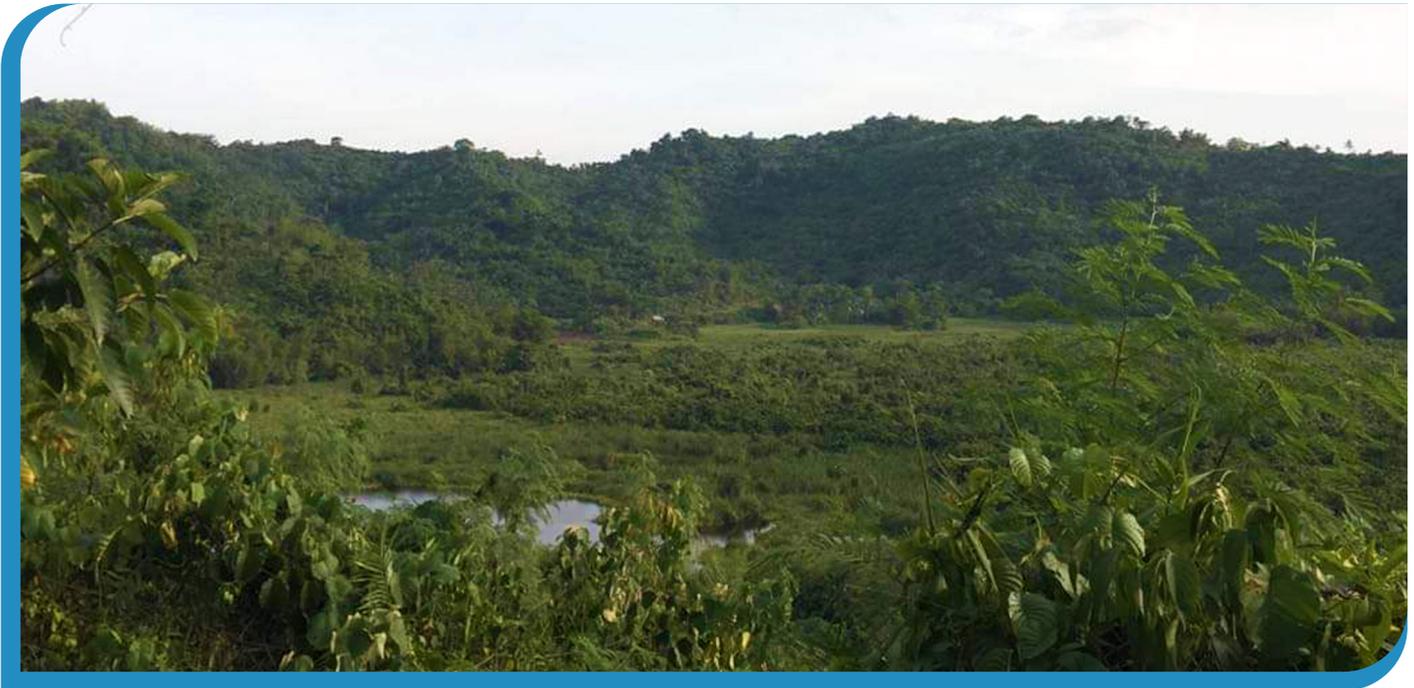


Samar and Leyte: Forests of Land and Sea



Low, rugged hills and alluvial plains and valleys characterize the provinces of Samar and Leyte, both found in Eastern Visayas, next to the Pacific Ocean. While the two provinces are beside each other, they are divided by the San Juanico Strait, with only the Philippines' longest bridge connecting the two. These strategic land and water features have led both provinces to grow a booming agricultural economy.

FORESTS AND PROTECTED AREAS

The Eastern Visayas region has a total forest cover of 505,796 hectares, the majority of which are found in Samar. The largest closed canopy and mangrove forest in the region also lie in the province.

Samar has the largest unfragmented tracts of lowland rainforest in the Philippines, making it a natural home for many species. Over half of its biodiversity is unique to the region, which includes 38 species of mammals, 215 species of birds, 51 species of reptiles, and 26 species of amphibians. The forests also serve as a habitat to over 1,000 species of plants, 53% of which are endemic.

