PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT:
An Exploration of the Roles, Motivations, and Lived Experiences of Forest Guards in the Philippines

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Abstract

Despite the existence of forest guards (e.g., forest rangers, *bantay gubat*) as "field-level implementers" of environmental policies all over the country, and despite the violence they face, little scholarship has been done to document their motivations, roles, and lived experiences. This chapter seeks to fill this void by presenting findings from a multi-sited qualitative study, in which 12 focus group discussions were conducted among forest guards in Luzon and Northern Mindanao. Common themes that emerged include the sense of financial, physical, and legal vulnerability, lack of recognition, the role of politics in their work, and a range of motivations including a strong sense of identity and a conception of the mountains as "home." Overall, both the study's descriptive findings and analytical insights can inform policies and programs that involve forest guards, support arguments for greater support and recognition for their work, and serve as baseline data for further research to understand the many other contexts and environments forest guards find themselves in.

Introduction

"For agenda setting and policy design, public policies that involve or affect local communities are often negotiated in the field rather than the office, yet development literature has surprisingly neglected the characteristics, social conditions, perceptions and attitudes of field-level implementers of policy." These words, penned by Sudha Vasan (2002, 4125) as a preamble to her study "Ethnography of the Forest Guard" in India, articulate the premise of this chapter. We speak of forest conservation as an urgent imperative, but how much do we really know about the people who implement it in its various geographic and socioeconomic contexts? Who are they, what do they themselves feel about their work, and what are their own views about forest protection?

Despite the self-evident significance of these questions, little has been done in the Philippines to answer them. Indeed, as a review of local literature shows (see Lasco, Mendoza, and Aldama, forthcoming), much of the published work in the country has concentrated on tensions between indigenous peoples, conservation, and development (e.g., Novellino and Dressler 2009, Perez 2018, Novellino 2003, and Minter et al. 2014), indigenous conservation practices and ontologies (e.g., Canoy and Suminguit 2001, Dressler 2009, and Camacho et al. 2012), as well as the "community" and its knowledge, attitudes, practices, and involvement in both conservation and exploitation (e.g., Acebedo 1999, Lantican 2001, and Pulhin and Dressler 2009). Forest guards figure in these accounts as part of the narrative (for instance, Perez 2018 in her account of Mount Pulag National Park and Cairns 1997 in his case study of Mount Kitanglad), but their own narratives are rarely foregrounded. Intriguingly, van der Ploeg (2011, 209) has claimed that the "multi-stakeholder co-management" paradigm espoused by Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)—including the formation of local protection groups such as those of forest guards—"clearly reflects the idea that participation minimises forest crimes . . . But the call for broad societal involvement in forest protection currently serves as an apology for the inability of the DENR to enforce forestry regulations."

Such a paucity of scholarship does not do justice to a group—however heterogenous in its composition—that has been seen as a cornerstone in forest governance in the country for over a century. At the twilight of Spanish colonialism, assistants, senior guards, and minor guards belonging to the Inspección General de Montes were tasked to arrest the destruction of forests—even as their own interests often conflicted with those of the colonial state and as the state itself increasingly took on a commercial outlook as far as forest use is concerned (Bankoff 2004). Such contradictions would continue during the American and postcolonial periods, when forest rangers under the Bureau of Forestry, and later, the Bureau of Forest Development (BFD), would serve as environmental frontliners tasked to protect public forest lands, but likewise facilitated (or at least tolerated) the state-sanctioned exploitation of

forests (Pulhin and Dizon 2003; Van den Top 2003). A major shift in policy and paradigm after the Marcos dictatorship—one that prioritized conservation over corporate logging, privileged participatory approaches—led to a renewed importance of forest rangers within the DENR; and the rise of volunteer guards, especially after the official enshrinement of Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) as state policy in 1995 (Lasco and Pulhin 2006). Even so, to reiterate the point above, forest guards have remained marginal—if not entirely invisible—in these policy analyses.

Further adding to the significance of forest guards is that they are, at least in the case of the volunteer guards, also part of mountain communities and are therefore part of indigenous land use systems, acculturated to traditional (and modern) ways of forest use (McDermott 2000; Van den Top 2003). Thus, they navigate their *positionalities* both as "agents of conservation" (Perez 2018) and as community members.

This chapter aims to address this gap by presenting findings and insights from a multi-sited qualitative study that foregrounds forest guards and their roles, challenges, and lived experiences. Following Vasan (2002), I define forest guards as field-level implementers of policy that are engaged by government or non-government organizations either on an official or unofficial basis, regardless of employment status (e.g., voluntary, contractual, regular employment). Working with a small research team, I conducted 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) with forest guards (typically referred to as forest rangers, forest guards, or *bantay gubat*) in Luzon and Northern Mindanao to document their demographic profiles and backgrounds, elicit narratives of their everyday lives and experiences, and explore their own notions of forest protection. In addition, we observed some relevant events involving forest guards and conducted over a dozen key informant interviews (KIIs) involving people they interact with.

