

Project Lasang

Conserving
Negros Forests

Project Lasang Hagabat

Lasang = forest; Hagabat = of the south

(Cebauno, one of the local languages of Negros)

What is the problem?

The primary forests on the island of Negros are close to being completely destroyed. Today, old-growth lowland forest exists only as a few thin ribbons between the montane forest and the cleared lowlands. Out of the original forested land, estimated to cover 40m hectares in 1820 (ref), there is now only approximately 500,000 hectares left - a staggering 96% loss of forest in the last 200 years.

There are two main reasons for the forest loss:

1. Clearing large areas for growing sugar cane; the island of Negros was named 'Isla Dulce' during colonial times, because the fertility of the land seemed perfect for growing the crops. Negros is still the largest producer of sugar cane in the Philippines.



2. The population of Negros has grown constantly with improvements in treating infectious diseases, notably since the eradication of small pox. In 1820, the population for the whole island was approximately 50,000. In 2015 it was estimated that there were around 4.5m people, many of them living in rural communities. As the population increases, there is a consequential demand for land for farming and housing, resulting in many forested areas being transformed. Large families are a norm for many rural communities throughout the world, as parents plan for their futures or begin families early in life.



Why is it a problem?

Clearing forest gives rise to several local problems, and contributes to several global ones.

Locally, once the trees have been cleared, the topsoil is washed away by the monsoon rains. The land can no longer act 'like a sponge' when the rains fall. Instead the water runs immediately off the land and the rivers fill rapidly. When the rains stop, after the initial flood the water courses dry up. Any community dependent on the rivers for drinking, or household use, find themselves without water. In addition, the forests often provide fuel for cooking food, timber for building houses, fences and other constructions. Over the years, a way of living has been established in the rural poor communities of Negros whereby the only way to survive has been to clear more forest. But what happens when there is no more forest left to clear, and the rivers stop flowing?

The forests of Negros are also home to many different species of plant and animal. Locally, the people have hunted there for meat, as well as for pleasure. Traditional medicinal plants such as quinine, cinnamon and guava, which survive best in primary forests, are also used to cure illnesses.

The need to conserve biodiversity for the welfare of humans has long-been recognised. In the forests of Negros live some species that are found nowhere else in the world, such as the Visayan warty pig, Negros bleeding heart dove, Philippine spotted deer, Wreath-wrinkled hornbills and Tarictic hornbills are all listed as either Critically Endangered or Endangered by the global authority on wildlife – the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and are facing extinction. If the forests go, so does some of the world's species.

Internationally it is recognised that forests have a major role to play in protecting the Earth from climate change as a result of rising atmospheric carbon levels. Clearing the forest means releasing more greenhouse gases, as well as losing the ability of the trees to sequester carbon i.e. take carbon dioxide out of the air and lock it into solid state, helping to reduce atmospheric carbon levels and helping to tackle climate change.

For all these reasons it is important that we come up with ways to protect the forest, yet not making the rural poor struggle to survive even more.



What can we do about it (solutions)?

Project Lasang's approach is to help the community identify and implement fundamental behavioural changes such that there is a shift from subsistence, unsustainable practices such as slash and burn agriculture to alternative, improved ways of living that provide long term benefits for local people and their future generations.

