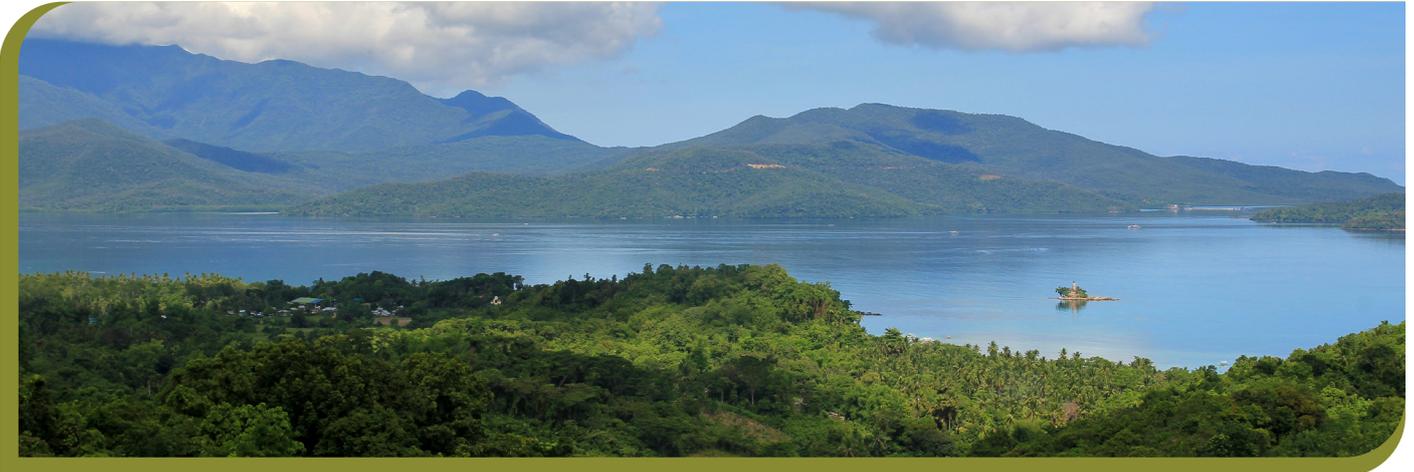


# Palawan: The Last Ecological Frontier



*Rife with natural resources, and home to highly diverse flora and fauna, the island of Palawan is a national treasure that must be conserved. With Palawan's tourist industry rapidly expanding, ensuring sustainable development that conserves its natural beauty, while tending to the needs of the local communities is a delicate balancing act.*

Hailed as the Philippines' "last ecological frontier", Palawan is an archipelagic province occupying the western edge of the country. It has a land area of 1.49 million hectares, with 1,768 islands and an approximate coastline of 2,000 kilometers. It is a sanctuary to a lush, diverse, and thriving ecosystem of flora and fauna.

Palawan's unique biotic composition relative to other areas in the country makes it a natural home to 39% of the terrestrial and marine vertebrate wildlife in the Philippines. Species accounts show that 46% of birds, 30% of reptiles, 33% of mammals, and 27% of amphibians in the Philippines thrive in Palawan.<sup>[1]</sup>

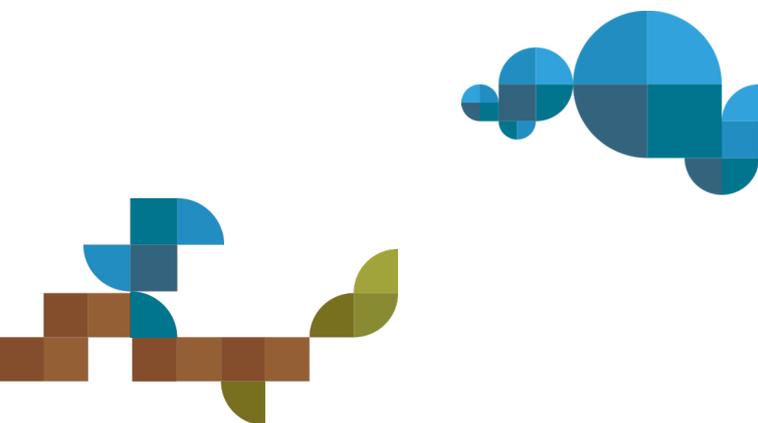
The province's vegetation is also some of the most diverse in the Philippines, as it houses the largest terrestrial and mangrove forests in the country. With 689,161 hectares of forest, Palawan houses 10% of the Philippines' entire forest cover.