Although primarily a descriptive account, this chapter also draws emergent themes from the guards' accounts to engage with the existing literature, recent developments involving guards in the Philippines, and the current policy environment in the country. Given what is at stake in forest conservation, learning more *about* its implementers, as well as *from* them, can help refine policies both toward the forest rangers themselves and forest governance as a whole. Moreover, they can also serve to evaluate the lived realities of programs that have been implemented with and through the rangers—from the National Greening Program to policies concerning logging and mining—but not necessarily with their input. Amid a backdrop of deadly violence against environmental defenders, including forest guards, in the Philippines (Global Witness 2019), this project also contributes to the urgent task of documenting the risks forest protectors face, and reflecting on what can be done to protect them.

Methodology

This qualitative study draws inspiration from grounded theory (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012) to allow for an inductive, open-ended exploration of the forest guards' lifeworlds. A grounded theory approach involves not having any prior framework applied, and is particularly useful for topics with a relative lack of similar previous investigations. In this chapter, no coding framework was imposed apart from an overall focus on the experiences of the forest guards themselves, as well as their views about their work and about forest conservation in general.

Representation of Mt. Makiling

The study sites include two protected areas in Bukidnon, various locations in the Sierra Madre range, and Mount Makiling. The selection of these sites was guided by the desire to explore a variety of geographic and sociopolitical contexts. While some are officially protected areas, others are contested by different actors, including various government agencies, the private sector, and communities both indigenous and non-indigenous. Regardless of these differences, what the sites have in common is that they are critical watershed areas that are rich in biodiversity but have been subjected to exploitative activities like logging, mirroring the above-mentioned history of forest (ab)use. With the possible exception of Mount Makiling, communities in these sites have been historically characterized by rural poverty (Cairns 1997; Van Der Ploeg 2011).

The two sites where most of the interviews were conducted deserve more description to further illustrate the context of the study. With a total land area of 1.4 million hectares spanning 10 provinces, the Sierra Madre range holds immense value as the home of the largest intact primary forest in the country, as well as high faunal and floral diversity, serving as Luzon's great watershed and natural barrier for typhoons (van der Ploeg, Bernardo, and Masipiquena 2003) Meanwhile, the Kitanglad Range, where a plurality of the interviews were conducted, is similarly a biodiversity haven with an astounding 63 mammalian and 168 avian species, 62 of which are endemic (Opiso et al. 2014). Within this area, in seven municipalities and one city in Bukidnon province, 47,270 ha constitute the Mount Kitanglad Range National Park (MKRNP), but like the Sierra Madre, its cultural, economic, environmental, and hydrological significance goes beyond this area (ibid.).

Twelve focus group discussions were conducted in the research sites (see Table 1), mainly in Filipino but with some parts in Cebuano, complemented by participant-observation sessions in Bukidnon and the Sierra Madre and key

informant interviews with government officials and community members. Prior to the data gathering, coordination through various DENR offices and non-government organizations were made, and, in the case of Bukidnon, the blessing of indigenous leaders was sought. In addition, the team adopted the research ethics guidelines of the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC), seeking prior informed consent and protecting the identity of the participants by anonymizing their names and not disclosing their specific locations within a general area (e.g., province, mountain range, national park).

Audio recordings of FGDs and KIIs were transcribed and gathered in an NVivo 11 database. Following grounded theory methodology, an open reading of the transcripts was performed to identify major themes, which were then used to re-read the transcripts to identify passages that are relevant to those themes, which are presented in the following section. To protect the identity of the informants, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Findings

Demographic Profiles

The forest guards we encountered can be grouped into two major clusters: (1) direct employees of government agencies (e.g., DENR and the University of the Philippines Los Baños or UPLB) and (2) volunteers supported by different entities, from NGOs to local government units, who engage with DENR on an indirect basis. The DENR employees can be further subdivided into regular employees with *plantilla* (i.e., permanent) positions and contractual or job-order workers, while the volunteers are a more heterogeneous cluster, even as many of them come from indigenous communities. The two clusters have distinct differences in terms of the profiles of those belonging to them.

The DENR employees, for instance, are all at least high-school graduates, and most have completed some years of college. Most of them do not belong to indigenous communities. While there is a plurality of rangers who took BS Forestry and environment-related courses, there is a diversity of educational backgrounds. Importantly, the rangers in name (there is a government position of "Forest Ranger") may not necessarily be rangers in function (i.e., conducting fieldwork); they may end up doing clerical or office-based work and are only designated as forest rangers for bureaucratic purposes. Moreover, not all have plantilla positions (the most common item, "Forest Ranger," is classified under Salary Grade 4 with an annual salary of PHP152,088 as of the time of writing), with others taking contractual posts (e.g. "Forest Protection Officer"). Either way, the entry point to becoming a forest ranger is by getting hired by local DENR offices—sometimes with the help of a "backer."

