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THE recent approval of climate adaptation projects is a welcome development. But given the existential threat to the planet, hopefully, more can be done, particularly on rehabilitating mangrove forests because they offer ecological and economic benefits.

Last week, the People's Survival Fund (PSF) Board approved projects worth P539 million. The board is a multisectoral body led by the Department of Finance. In deciding which projects to approve, the PSF Board considers the level of risk and vulnerability to climate change, among other things, a statement explained.

The approved projects include a mangrove rehabilitation project in Quezon province worth P2.63 million. That is a good start. Hopefully, in the future, more resources will be devoted to similar projects around the country, with more than 36,000 kilometers of coastline, most of which can be planted with mangroves. About 80 percent of provinces have some mangroves, and 46 of the more than 70 known species are native.

Interestingly, mangroves capture four to five times the amount of carbon from the atmosphere than terrestrial forests. Regretfully, though, about 50 percent of the area covered by these "rainforests of the sea" has disappeared. And despite various replanting programs by the government and the private sector, mangrove forests are disappearing at a rate of about 1 percent a year. They typically make way for fishponds and land development.

Another benefit of mangroves is that they are effective in protecting coastal communities from extreme weather. Mangroves are, in fact, better than concrete seawalls against storm surges and tsunamis. Plus, studies have shown that these forests help prevent soil erosion and are useful in flood control.

Scientists have been saying that extreme weather events are likely to continue because of climate change. An international coalition of authors wrote in the journal "BioScience" that they were shocked by the ferocity of extreme weather events in 2023.

They added, "Life on planet Earth is under siege," and greenhouse gases are now at record-high levels. Given that threat, it makes sense that restoring mangrove forests, which are effective at capturing those harmful gases, should be the priority for everyone. It is simply self-preservation.

Economic gifts

Besides climate change, the PSF Board also considers a project's potential in reducing poverty. Rehabilitating mangroves checks that box, too.

First, rehabilitation projects create jobs in coastal communities where the poorest of the poor tend to reside. Rehabilitation requires workers for replanting and forest management. Mangroves also provide raw materials for some cottage enterprises. Plus, mangroves can generate tourism jobs and other opportunities. In some areas like Bicol and Palawan, snorkeling in and around mangroves is a tourist attraction. Just like coral reefs, mangroves are home to a variety of fish and

other aquatic life.

In that sense, mangroves are like nurseries for various marine animals, which could be beneficial to small fishermen. Some experts have also reported that people in coastal communities collect medicinal plants from mangrove ecosystems and that they use mangrove leaves as animal feed.

As mentioned earlier, a third benefit is the protection mangroves offer from the sea during storms. Sadly, the poor are the most vulnerable to extreme weather events because their dwellings offer little protection during bad weather.

On a related note, the PSF Board or others in government should study the possibility of earning carbon credits from mangrove replanting projects. Those credits can be traded or leveraged to access foreign markets for Philippine exports.

In fairness to the PSF Board, other public offices, particularly local governments, should also help restore mangrove forests around the country. The PSF had an initial capitalization of P1 billion, and the board reported that P887 billion of that had been allocated to 11 projects and six grants. That left the PSF with a balance of about P110 million after selecting only a handful of projects from 180 proposals.

In the past, people had little appreciation for mangrove forests. They were often perceived as wastelands. In actuality, the Philippines is rich in natural resources. But Filipinos are unaware of what they have and how to tap the opportunities.