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# Indigenous Peoples' Community-Conserved Areas are leading to a paradigm shift in land conservation in the Philippines

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### Indigenous-Led Conservation in Asia

An estimated 411 million Indigenous People live in Asia and the kinship between these communities and the land have shaped customary land use and traditional governance systems across the continent. In turn, these systems have fostered intergenerational continuity between land and people, which developed independently from state-managed land, and has helped sustain conservation in Asia for generations.

Over the decade spanning from 2011 to 2021, recognition of Indigenous Peoples contribution to biodiversity conservation grew significantly. This was the same timeframe across which the United Nations' Aichi biodiversity targets were formulated and left unmet on a global scale. In Asia, this is notable because of both the scale of, and lack of formal recognition for, Indigenous protected areas. Approximately 13 percent of all Indigenous lands and territories in Asia overlap with Protected Areas (PAs), but only 8.7 percent are legally recognized. Across nine South- and Southeast-Asian countries, there is about 123 million hectares (ha) of unrecognized



*3D mapping with Indigenous groups and communities. Credit: Bukluran.*

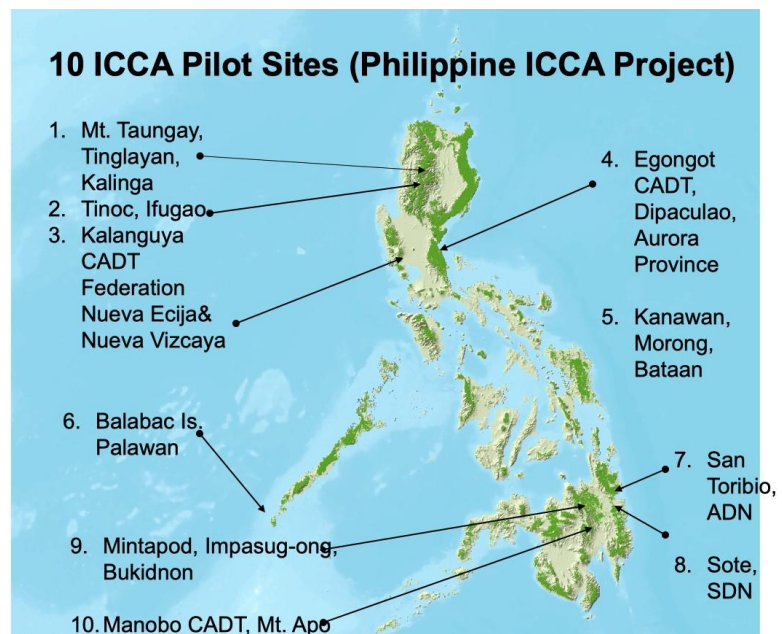
Indigenous and community lands, an area larger than the combined territories of Cambodia, Thailand, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and the Philippines. Of these countries, the Philippines is particularly notable for its turn toward Indigenous-led land conservation and nature-based solutions.

## Solutions in the Philippines

The Philippines is an archipelagic state—a state composed wholly of islands and their interconnected waters—comprised of about 7,641 islands, with a total land area of about 29,817,000 ha. It is one of the world’s 17 “megadiverse” countries, as defined by Conservation International, due to the breadth of its ecosystem variation and the number of endemic and ecologically important species it houses. Philippines and Madagascar are the only two megadiverse countries that are also biodiversity hotspots. This makes the Philippines a top global conservation priority area.

### *Conservation Tools and Mechanisms*

The Philippines has an Indigenous population of about 102.9 million people and its land ownership system is governed by a complex set of legislative and traditional approaches. Since 1992, the nation has identified 234 Protected Areas (PAs), covering about 5.23 million ha. In 2004, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the primary implementing agency and administrator of the PA system, issued revised guidelines for establishing and managing community-based programs in PAs. Under these guidelines, tenured migrants may be granted rights to live in PAs and engage in compatible economic activities within their boundaries when a community-based protected area resource management agreement is established. These 25-year agreements are formed between the DENR and organized tenured migrant communities or Indigenous peoples. Once they expire, they can be renewed for another 25 years.



*10 ICCA pilot sites in the Philippines. Credit: Bukluran.*

From 2010 to 2015, the New Conservation Areas Philippines Project (NewCAPP) was developed. The project was funded by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) and implemented jointly by the United Nations Development Program — Philippines and the Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB). It sought to expand the national PA systems, including 14 sites in 10 key biodiversity areas. Six of the sites are traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples or ancestral domains. Formal recognition for Indigenous Peoples’ Community-Conserved Areas (ICCAs) or areas within ancestral domain was seen as integral to achieving the project’s goals. These ICCAs are conserved and used by Indigenous Peoples’ pursuant to Indigenous knowledge systems and practices and in accordance with customary laws.

NewCAPP recognized that areas overlapping with PA expansion must continue to be governed by Indigenous Peoples. To enable this, the state created the Philippine ICCA Consortium (Bukluran). Bukluran played a crucial role in community engagement, training, and communication between community leaders and the BMB, UNDP, and GEF.

From 2016 to 2019, NewCAPP evolved into the Philippine ICCA Project (PICCAP) and began to focus solely on ICCAs. Under the new name and structure, Indigenous Peoples and their communities took on a decision-making role. They documented, identified, and mapped ICCAs across the Philippines, and created a resource inventory and Community Conservation Plans. Accordingly, government and partner Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) stepped into a facilitative role. They provided technical support, such as 3D mapping and participatory analysis of resource inventory results.

#### *Impacts of collaboration and passing off leadership*

As leadership was passed off, consideration for community-based governance, language, literacy, and concepts of time, were particularly important. 3D mapping was used to identify and illustrate the extent of traditional territory—including traditionally conserved areas of special significance—and to document traditional place names, land use, and other culturally significant factors. In addition, the technology was leveraged to aid in land use planning and resource management.

In the end, PICCAP exceeded its target of establishing 99,999 ha as ICCAs, formally recognizing 154,868 ha as such. The area holds an estimated 10.5 million tons of carbon—116.2 tons per ha—which is equal to the carbon emission of at least seven million cars annually. The approach also proved cost effective and replicable. At a local level, traditional governance, science, and technology resulted in a respectful transfer of responsibility, where IPs were trained on mapping and resource inventory, while scientists and technical staff learned about Indigenous knowledge. This gave IPs a more complete picture of their resources, allowing them to exercise greater control and surveillance and take stronger community positions against threats to biodiversity.

This synergy between Indigenous knowledge, science, customary law, and state law avoided weakening any of the systems involved. Instead, it created a paradigm shift from the notion that conservation exists only by adhering to state-managed protected areas to an emerging recognition that Indigenous practices remain the best means for nature-based solutions. PICCAP was an important part of this shift, setting an example of inclusive conservation in Southeast Asia through action and advocacy.

To learn more about private and civic land conservation in the Philippines, read the ILCN's [Country Profile: Philippines](#).

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