"Volunteers," meanwhile, are mostly primary- or secondary-school graduates who are either residing in the forest themselves, mostly as part of indigenous communities. As volunteers, their work is part-time (e.g., twice-monthly patrols),

but their level of involvement varies depending on projects (e.g., reforestation) and emergencies (e.g., forest fires). In some communities, being a volunteer guard is lifelong, hereditary, and titular. As such, the age range is quite wide, and in many communities they also tend to be older (> 50 years).

An overwhelming majority of the forest guards we interviewed were males, but there were also a few female participants, likely reflecting the demographic picture throughout the country.

Motivations and Rewards of Being a "Forest Guard"

The forest guards' motivations range from professed love for the mountains to the need to earn one's livelihood. While the employed guards emphasized the financial incentive, volunteers belonging to indigenous communities tended to frame their work in terms of duty, speaking of the forests as their material and spiritual homeland.

As JR, a Kitanglad Guard Volunteer (KGV) in his early 20s said:

> Because I want to protect Mt. Kitanglad. For me, a new KGV, I want to protect Mt. Kitanglad because it gives us water, and as they say, it's our market. It's also our hospital because sometimes it's where we get our medicines from.

Marcelo, an older counterpart in his late 60s, shared similar sentiments:

> As God said, love my creation. For us, we learned to love our mountain because God created it for humans, not for himself. Thus, it is good for us to love the mountains. To have love for the environment. [Because] God made the trees, animals, and others for our good. That's what we do, we protect God's creation. We are old, but we have grandchildren and I hope that someday they will look at the mountain and say, "this was protected by our grandfather."

These spiritual and philosophical discourses are not confined to indigenous volunteers alone. Paul, a *guardia monte* in Los Baños in his late 20s, for instance, stated that his love for the mountain started as a college student in UPLB: "*Napamahal na ako kay Maria Makiling* (I grew to love Maria Makiling)." Related to the above, some also speak of health and the opportunity to see beautiful things. To be a forest ranger, as one from Nueva Ecija said, is "*maganda sa katawan* (good for the body)," a sentiment echoed by other guards.

Finally—and perhaps most significantly—we can also glean a sense of belonging among the rangers, many of whom work as a team. This is

particularly true for the volunteers, who, while paid very little, nonetheless derive some social capital from their position. Beyond the interview proper, such sense of belonging manifests in the pride many guards place in their uniforms and their identification as "frontliners."

Altogether, we find overlapping reasons, from the philosophical to the pragmatic, informing people's motivations to be a forest guard.

The Roles of A Forest Guard

Regular tasks

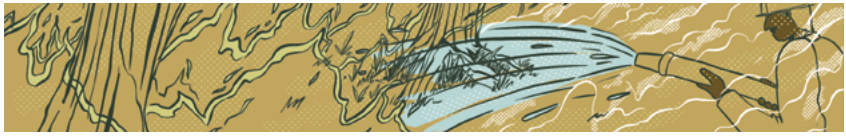
Both employed and volunteer guards say that their main task is to patrol the forests and monitor illegal activities that vary from place to place, from logging and mining to the establishment of illegal settlements. The main difference between the two groups is the frequency: while the employed guards typically do weekly patrols, the volunteers are expected to do the same only once or twice a month. For instance, in Mount Kitanglad, some volunteer guards recount that:

JEFFREY: In one month, sir, I patrol for one day; we have a gadget to observe the environment. We observe if there's no illegal [activity] and also the presence of animals.

GIDEON: So that's it?

JEFFREY: Yes, sir, that's it.

Employed guards, moreover, also take part in enforcement activities, often in cooperation with police or military, including going to duty on checkpoints and participating in "raids" and apprehensions. Moreover, they also perform clerical duties including filing reports and facilitating paperwork. For their routine tasks, the employed guards note the physical demands of fieldwork—of having to walk all day—and some of the older ones blame their occupation for joint pains.



Special activities

Beyond these routine tasks, there are also special activities, such as projects funded by non-government organizations. For instance, forest guards in various sites mentioned their involvement in the Lawin Forest and Biodiversity Protection System, an initiative funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and institutionalized by the DENR in 2018, which makes use of a tablet app to enable streamlined, real-time monitoring of wildlife and illegal activities (Rocamora 2018), as well as the National Greening Project (NGP) (Israel 2016). When I asked the forest

guards in Mount Kitanglad how many trees they have planted as part of the NGP, one of them said, "around five." When I incredulously repeated my question, he said, "Yes, five. Hectares."

For volunteers these special projects are ways to greatly augment their allowance, but the projects can also cause friction because they do not always involve all the guards. In one meeting of a bantay gubat organization we attended, for instance, some members questioned their leader on how an NGO grant amounting to a few million pesos was spent. In Bulacan, where at least four volunteer groups occupy the same area, some key informants noted how local politics (i.e., between the groups, the local DENR offices, and other actors) determine which particular groups get prioritized—including being hired or contracted as a bloc—in DENR-initiated projects.