There are 10 protected areas in the lands and seas of Samar and Leyte. One of the most notable areas is the Biri Larosa Protected Landscape and Seascape in Northern Samar, which has 81.53 hectares of coral reefs,

284 hectares of five seagrass species, and 443 hectares of mangrove forests, with 15 mangrove species. The forest reserves and watersheds also ensure potable water and irrigation throughout the region.

ECONOMY

Eastern Visayas has an agricultural economy, with 976,385 hectares of land allotted to agriculture. Seventy-one percent of this land is dedicated to planting coconut, the region's major crop.

Other crops include rice, abaca, corn, sugarcane, and various root crops. Some of the land is used for fishponds.

The region's agriculture, fishery, and forestry industries grew from 2005 to 2007, with fisheries notably expanding at a rate of 23.11%.

TOURISM POTENTIAL

Unlike Central Visayas that has become known for its tourism sites, Eastern Visayas' tourism industry remains at its nascent stage, despite the region's bevy of natural wonders, historical sites, and cultural festivals.

Samar is touted as the Philippines' "cave capital", with its Sulpan Cave system spanning a total of 32.1 kilometers, with 12 identified caves. Leyte boasts pristine and untouched beaches, like Kalanggaman, with sands that can rival the world-famous Boracay.

The region also has many local festivals, where tourists are welcome. This includes the Embajada Festival, which comically portrays the conflict between the Moro-Moros and the Spanish colonizers, as well as the Parayang Harvest Festival in San Roque, a centuries-old tradition which celebrates abundant harvests.

DEVELOPMENT VERSUS CONSERVATION

The Secondary National Roads Development Project is a \$222.5 million initiative that aims to rehabilitate 222 kilometers of road networks connecting Paranas in Western Samar to Guian in Eastern Samar.

While the project is expected to improve economic activities and access to social services for more than 280,000 residents of the region, this comes at the cost of reducing total forest cover, with a projected destruction of up to 7,739 trees.

Mangroves are among Eastern Visayas' greatest assets, because they act as added protection against severe weather conditions. This makes deforestation a major problem for a region that has endured some of the worst typhoons in the country.



Vigan Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Association (VARBA), our grantee, planting to restore and rehabilitate 27.87 hectares of mangrove area in Capopocanan Island, an area damaged by Typhoon Yolanda.

Yolanda, one of the most destructive typhoons in history, ravaged Eastern Visayas in 2013, leaving 5,902 casualties and an estimated PhP 68 billion worth of damage.

The Eastern Visayan coastline experienced storm surges as high as 5.3 meters, almost the height of two-storey houses. Despite the low rate of forest loss during the typhoon, the sheer strength of Yolanda was enough to increase forest degradation.

With 30.7% of the region currently classified as living in poverty, mangroves are becoming

increasingly important in protecting low-lying communities from the effects of climate change.



If not for the prevalence of mangroves in the coastline of Eastern Visayas, the region might have experienced heavier destruction during the typhoon.



Since 2017, we have been working with the International Institute of Rural Construction and other partners for the protection and conservation of the Leyte Sab-a Basin Peatland.

The **Leyte Sab-a Basin Peatland** spans 3,088 hectares and covers the municipalities of San Miguel, Alangalang, and Sta. Fe in the Province of Leyte. It is one of the confirmed peatlands in the Philippines.

It serves as a refuge and sanctuary to diverse species of wildlife and provides valuable ecosystem services, such as hydrological and geochemical cycles, benefitting the surrounding municipalities. It is important in climate regulation, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem services provision for the surrounding communities and the entire province. Unfortunately, the forest is now being fully converted to agricultural land. The land-use changes in the forests threaten wildlife and ecosystem services, particularly its carbon sequestration functions.

Since 2017, Forest Foundation Philippines has been working with various stakeholders to protect, restore, and manage the Leyte Sab-a Basin Peatland area and sustain its ecosystem services.

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