserve and protect the OWFR.

Keywords:- Ecosystem, Forest Reserve, Urban Landscape, Untenured Migrants, Watershed Protected Areas.

I. INTRODUCTION

Protected areas are essential for reducing climate change and increasing resiliency to catastrophic incidents. In addition to ensuring biodiversity and protecting ecosystems that have traditionally provided livelihoods for many, protecting the reserve areas is also critical to prevent the further spread of zoonotic infectious diseases such as Ebola and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID19). The problems related to the operation and management of protected areas must therefore be urgently addressed.

Healthy watersheds offer several ecosystem services including nutrient cycling, carbon storage, erosion/sedimentation control, increased biodiversity, soil formation, wildlife movement corridors, water storage, water filtration, flood control, food, timber, and recreation, as well as reduced vulnerability to invasive species, the effects of climate change and other natural disasters”. These goods and services are essential to our social, environmental, and economic wellbeing. Diaz, Rabanal, (2020) notes that protecting healthy watersheds can reduce capital costs for water treatment plants and reduce damages to property and infrastructure due to flooding, thereby avoiding future costs. Additionally, protecting healthy watersheds can generate revenue through property value premiums, recreation and tourism.

Protected areas are an essential mechanism for conserving the biological and cultural diversity of a territory. Initially, protected areas were conceived as spaces isolated from human populations but because of land scarcity in the urban areas, people began to occupy the protected Areas. Thus, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has assured the public that illegal occupation of lands within protected areas will not be tolerated. (DENR, 2020) thus, the study. This study will focus on protected areas with considerable human populations inside the area and its buffer zone and Barangay Old Cabalan was chosen as a case study area because it was a representative example of the protected area management problematics in DENR.

The protected area is being occupied by both tenured and untenured migrant since 1992. The tenured migrants were given “land rights” to stay outside the buffer zone while the

untenured migrants are the illegal settlers staying within the buffer zone of the area. The migrants came from different parts of the country. Most of them are from Visayas, Ilocos, Zambales, Bataan, and Bicol Region. Most of the migrants are working in the central district, others are using the resources in the protected area. Some are farmers, loggers, and fishermen. Despite the law that prohibits the occupation of the watershed protected areas. The migrants resist to leave the place.

Like most protected areas in the Philippines, Old Cabalan in Olongapo City has a relatively dense human population within its boundaries. The Olongapo Watershed Forest Reserves are environmentally critical area and are main sources of biodiversity, maintaining the ecosystem and providing natural processes of the city. Disturbances to such conservation areas threaten flora and fauna and water resources, which could affect the food and water supply in Olongapo.

The study will investigate why despite the passing of Republic Act 11038 or the Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System (ENIPAS) Act of 2018, there are still communities near and within the boundaries of the OWFR and the reason behind the continuous occupation despite of the passage of the law prohibiting the occupation within the protected area. It will also examine why the settlers in OWFR refuse to leave the place despite the notice of the DENR to vacate the place. This paper will also examine the reason behind the refusal of the settlers in the OWFR's to leave the area despite the existence of laws prohibiting occupation of public lands by analyzing the DENR's program for the protected area.

The study will be beneficial to the DENR's protected area planners as the result of the study may serve as basis for policy implementation, additionally, the DENR will understand the reason behind the resistance of the settlers, thus the government can design better policies for the mutual benefit of both people and biodiversity. Further, the study will also contribute to the very limited studies on the causes and factors on occupation of public land specially within the protected areas.

The study will be able to explore the nature of occupation within the OWFR according to the public authorities and the occupants. It will also describe how the DENR approach occupation of public domain specifically in areas under initial component of NIPAS. The study will also identify the strategies and intervention that the DENR authorities are implementing within the OWFR to address occupation issues/problem and identify its weaknesses and strength.

The study would provide a springboard on future research within other public land such as accretion caused by the eruption of Mount Pinatubo within the coastal areas of Zambales.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research which utilized a descriptive case study design. This type of methodology emphasizes looking into meanings, perspective, experiences, and processes that are not easily quantifiable. (Torneo 2018) A qualitative approach was appropriate in this study to have a deeper understanding of the extent as well as the status of defiance of the occupants in the watershed protected areas thus, it requires in depth investigation of the case.

The researcher personally gathered the data using the tools and instruments identified in the study and personally transcribed the interviews and made thematic analysis on the results that are relevant to the study. The study was conducted in three phases namely, pre-fieldwork, fieldwork and post-fieldwork.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The focus groups produced lively discussions about the experiences and struggles of the occupants in Olongapo Watershed Forest Reserve in response to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources plans and policies. The following themes emerged from the study of the informants' transcripts and elucidated an in-depth analysis of the experiences and nature of resistance of the illegal settlers answered each research questions.