Other ad-hoc activities include attending to emergencies. In Bukidnon, both the employed and volunteer guards said they participated in firefighting during the 2016 fires in the Kitanglad Range, as well as in smaller, more recent episodes. Underscoring the challenges of firefighting, they referenced Alex Banilar and Wilfredo Baticon, two of their colleagues who died while responding to a forest fire that hit a portion of the 500 ha Bukidnon Provincial Tree Park in April 2018. In Mount Makiling, a popular hiking destination, a more common emergency is rescuing missing hikers on weekends, for which they are "on-call."

The employed guards also cite another special activity: testifying in court for cases involving illegal activities, for which they serve as witnesses. These court cases, according to the guards, can drag on for years, and given the security risks involved, they do not look forward to these court hearings. One ranger in Mount Makiling, for instance, referenced the case of Elipidio "Jojo" Malinao, who was killed in May 2011 right after a court hearing involving a case of illegal settlements in the mountain.

Key Relationships

The forest guards underscore the importance of relationships with various community members and stakeholders, most especially mayors and barangay captains. Politics can be a challenging terrain: In one barangay in a municipality in Bukidnon, the volunteer guards complained that the mayor pressured them to make one of his men a member, in contravention of their own rules which state give them the sole power to appoint new members. Given that their allowance is given per team and divided into the number of members (in one barangay, for instance, it was PHP 5,000 divided by 12), another member would mean less allowance for each of them. But because they needed to work with the mayor, they relented to his demand.

Meanwhile, there is also the frustration in some sites over the knowledge that local officials themselves are involved in corrupt activities. "How can we go against them, when their backer is *nasa loob* (within the office)?" as one ranger in Nueva Ecija said. One limitation of the research is that the data gathering

was facilitated in the auspices of DENR, which may have prevented the rangers from more fully articulating, and the researchers from probing, these internal issues, but they fact that they were hinted at by the guards is notable.

Even so, there were also sites where the support of the mayor is empowering, as one DENR ranger from Gabaldon, Nueva Ecija shares:

> Here in our town, the mayor himself says that logging is not allowed, not even furniture. And he himself will give a cash award if we're able to catch the *ilegalistas*. That's a good thing because it encourages us, we have his backing.

The ranger's colleagues add that Typhoon Lando, which caused catastrophic flooding in Central Luzon in 2015, made people in their town realize the devastating effects of illegal logging, which is why people (and politicians) are wary of it.

In some areas, indigenous leaders, soldiers, and rebel groups were also cited as key people with whom good relationships are essential. Where both are present in one jurisdiction, the employed guards see the volunteers as their partners: "They are our eyes and ears on the ground," as one Bukidnon forest ranger said of the Kitanglad Guard Volunteers. For their part, however, some volunteers feel that while they are the true frontliners, they receive much less compared to the forest rangers, even as they do not feel the latter's presence. As one bantay gubat in Bukidnon said: "They hardly go here, they hardly climb the mountain, and yet they get paid much more."

Particularly for the volunteer groups, one final key relationship they identified is the members of their own communities, including their relatives or family. While many community members share the guards' outlook and goals, others are, in the words of one guard in Nueva Ecija, *pasaway* (disobedient) and are difficult to deal with given their personal relationships. As JR shares from his experience as a young bantay gubat in Bukidnon, these tensions can undermine conservation but can also facilitate it:

> I knew it was my uncle who was behind the [illegal construction], and I couldn't bring myself to confront him. But one of my uncles was also a bantay gubat, so I told him about it. He was the one who took care of it.

In areas where the volunteer guards' associations enjoy a prominent role in interfacing with government agencies, there may also be some friction between them and indigenous leaders. In Bukidnon, for instance, we witnessed a traditional conflict resolution ceremony between tribal chieftains and the leaders of the forest guards, with the former feeling left out in funding opportunities, and the latter feeling undermined in their positions. In the Sierra Madre, meanwhile, we saw different groups of bantay gubat having tensions regarding jurisdictions and allocations of allowances from the DENR and other agencies.

FIGURE 2. Kitanglad Guard Volunteers and author in Imbayao, Malaybalay, Bukidnon

Qualities

Given the above tasks, special activities, and relationships, the guards spoke of qualities that they need to be effective in their work, most common of which are courage (*tapang*, *lakas ng loob*), physical fitness (*lakas*, *tibay*) and diplomacy (*pakikisama* or *pakikitungo sa tao*).

"When you're in the forest, you're on your own," Geoffrey, one ranger from Aurora told us. "You need to be strong and brave, but above all, you need to be able to talk your way out of any situation." He shared that he would sometimes offer coffee to those he would apprehend or warn for environmental violations, making them less hostile before he confronts them: "*Kumbaga pakakapehin mo para at least kahit papano, mabawasan 'yong self—mawala 'yong sama ng loob niya* (You serve them coffee so that at least their sense of embarrassment is lessened)."