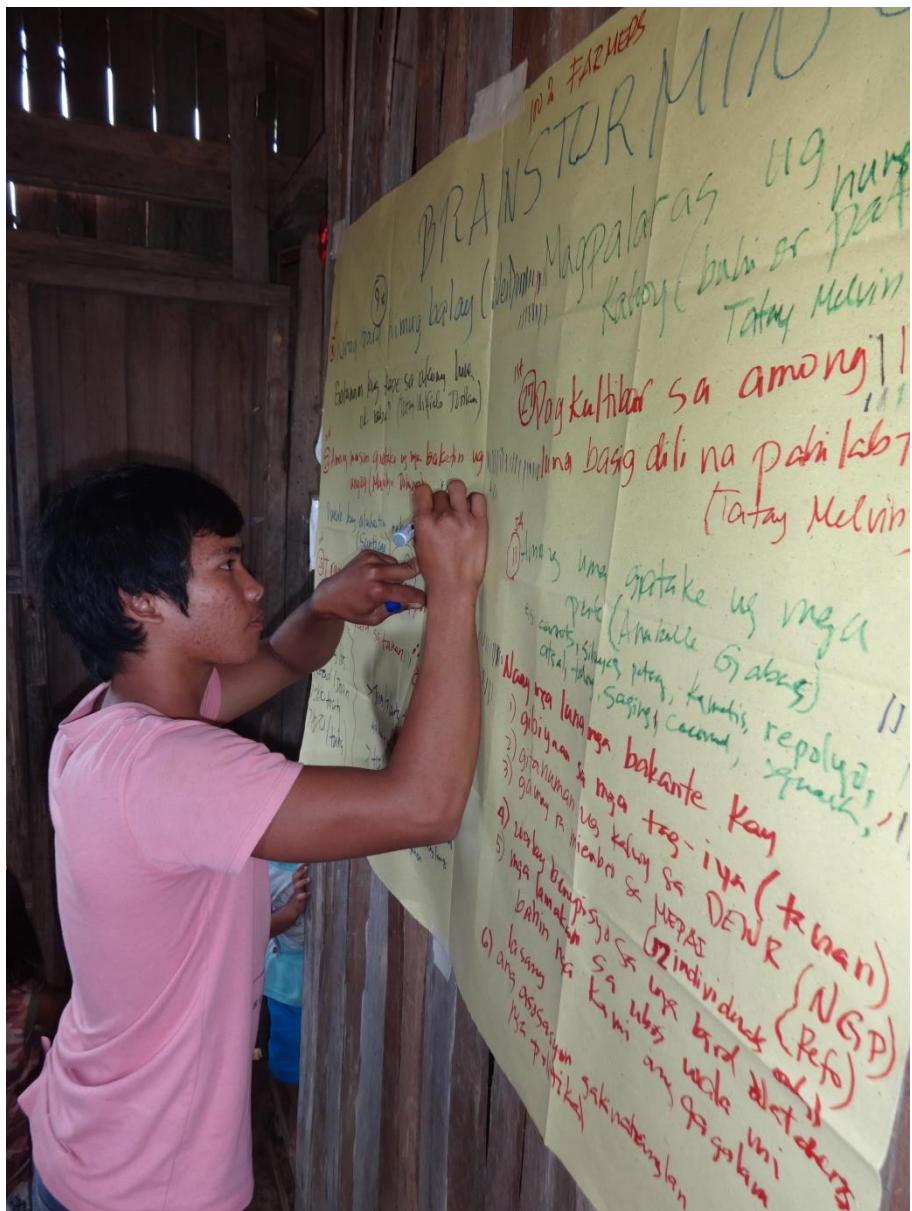
In the forest edge communities around the Cuernos de Negros, we know that this will mean helping them change the way they farm, and what they grow, increasing their ability to produce higher value goods for the local markets, increase productivity of domestic livestock such as pigs, hens and cattle, and introduce new cash crops that will enable the villagers to develop in a sustainable way.

It will also mean working with specific target groups such as young women, entrepreneur-minded individuals and providing them with the tools and support they need to make a positive difference for themselves and the area they live in.



How do we do it?

The project has identified a model for the conservation of old-growth, bio-diverse forest to benefit disadvantaged (poor) people on Negros living in and around the Cuernos de Negros forest landscape. Participatory 'action research' is used to elicit local knowledge and engage local communities. Communities are supported and trained through local community facilitators. Building on similar, tried and tested work undertaken elsewhere, a seed fund now needs to be established to: a) support 'win-wins' that deliver benefits to local people and wildlife; and b) purchase and manage tree nurseries, notably for the growing of abaca, which is in continual demand for the production of Maila hemp. These are schemes developed by the community (with the Project's help) to connect improved livelihoods to forest conservation; in other words, 'win-wins' for people and wildlife.



A crucial component of the project is to build capacity of local people so that they can gain the skills they need in order to develop e.g. by learning more about trading and enterprise schemes.

We also support the local communities through identification and recruitment of other stakeholders in the region who can play a role in forest conservation. For example, the rice growers (literally) downstream of the forest edge communities benefit from having a steady supply of clean water, so we're helping introduce a 'payment for ecological services' system, which rewards the people looking after the forest and ensures a constant supply of water for the paddy fields.

