

Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City, Metro Manila



Eighteenth Congress
First Regular Session

HOUSE BILL NO. 5493

Introduced by **Hon. Cyrille "Beng" F. Abueg-Zaldivar**

EXPLANATORY NOTE

The proposed bill seeks to declare the municipality of Balabac, Province of Palawan, as an ecotourism zone.

Balabac, a second-class municipality in the south-westernmost tip of Palawan, has a population of 40,142 people as of the 2015 national census. Even prior to Spanish colonization, the area has been the home of the Molbog people. They are known to have a strong connection with the natural world, especially with the sacred *pilandok* (Philippine mouse-deer), which can be found only in the Balabac islands. The municipality consists of some 36 islands, including its mainland Balabac Island.

Balabac has one of, if not the most, diverse and dense biodiversities in the world, being home to a wide variety of endemic flora and fauna, including the nocturnal Philippine mouse-deer (*pilandok*), countless species of endemic and migratory birds, and rare plants and insects; and rich marine life, characterized by dugongs, saltwater crocodiles, sawfishes, sharks, dolphins, tuna, whales, rays, sea turtles, numerous species of mangrove, and giant Sulu Sea Pearls. Due to its biodiversity, the Balabac archipelago's terrestrial and marine ecosystems are currently being pushed by scholars to be included in the tentative list of the Philippines for a possible UNESCO World Heritage Site nomination in the future.

The municipality boasts of unspoiled island beaches, shoals, and sandbars, surrounded by perfectly turquoise waters. Balabac has the third and fourth longest sandbars in the Philippines, the Queen Helen Sandbar at the southern tip of Bugsuk and the Angela Sandbar east of Mansalangan, respectively.

In recent years, more and more visitors have been venturing toward this "last of the last frontier." They are keen to visit the Spanish-era Cape Melville lighthouse (one of the oldest in the Philippines, having been built in 1892), the ruins of the Spanish structure at the mouth of Larindon Bay (below the Melville lighthouse), the Historical Marker in Ramos Island, and the old Spanish Fort in Ulitan.

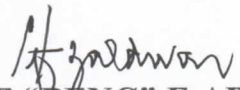
Visitors can go island-hopping and bask in the wide and long stretch of fine white sands of Punta Sebaring, Onuk (Roughton), Nasubata, Candaraman, Matangala, Canabungan, Ramos, Bugsuk, Bowen, Siksikan, Secam, Patongong, Pandanan, Lumbucan, Salingsingan, Mangsee and other islands, shoals, and sandbars that dot the Balabac archipelago; visit the pink sand beach of Comiran Island; see the beautiful mangrove areas of Sebaring, Bugsuk, Melville, and other coastal areas in town; or go bird-watching, as Balabac is considered one of the best bird-watching spots in the Philippines, being home to the Grey Imperial Pigeon (*Ducula pickeringii*), Philippine Cockatoo (*Cacatua haematuropygia*), Blue-headed Racket-tail (*Prioniturus platenae*), Palawan Hornbill (*Anthracoceros marchei*) and the Philippine Eagle (*Pithecophaga jefferyi*), among others. Those in search of more physical adventures can trek to Melville Peak, Italawon Peak and Malaking Ilog Peak, or see the hidden waterfalls in the mountains of Balabac.

All these have attracted visitors, foreign and domestic alike. In fact, plans are underway to make Balabac a cruise ship destination in the Philippines. Balabac visitors are undeterred by the lack of sufficient transportation and tourism systems, infrastructure, and facilities found in more established tourist destinations, all in search of new adventures and unexplored natural beauty.

However, there is a need to ensure that with the burgeoning number of tourist arrivals in Balabac, its ecological sustainability is maintained. Thus, there is also a need to protect it through a comprehensive and holistic tourism development plan and policies that will cater both to Balabac's improvement and protection. Otherwise, Balabac might end up as just another unfortunate but wholly preventable case of a tourism destination destroyed by uncontrolled development.

With the municipality of Balabac being declared as an ecotourism zone and being covered by programs and projects of the Department of Tourism and other agencies, it is hoped that this wonderful gift of nature will see improvement and protection, as well as be a potential source of income for its local government and the people residing within the area.

In view of the policy of the State to promote a tourism industry that is ecologically sustainable, responsible, participative, culturally sensitive, economically viable, and ethically and socially equitable for local communities, as declared in Republic Act No. 9593, otherwise known as "The Tourism Act of 2009," the approval of this bill is earnestly recommended.


CYRILLE "BENG" F. ABUEG-ZALDIVAR
Representative, 2nd District of Palawan

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AN ACT
DECLARING THE MUNICIPALITY OF BALABAC, PROVINCE OF
PALAWAN, AS AN ECO-TOURISM ZONE, PROVIDING FOR ITS
DEVELOPMENT AND APPROPRIATING FUNDS THEREFOR

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

1 **SECTION 1.** This Act shall be known as the “Balabac Ecotourism Zone
2 Act.”

3 **SECTION 2.** Declaration of Policy – It is hereby declared the policy of
4 the State to promote a tourism industry that is ecologically sustainable,
5 responsible, participative, culturally-sensitive, economically viable and equitably
6 beneficial to local communities.

7 **SECTION 3.** The municipality of Balabac is hereby declared an
8 ecotourism zone. As such, it shall be accorded with priority development by the
9 Department of Tourism (DOT) and shall be subject to the rules and regulations
10 governing the development of an ecotourism zone.

11 **SECTION 4.** The Department of Tourism, in consultation with the Local
12 Government Unit (LGU) of the Municipality of Balabac, the Provincial
13 Government of Palawan, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development

1 (PCSD), the Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority (TIEZA), and
2 other concerned agencies of the government shall, within one (1) year after the
3 approval of this Act, prepare a development plan involving the construction,
4 installation and maintenance of such appropriate facilities and infrastructure as
5 shall enhance tourism in the area. The development plan shall identity well-
6 defined geographic areas within the Municipality of Balabac ecotourism zone,
7 which shall include the existing infrastructure and facilities therein; *Provided,*
8 That said development plan shall ensure the integrated development of these
9 areas for the optimum utilization of natural assets and attractions, as well as the
10 preservation and conservation of their historic and environmental significance.

11 **SECTION 5.** The DOT, after preparation of said tourism development
12 plan, shall incorporate the same in the overall National Tourism Development
13 Plan (NTDP), pursuant to Republic Act No. 9593, otherwise known as “The
14 Tourism Act of 2009.” The plan shall be implemented jointly with the LGU of
15 the Municipality of Balabac, the Provincial Government of Palawan, PCSD,
16 TIEZA, and other concerned government agencies.

17 **SECTION 6.** It shall also be the responsibility of the DOT to promote the
18 Municipality of Balabac as an ecotourism zone area in all its national, regional
19 and local promotion programs.

20 **SECTION 7.** The Secretary of Tourism, in consultation with the LGU of
21 the Municipality of Balabac, the Provincial Government of Palawan, the PCSD,
22 and TIEZA, shall issue such rules and regulations as may be necessary to carry
23 out the purpose of this Act.

1 **SECTION 8.**The amount necessary to carry out the provisions of this
2 Act shall be included in the General Appropriations Act of the year following its
3 enactment into law and thereafter.

4 **SECTION 9.** All laws, rules, regulations, proclamations, executive
5 orders or parts thereof inconsistent with this Act, are hereby amended
6 accordingly.

7 **SECTION 10.** This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days after
8 publication in the Official Gazette or in two (2) national newspapers of general
9 circulation.

Approved,