Needs and Aspirations

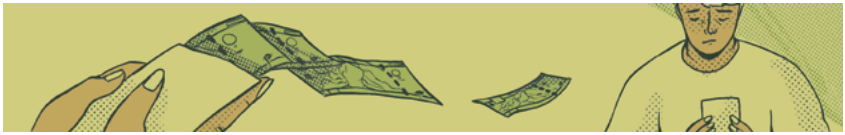
When I asked Edgar, a 31-year-old volunteer guard in Bukidnon, about their needs, he responded:

> Any protection will be a great help. Firearms may not be possible because we're not allowed to have them. But I hope they give us protection as forest guards. For example, we need radio, food, higher pay. When it gets hot in the forest, we are like firefighters, the firefighters of the forest. We stop the fires and we also need equipment for that.

He proceeded to highlight the perils of their job, pivoting to a plea for more financial compensation:

> Our job is hazardous, there are many threats to our life but no matter how dangerous, we are trying our best. But we really hope they increase our pay. Our older members, we hope they will get a retirement benefit since they've

been working for so long. When they stop working, we hope they will be some help from the government. That's all they are asking for.



Edgar's words capture the sentiments of most, if not all, forest guards: a paramount need for more financial compensation, as well as requests for more equipment. In the first place, whether they have plantilla positions and earn PHP 13,000 a month or are volunteers getting a monthly allowance of a few hundred pesos, forest guards feel that they are underpaid, even as those who have regular positions consider themselves *suwerte* (fortunate), citing the many others who would be willing to take their jobs. Nonetheless, there is an overall desire for higher wages (or allowances). One forest ranger in Bukidnon, for instance, pointed to the salary increase among the uniformed services to argue that they, too, should receive the same, given that they also perform some enforcement functions. As Geoffrey, a DENR officer from Aurora, said, reforms must extend to their many contractual employees:

> I hope our forest rangers will be classified as Salary Grade 4. Right now, we get PHP 12,000 to 13,000. I hope it is raised to PHP 18,000 so at least . . . because we are frontliners the mountain. And forest protection is not an easy task. I also hope they end contractualization; many of our staff deserve to be made permanent.

As for the volunteers, the demand for a higher salary or allowance varies even within one jurisdiction. For instance, the Kitanglad Guard Volunteers in Malaybalay City get more than the poorer neighboring towns, leading the volunteers in those towns to clamor for higher allowances, and we saw them raise this among the foremost concerns during the Aldaw ta Kitanglad celebration in 2019.

Beyond what they get on a regular basis, they raised hopes that they will get a range of monetary and non-monetary benefits. As one forest ranger in Aurora, for instance, said:

> We hope to get hazard [pay], because we are prone to accidents when it comes to the mountain. We climb it and who knows, we might suffer a fall and we don't even have hazard [pay].

Many also pointed out the need for health insurance. As Ansastacio, a Bukidnon-based volunteer in his 60s shared:

> I am old and without livelihood, I hope there's health insurance—ours is only for death and accidents. Even a small assistance will help.

Beyond their individual needs, the forest guards also articulated the need for more personnel. "Kulang na kulang kami (We're severely understaffed)," as one protected area officer in the Sierra Madre told us, adding that the consequent overwork is exacerbating the physical toll of the job and the feeling of being underpaid.

Some of the rangers, however, consider themselves still more fortunate as compared to the people in their community, as they are relatively better off. Even so, they are hoping for higher compensation, as well as greater recognition. "I haven't received anything, not even a certificate!" as one forest ranger in Bulacan told me. His and other narratives suggest that recognition can play a big role in making them feel valued, and in motivating them to continue their work.

Views on Environmental Protection and Future Outlook

The final domain that we explored in the FGDs are the forest guards' views on environmental protection, as well as their outlook on the future of the forests.

The forest guards are generally supportive of government programs to protect the forest, including reforestation, citing the improvements they have seen over the years. However, most of them agree that forest protection is more important than reforestation. As one leader of a volunteer group in Bukidnon said, "The forest can heal itself. All we need is to protect it." Throughout our research sites, encroachment of communities and industries on forest lands was identified by the guards as the most significant threat:

> As the population increases, if the environment lacks support, it will be damaged. People will creep up to the mountain (*gagapang nang gagapang sa bundok*) if the government does not pay attention.

Despite this overall view, however, the volunteer guards are divided in terms of indigenous uses of the forest itself, and whether they have more rights to forest resources as compared to lowlanders. A few, for instance, said that "we have to respect tradition" and tolerate their villagers' activities, such as hunting wild boar and engaging in swidden farming. However, a majority seem to acknowledge that the practices of the past are no longer applicable today, as one elder in the Sierra Madre said:

> It's different now. Back then, there were just a few people but now there's many of us, we cannot continue doing what we used to do then.