Another key element of the project is to ensure that all support is based on agreements between the villagers and Project Lasang. These 'reciprocal environmental agreements' ensure that each party understands their role and commits to working together for the benefit of people and wildlife.

Perhaps most of all we recognise that there is a need for ongoing support and commitment to making changes happen that will benefit local people. Unlike most conservation and development projects, Project Lasang is committed to long term engagement and support.

What do we need to do it?

At this stage of Project we still need funds. Specifically, money is needed to cover the costs of introducing new enterprises and new ways of living, for example the building of a new pig farm and training of the local people to market their products, for providing technical assistance for agricultural improvement, growing abaca, trading and marketing. The local people will need support for the next three years, until the enterprise schemes are established.



Project Lasang requires around \$75,000 p.a. to support the village of Naubo, on the edge of the Mantiquil barangay, but we intend to use the project as a learning base to extend to other communities living around the Cuernos de Negros. In 2018 we are hoping to move to the adjacent municipality of Santa Catalina, to repeat the process and protect even more forest. Ultimately we would like to be working with all the forest edge communities to deliver benefits to people and wildlife.

What is the timetable?

Project Lasang has been working with the village of Naubo, in Mantiquil barangay, Siaton, since 2012. Already we have seen some significant wins, such as the training and planting of abaca trees, which will bring in revenue in the next three years, the creation of a village association to act for the

benefit of the community, and the cessation of forest cutting, notably in the Canaway Valley, which will help safeguard the watershed as well as keep the critical habitat for wildlife intact.



What are the milestones?

Throughout the period from 2017 – 2019 we intend to establish more enterprise schemes in and around Naubo. Ultimately, which schemes are implemented will be decided by the local people in order to ensure ownership and hence sustainability, but could include all of any of the following:

- a) domestic piggery to provide alternatives to hunting for Visayan warty pigs
- b) poultry farm for providing low cost, high grade animal protein from meat and eggs
- c) production of garments, baskets, soaps
- d) planting of under-storey crops such as abaca, cocoa i.e. agro-forestry products
- e) sustainable honey-gathering (encouragement and harvesting of wild bee (*Apis dorsata*) populations)
- f) re-forestation under the National Greening Programme



How do we know we are making progress/have succeeded?

We set a number of indicators that we monitor regularly in order to determine the impact the project is having. These include social and biological indicators such as:

Legal Status and Law Enforcement	Legal status of forest - National - Provincial - LGU REA (No./% of households) Forest clearance (m^2) Prosecutions/Dossiers (no.) Compensation scheme for HWC
Population growth	Current population (by village) No. of households (by village) No. of immigrants No. of births No. of deaths No. of emigrants Average household size Average no. of children to one woman Average age of first child mother

	Family planning guidance
Socio-economic indicators	Household revenue/community GDP
	Protein consumption (av. per household)
	Carbohydrate consumption (av. per household)
	Land ownership
	The number of village children attending primary school
	The number of village children attending secondary school
	Knowledge of forest laws
	Attitude to forest use
	Behaviour towards forest use
	No. of livestock (pigs, chickens, goats)
	No. of new business enterprises established
	Amount of timber used for building (source)
	Amount of timber used for firewood (source)
	No. of new houses built
	Water availability
Forest regeneration	No. of trees planted
	Amount of farmland available
	Nursery production
	No. seedlings harvested
Species protection	Knowledge on forest species
	Attitude to forest species
	Behaviour towards forest species
	Amount of hunting
	No. of snares removed
	Forest species population data
	Income derived from conservation
	Anecdotal evidence of key species
Monthly activity reports	Community Facilitators
	Law Enforcement Officers
	Director's report
	Project Coordinator's report

How do we keep it going?

One of the main reasons for basing our work on 'bottom-up' processes such as Participatory Learning and Action is that sustainability of action lies at the very centre of the strategy. By building up local expertise, ownership and ability to self-determine, the local people are empowered in sustainable development.

We know from our experience that local people recognise the challenges facing them in rural situations and are concerned about what the future holds for them and their children as the pressure grows on diminishing resources. The aim of Project Lasang is to help them find new ways to meet their needs – without costing the Earth.

