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Crocodile attack prompts calls to curb mangrove bark trade

By Redempto Anda
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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY -- Southern Palawan Rep. Abraham Mitra has called for stricter measures to curtail the illegal trading of mangrove bark, which he blamed for the increased incidence of crocodile attacks on humans.

The latest attack occurred in Barangay Ransang, Rizal on April 27, which resulted in the death of a 7-year-old boy.

Mostagem Ibrahim's death prompted Mitra to urge the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to burn all confiscated tanbarks instead of bidding these out to buyers.

Ibrahim, of Sitio Sumorom, Barangay Ransang, was reportedly swimming in the river with his brother Jadnor when he was attacked by the crocodile at around 1 p.m.

Jadnor told authorities that he heard his brother cry for help and saw him being snapped by the animal before it disappeared into the water.

Local residents found the victim's body the following morning, soaked in mud.

A responding group was able to catch a 15-foot crocodile before the body was found. They cut open its stomach but found nothing.

Hunt

Personnel of the Palawan Wildlife Rescue Center based here have been dispatched to track down the crocodile responsible for the boy's death.

Authorities reported gathering narrative accounts from residents of other cases of crocodile attacks in the Rizal area.

In November 2006, the head of a 9-year-old girl believed to have been eaten by a crocodile was recovered in a river in the same town.

The victim, identified as Joanna Crisostomo, of Barangay Panalingaan, was crossing a shallow river with her 11-year-old brother after watching television from a neighbor's house when the incident happened.

"For as long as the DENR allows the bidding of confiscated tanbarks, the practice of tanbarking will eventually wipe out our mangroves in the south and expose more people to harm from disruptive wildlife such as crocodiles," Mitra told the Philippine Daily Inquirer (parent company of INQUIRER.net).

He noted that the modus operandi of unscrupulous businessmen financing poor farmers to engage in tanbarking involves allowing authorities to seize abandoned tanbark and bidding for them once they are auctioned off by the DENR.

Alarm

Conservation groups have expressed alarm that in addition to disrupting the mangrove habitat of the saltwater crocodile, the prevalent destruction of mangroves for their bark threatens to wipe out the only remaining forest stand of a certain mangrove species, *ceriops tangal*, believed to be found only in Palawan province.

This species, according to studies made by Conservation International, is characterized by a thicker bark than those of other mangrove species. The bark is used as a raw material for dyeing clothes such as batik or as ingredient for certain traditional medicine.

"It is common knowledge that illegal tanbarking is common throughout the south. It's a vicious cycle of continuation of the trade despite apprehensions," Indira Widman, an official of the Katala Foundation which runs a mangrove conservation project in Rizal, said.

Widman said the group had noted an increase in debarking activities due to the presence of financiers and even some local politicians involved in the trade.

The NGO officials said the enforcement of existing laws against tanbarking is difficult because a lot of moneyed and powerful individuals were behind this trade.

[^ Back to top](#)

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