One major concern shared by many volunteer guards, especially those in leadership positions, is sustainability—both of their organization and the support they get. "What happens next year, when the project is over?" one hired staff of a volunteer organization asked rhetorically, when the topic of NGO support came up. Among the volunteers, there is also a concern on how to recruit younger members, as this dialogue with a volunteer in Bukidnon shows:

GIDEON: You mentioned that you hope there will be people who would follow your footsteps. Why are they not joining?

ALVIN: Many want to join, but how can we accommodate them? That's the problem—we have such limited funds we cannot make them fit into it. That's the concern.

GIDEON: What about your family members?

ALVIN: There are, but again, would they accept PHP 400 a month? We cannot even buy enough rice from that, and even then, sometimes it gets delayed up to 6 months.

On top of financial constraints, some volunteer guards also problematized young people's attitudes, suggesting that they may be interested in seeking opportunities in the cities rather than staying in the communities. Despite the above concerns, the guards were cautiously optimistic about the country's environmental picture, citing the positive developments that have taken place since 10 or 20 years ago, even as this optimism is tempered by their assessment of the socioeconomic and security risks they face.

It is worth adding that beyond such strategic insights, forest guards demonstrate tactical knowledge that are likewise largely taken for granted, despite their potential to contribute to environmental work. In Aurora, for instance, some of the guards spoke of specific kinds of trees that are suitable for reforestation, while in Bukidnon, one leader of the volunteer guards spoke of "planting trees by the riverbanks" as their long-running but unheeded recommendation. Meanwhile, in Bulacan, the guards mentioned various root crops in the forest that can contribute to food security among mountain communities. Given the specificity of these insights, the FGDs were not able to explore them in-depth, but they nonetheless hint at the potential of the guards as sources of situated knowledge.

Discussion

Many of the issues raised by the forest guards corroborate concerns already documented in various sources. The forest guards' concerns for their safety, for instance, resonate with reports that in the year 2018 alone, 30 "environmental protectors" were killed in the Philippines, including forest rangers and guards (Global Witness 2019), as well as news accounts of forest rangers (e.g., Bienvinido "Toto" Veguilla Jr, 44, a forest ranger of the CENRO in El Nido, Palawan; and Ronaldo Corpuz of the CENRO in Muñoz, Nueva Ecija) being killed all over the country (Fabro 2019; Geronimo 2019). Despite the decentralized nature of forest governance, our interlocutors identify with rangers all over the country and find solidarity with them. Likewise, they are also aware of policy issues like the debate about arming forest rangers (e.g., Gamil 2019) and the plan to create an "Enforcement Bureau" (Reyes 2019; Domingo and Manejar 2018).

Similarly, the guards' demands for more support, compensation, and recognition also mirror demands that have been raised all over the archipelago (e.g., Cinco 2020; Carandang et al. 2013). Moreover, their lament over the pervasiveness of politics and corruption is well documented in the environmental literature in the Philippines (Severino 1988; Dressler et al. 2006; Vandergeest and Peluso 2006; Van der Ploeg 2011; Mayo-Anda and Torres 2014; Barrer et al. 2017). As in other countries (e.g., Ghate 2003), these accounts have also implicated the guards themselves in a political economy that enables corrupt practices. As Van der Pleog and others (2011, 209) note: "In interviews, forest guards admit that confiscations are actually often staged to meet confiscation targets; *bugadores* surrender several boards at the DENR checkpoints to secure passage."

These recurrent themes notwithstanding, the findings offer new analytic insights with potential usefulness for policy and planning, namely: (a) "being a forest guard" as a source of identity and belonging; (2) the complicated role of indigenous people; and (3) the challenge of sustainability.

Identity and Belonging

The findings make clear that the forest guards are proud to be bantay gubat and embrace it as part of their identity. Beyond the limited financial compensation and social capital that they gain from the position, the forest guards' narratives—and our own observations of their activities—make clear that they find a sense of identity, affirmation, purpose, and belonging in being a forest guard. They see themselves as advocates of the community and the environment, and as members of an organization that is recognized and well-regarded, in many settings. Moreover, the "personal commitment and dedication to the forest, often based on an emotional connection with the forest" that Lawrence (2011) documented among the foresters in Poland can also be said of the forest guards in the Philippines, suggesting similar motivations among "environmental frontliners" around the world.

Such sentiments can explain why many forest guards continue in their roles despite the difficulties and lack of monetary reward. As the literature around the world shows, forest guardians' motivations are often multiple, and often include conservation, social benefits, and economic opportunities (Allendorf et al. 2013). As with many of our informants, a value for aesthetics and indigenous traditions also comprise these overlapping motivations, although they are sometimes overridden by more pragmatic concerns (Muttaqin 2019).