The themes emerged to answer research question #1 on what are the DENR's development issues directly affecting the informal settlers in OWPA

- Limitations and restrictions.
- Identifying and Safeguarding of Protective Area.
- Lack of Information Initiative; and
- Inconsistency of the Implementation of Policy

Meanwhile, the themes emerged that answered research question #2 about the responses of the settlers in the development policies of DENR are:

- Constant Fear of Evictions.
- Lack of Accurate Knowledge and Capacity; and
- Hoping for Government Consideration.

Furthermore, the themes emerged that answered research question #3 about the reasons of resistance of the settlers in OWFR are:

- Lack of Clear Policy and Access to Affordable Housing; and
- Positive Outlook. This study aims to explore the experiences and struggles of occupants of informal settlers,

within the Olongapo Watershed Forest Reserve, which is reflected in the results and discussion in this chapter. The divisions above discussed the findings of the comprehensive interview and in-depth data analysis conducted by the researcher.

Results and findings were discussed by forming themes and meanings elicited from informants' responses that answers research questions stated in Chapter 1. It also includes the experiences and nature of resistance of the occupants in Olongapo Watershed Forest Reserve in response to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources plans and policies. Studies have shown that participants choose to stay in the protected area because of the demands of their job, their birthplace, and poverty. People were drawn to occupy vacant government areas such as OWFR because they could not afford a decent house to call their own. Furthermore, illegal occupants and DENR representatives face inherent problems due to a lack of knowledge and strict implementation of certain policies, which explains why these tenants continue to stay in the said location.

It is also fascinating that, considering the tenants' anxieties brought by the threat of termination or eviction, they still hope that the government will give them consideration to have a full legal right to own a piece of land from the protected area or give them justifiable relocation sites where they can start anew.

On the other hand, while it is difficult for them to grasp the reality of the consequences of living there, they are all open to dialogue and prepared to follow the rule of law. In addition, the government must set the proper conditions and benefits for the informal settlers to have a successful peaceful and humane manner of relocating informal settlers if they want to conserve and protect the OWFR.

IV. CONCLUSION

Findings have shown that occupants of the OWFR stated their awareness regarding the management implementation of the developmental projects and policies safeguarding the protected area.

Despite the DENR's launch of advocacy campaigns to protect watersheds, not everyone living in the protected area had knowledge about the contexts and policies, and living in the protected area would affect biodiversity, particularly those living in the OWPA.

Consequently, such inconsistency in the implementation of DENR policy affects the settlers in a way that they tend to justify and follow the precedent of pioneering untenured migrants in the protected area.

Notably, fear of evictions for many of the OWPA settlers relative to the development policies of DENR has been notably seen in their sharing of their struggles and experiences living in the protected area. Shared experiences and statements elicited show that some reasons for the resistance of the untenured migrants in OWFR were poverty; there was no clear policy about the termination; and they didn't have their own real property. That is why they insisted on staying in the protected areas.

Thus, even though the DENR established PAMB, or the Protected Area Management Board, which has powers and functions to oversee the management, approval, and implementation of policies, plans, programs, proposals, agreements, and others; representatives openly admitted their awareness of illegal occupants and their limited capacity to control the nature of the settlers' resistance. Furthermore, findings indicate that the primary challenge was strict policy implementation and budget allocation to support all PAMB programs aimed at protecting the OWFR and OWPA.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, there are significant challenges associated with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and illegal tenants of Olongapo Watershed Protected Area.

The Philippines is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change. As temperatures rise, rainfall patterns shift, sea level rises, and as more extreme weather events happen, this will further exacerbate the degraded condition of ecosystems and biodiversity in the country. Furthermore, watersheds are critical for sustaining plant and animal ecosystems as well as supplying drinking water for humans and wildlife. In this regard, it is critical to protect the natural resources in our watershed for our own personal health as well as the health of future generations.

The government should strictly implement policies with adequate plans and programs that will secure the welfare of all illegal occupants of these protected areas. The National Government must provide proper relocation that is conducive, safe, with livelihood support and basic services which is accessible for the affected families. Extra effort is needed to educate and inform the people/migrants of the protected areas about certain policies and penalties mandated by the law, the possible risks of their tenancy in the area, and other possible negative effects of their resistance to obeying the rule of law.

The Local Government must also exert effort in convincing the people in the OWFR to accept the offer of the government for their own welfare. Moreover, for the possible implementation of the policies and programs of the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB), they must have a guideline that will secure equality and justice for all possible grantees of

the portion of land for legal tenancy, followed by educating these stewards of land about maintaining clean water; solid waste management; enhancing tree planting programs; intensifying forest protection and anti-illegal logging; as well as enhancing biodiversity conservation for the said Protected Area.

OWFR occupants must organize and engage in talks so that those in authority understand all of their sentiments, needs, and other problems related to their current status of tenure. They can form potential associations and representatives who will maintain constant contact with government agencies and officials.

Future researchers must provide more data regarding the current state and statistics of the poor in the protected area for them to have a clear picture of those who identified themselves as in the poverty line. The development plan of the DENR in the protected area must be monitored through evaluation or assessment in order for them to address its effectivity and provide much more accurate programs and interventions regarding the issues being presented.

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