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Amid the depressing news of the pandemic, one feel-good narrative over the past months is that of a healing planet. From animals taking over deserted streets to mountain ranges reappearing after decades hidden in perpetual smog, stories of a resurgent nature are no small comfort, especially as we recognize — if belatedly — our interconnectedness with it. People are also expressing hope that COVID-19 will do what decades of negotiations have failed to: getting governments and big corporations to take the drastic steps needed to address the climate crisis.

At this point, any movement toward greater environmental action is certainly welcome, and so are reports of decreasing air pollution alongside the increasing use of active transport. Surely, moreover, any nature lover will be delighted over the appearance — for the first time ever — of small-clawed otters in Tawi-Tawi, or the discovery of new helmet orchid species in Palawan.

The discourse of a healing planet, however, may obscure the fact that the pandemic — including our political and social responses to it — is also endangering the environment in various ways.

In the first place, we are seeing people taking advantage of the situation by carrying out activities that would normally elicit greater public attention and protest. In Homonhon Island, Eastern Samar, for instance, reports indicate that the mining of chromite ore by Chinese vessels has resumed despite health concerns and long-standing environmental protests by local communities.

Similar concerns have been raised in Semirara Island, where, as Antique Rep. Loren Legarda and Save Antique Movement have decried, coal-mining activities have gone unabated; and in Kasibu, Nueva Vizcaya, where, according to Nueva Vizcaya Rep. Luisa Cuaresma and Alyansa Tigil Mina, police not only escorted fuel tanks to the mining area at the height of ECQ, but also violently dispersed a peaceful protest by indigenous communities.

Meanwhile, illegal logging in the Sierra Madre continues; in the words of Department of Natural Resources and Environment regional officer Paquito Moreno Jr., “some scrupulous groups are taking advantage” of the quarantine in the region. And Gregg Yan, an environmentalist, tells me: “With environmental authorities and enforcers either tied down or stood down because of COVID-19 operations, we have fewer eyes on the ground to look for illegal wildlife poachers, loggers, and fishers.”

Moreover, the conservation work of environmental groups has been put on hold, including vital research, monitoring, and advocacy — as I have seen as a member of the board of Centre for Sustainability, a Puerto Princesa-based environmental NGO. With funding agencies shifting attention to COVID-19, we might also see organizations losing what little resources they get to continue their activities.

The lack of visitors in some sites is also causing some consequences for environmental organizations that rely on ecotourism. For instance, the Philippine Eagle Foundation has already appealed for help, and I encourage everyone to join me in extending help (go to www.philippineeaglefoundation.org/donate), especially in the spirit of the recently-concluded Philippine Eagle Week.

All is not lost. Many government personnel around the country — including those in the DENR and LGUs — have continued honest-to-goodness environmental work. And, despite the constraints in movement and funding, committed organizations — including those of volunteer bantay gubat and indigenous peoples — have not stopped their activities or their activism. While it can detract attention from environmental issues, the pandemic may yet catalyze calls for similarly decisive action on the climate crisis.

Even so, much more work ought to be done, at the very least, to make sure that the environment and people alike are protected from illegal activities such as those mentioned above. Bold steps must be taken to stop the illegal wildlife trade in the country — particularly involving the heavily-hunted pangolin — as well as the illegal mining and logging that have continued to destroy our habitats.

Some animals may have reemerged, but numerous species are as endangered as ever. The beauty of our mountain ranges may have reappeared, but not for long if we allow destructive practices to continue. Even as we continue to grapple with the pandemic, we cannot look away from a planet that is as precarious as ever.

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