While these motivations can enhance their contributions to forest conservation, they can also undermine forest governance, and this is particularly true for the volunteers. The paramount loyalty to the group or village, for instance, can pit groups of volunteer guards against each other, as we saw in Bukidnon and Bulacan; and can also cause friction within their own communities. In light of the plan to arm guards as part of an "Enforcement Bureau," also at stake in the guards' conflicted loyalties are questions of securitization and (further) militarization, especially in light of a long history of forest guards being used in the service of political and economic interests—and already-militarized forests lands all over the country (Dressler and Guieb 2015; Gatmaytan 2018).

Moreover, the fact that being a bantay gubat is seen as a source of identity can contribute to people's determination to hold on to the position beyond their active years, or regard the position as hereditary. All of the above can diminish the effectiveness of the group.

Local Relationships and Indigenous Knowledge

As mentioned in the introduction, various works have been written in the country that situate forest protection and indigenous peoples in relation to each other, particularly in the wake of the global paradigm shift toward embracing indigenous communities as partners in protected areas (Nepal 2002). Notable among them include Dressler's (2006) account of "coercive" and "community-based" conservation in Palawan and how both of these modes have constrained the livelihood of the Tagbanua, as well as Perez's research in Mount Pulag National Park (2018) that charts the "interface" between what she calls "agents of environmentalism" and indigenous peoples.

Our findings suggest that indigenous needs and aspirations can truly clash with the imperatives of forest protection (and protectors), and that such tensions can play out at the interpersonal level: while many guards spoke of forest conservation as their primary motivation, the same cannot be said of other community members, especially given the continued economic appeal of logging and other activities. Moreover, the very existence of bantay gubat organizations can be perceived as a threat by tribal leaders who may see their position challenged—even though in the sites we visited, the relationship was largely friendly and cooperative, with mechanisms in place to resolve conflict.

On the other hand, indigenous knowledge can also inform forest protection in powerful ways. Indeed, the indigenous forest guards have a spiritual and ecological outlook on the mountains that can be an invaluable resource for empowering forest guards, their communities, and the general public. Indeed, the discourse of "the mountain as home" can frame environmental conservation in more positive terms, alongside the more reactionary message of forest conservation to avert ecological destruction. Notably, the indigenous insights elicited in our study resonate with the findings of Camacho et al. (2016, 11) in Ifugao where they found the *muyong* system to be rooted in a worldview that "harmonizes the mutual connections between human and natural resources." Closer to our sites, Cairns (1997, 52) has documented the widespread perception among the indigenous communities in Bukidnon that "nature is governed by guardian spirits that must be shown respect" and that such views have "buffered" the forests of Kitanglad "from over-exploitaton by the highest possible authority—the spirit world" (ibid., 55). These same perceptions, alongside the tribal leaders' own role in pushing for the bantay gubat system in Kitanglad, strongly suggest that overlaps between ancestral domain and national park can be "mutually supportive."

The forest guards' "tactical knowledge," although only superficially explored in the FGD, likewise find resonance in previous literature. Cairns, for

instance, writes that indigenous knowledge and traditional resource management "should form the basis of efforts to restore the buffer zone's ecology," owing to community members' knowledge of the properties of various trees—and affinity of species to each other (e.g., *lawaan* or lauan as the favored tree of the Philippine eagle) (1997, 68). Valuing this knowledge should take a sense of urgency given that, as the literature suggests, their bearers are fast disappearing (e.g., Camacho et al. 2016), echoing the questions of sustainability raised throughout this chapter, and broadening them to every complexity of indigenous ways of life.

Sustainability

This brings us to the final discussion point: the question of sustainability, particularly for the volunteer guards. In most of the sites we visited, the rangers were in their 50s and older, and while there were a few young people, many are not even capable of doing fieldwork anymore, serving more as titular guards even as they continue to take leadership roles and receive a share of the guards' allowances.

The volunteer guards themselves share this concern over sustainability, framing it in terms of generational difference (e.g., "More young people are heading to the cities in search of jobs"), as well as a function of limited support ("How can you attract young people when all we get is an allowance?"). If their observations are correct, then forest protection may face a decline in its auxiliary forces in the coming years and decades—unless the guards receive more support, and the indigenous communities themselves are supported in ways that can attract future generations to continue living and working there.

Meanwhile, another related concern is the sustainability of funding from NGOs, given the project-based nature of their support, as well as from LGUs, given the arbitrariness of funding (e.g., depending on the mayor or governor in charge). Institutionalizing support for forest guards through enactment of enabling laws can help mitigate this concern, while NGOs should also think of how their projects can contribute to addressing the challenge of sustainability, mindful that their efforts and very presence can have unintended consequences for forest communities (see Novellino and Dressler 2009).