Two of the Philippines' UNESCO-designated World Heritage Sites — the **Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park** and the **Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park** — are found in the province. Due to their importance in maintaining Palawan's biodiversity, both of these sites have been named Wetlands of Significant Importance by the Ramsar Convention. Together, these wonders are home to over a thousand different species of plants, birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, corals, and fish.

The province also has nine protected areas — equivalent to 20% of Palawan's land area — as mandated by the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) Act. The coverage of these protected areas grew from 64,819 hectares in 1990 to 541,565 hectares in 2014. Many of these areas are classified as core and restricted-use zones of the Environmentally Critical Network (ECAN) of Palawan.<sup>[2]</sup>

## PALAWAN'S NINE PROTECTED AREAS

- Ursula Island Bird Sanctuary
- Mt. Mantalingahan Protected Landscape
- Rasa Island Wildlife Sanctuary
- Puerto Princesa Underground River National Park
- Malampaya Sound Protected Landscape and Seascape
- El Nido Managed Resource Protected Area
- Caluit Game Preserve Wildlife Sanctuary
- Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park
- Palawan Flora and Fauna Watershed Reserve



## THE WORLD'S BEST ISLAND

Palawan's natural beauty led it to be named the World's Best Island in 2016, 2017, and 2020 by the Travel+Leisure Magazine. This global acclaim increased local and foreign tourist arrivals on the island, prompting the province to undergo rapid development to conserve its biodiversity and to accommodate visitors. The Puerto Princesa park has an annual average of 284,000 visitors and approximately PhP 50 million in income.



## AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

Despite the province's flourishing tourism industry, many still rely on agriculture and fishing as main sources of living. Some of Palawan's crops include rice, corn, cashew, coconuts, and mangoes. The province's waters supply 65% of Manila's fish, and 10% of the entire Philippines' annual total fishery collection. Palawan is also the country's top seaweed producer.

## MINING

Mining is one of Palawan's top industries, with its biggest mineral resource being nickel. The second-largest nickel mine in the Philippines is in Palawan. Other minerals, like gold, silver, manganese, granite, and marble, may also be found in its mountains.

## INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Palawan's paved roads grew from 906 to 1,003 kilometers in 2012. The growing human population increased the amount of land used for residential and non-residential structures from 68,080 square meters in 2006 to 112,478 square meters in 2010.

## STEPS TOWARD SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF PALAWAN

All this growth comes with a cost. Every flourishing industry in the province has threatened Palawan's natural beauty.

The province's mining activity corrupted its biodiversity and threatened the 12 ancestral domain claims of cultural minorities, such as the Pala'wans and Tagbanuas. The burgeoning tourism industry prompted massive infrastructure projects that consume natural resources and important land just to satisfy needs and demands. Even the agriculture industry's continuous need for arable soil led to conversion of forest lands.

The land use changes due to agricultural and infrastructural growth within protected areas have led to a reduction in Palawan's forest cover, which decreased by 40,707 hectares from 2005 to 2010.

There must be an increased focus on the formulation of appropriate policies and regulations, and strong enforcement of established laws to conserve the province's natural wonders. Environmental programs and projects must also be developed and implemented closely with the community members.

Forest conservation through a total commercial logging ban in all areas should be strictly imposed. The protection of watersheds, biological diversity, indigenous communities, and the conservation of their culture should also be strengthened. Proper areas for environmental and ecological research, education and training, tourism, and recreation should also be provided.

Amid the challenges brought by growth, national policies, governance and local politics, and natural environmental changes, there is a need to continuously address socio-economic and environmental issues. These efforts must be built on gains and insights from more than two decades of implementing the Strategic Environmental Plan for Palawan, which was established to "improve the living conditions of the people of Palawan and to increase the economic contribution that Palawan can make to the Republic of the Philippines by developing its resources and land and water in ways that are environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and economically practicable."