Summary and Conclusion

Recognizing the multiple motivations that inform forest guards' work should also lead to further investigations of the "micro-politics" (see Kolstad and Søreide 2009) in their lifeworlds. In a study of local corruption in natural resource management in India, for instance, Robbins (2000, 440) noted that instead of just focusing on institutional reform, anti-corruption efforts "must be centered instead on the skewed patterns of social capital that pre-exist the state resource management system; localized power requires localized institutional reconfiguration." In the case of the volunteer forest guards, our analysis shows that a sense of belonging and identity informs their work, and while their "social capital" lies in their dual position as community members and environmental workers, their strategic and tactical knowledge—including those from indigenous heritage—have not been recognized, and their level of participation has been minimal, mirroring the status of community organizations despite decades-long calls for participatory environmental governance (Gera 2016). While there have been successes, including in Bukidnon (see Broad and Cavanagh 1993), these continue to be few and far between, with civil society initiatives often unable to challenge political pressures (Vitug 1997).

Alongside the urgent security and financial challenges reiterated by our findings, one significant concern raised by the guards themselves is that of sustainability. Toward this end, some proposals put forward by the DENR and other environmental actors have involved economic activities such as ecotourism and agroforestry (e.g., Friess et al. 2016; Carada 2017; Galang and Vaughter 2020)—and indeed, the sites we have visited are amenable to such activities. However, considering the COVID-19 pandemic, questions of sustainability remain unresolved and will need further examination.

Taken together, our recommendations serve as further impetus for policy reforms: beyond legislative initiatives to hire more rangers and give them more benefits, programs must consider the rangers' own insights on governance, act on their sustainability concerns, and anticipate the implications of the guards' relationships with community members and other key actors (e.g., regularly employed forest rangers).

Meanwhile, in terms of research, we recommend exploring other sites to further refine the typologies, findings, and insights we gathered, and to revisit

our sites and elicit more voices within them. One limitation of the study was the conduct of research mostly under the auspices of their offices, which may have prevented some forest rangers from opening up about problems within their own bureaucracies—including about sensitive matters like corruption and militarization—and this limitation can be overcome by longer-term engagement with the rangers and participant observation.

Moreover, while we foregrounded the hitherto-overlooked perspectives of forest guards, it would be useful to also account for the perspectives of community members, including women who are also involved in forest protection, as well as other key actors like NGOs and people's organizations (see Severino 1998). Specifically for indigenous communities, this exercise should include local conceptions of forests, mountains, the environment, and human-environment relations. Exploring indigenous notions of ecology and sustainability (cf. Throsby and Petetskaya 2016) will not only foster a greater appreciation of indigenous knowledge, but pave the way of such knowledge being used in bringing about a fuller, deeper understanding of our forests and why we must protect them.

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ANNEX 1. Dates, locations, and participants of the 12 FGDs

DATE	LOCATION	PARTICIPANTS
17 August 2019	Sitio Intavas, Impasug-ong	Kitanglad Guard Volunteers
17 August 2019	Brgy. Imbayao, Malaybalay	Kitanglad Guard Volunteers
19 August 2019	Brgy. Songco, Lantapan	Kitanglad Guard Volunteers
7 October 2019	Pangantucan, Bukidnon	Bantay Lasang Volunteers
20 October 2019	Norzagaray, Bulacan	Bantay Gubat
21 October 2019	Cabanatuan, Nueva Ecija	Forest Rangers (CENRO)
24 November 2019	Casiguran, Aurora	Forest Rangers (CENRO)
25 November 2019	Daraitan, Tanay, Rizal	Bantay Gubat
3 December 2019	Los Baños, Laguna	Forest Rangers (UPLB)
17 February 2020	Los Baños, Laguna	Forest Rangers (UPLB)
21 February 2020	Malaybalay, Bukidnon	Forest Rangers (PENRO)
5 March 2020	Tumauini, Isabela	Forest Rangers (CENRO)

ANNEX 2. Typical profiles of forest guards in study sites

	EMPLOYED GUARDS	VOLUNTEERS
Affiliations	DENR, local government, government agencies, and state institutions (e.g., UP Los Baños)	NGOs, people's organizations, local government units (often deputized by DENR agencies)
Background	At least high school graduates, and most have least completed some years in college. Most of them do not belong to indigenous communities; mostly male	Mostly primary or secondary school graduates who are either residing in the forest themselves, mostly as part of indigenous communities; mostly male
Age	Early 20s up to age of retirement (60s)	Mostly in their 40s to 60s with only a few in their 20s

ANNEX 2 (CONT'D)

Salary or allowance	Around PHP 11,000–20,000 a month from their employer	A few hundred to a few thousand a month—from various sources (LGUs, NGOs)
Regular tasks	Office work, weekly patrols	Once- or twice-monthly patrols, participation in activities (e.g., seminars)
Occasional tasks	Emergency response, testifying in court cases, other activities as mandated by superiors	Special projects (e.g., reforestation); emergency response (e.g., forest fire); other activities by the barangay, LGUs, and DENR

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