



# ECOTOURISM LAUNCH CUTS ILLEGAL LOGGING

## The Challenge

Samar Island has been recognized by WWF as one of 200 ecoregions in the world considered essential to preserving global biodiversity. It contains one of the country's largest tracts of unfragmented lowland rainforest, yet is among the poorest islands in the Philippines.

The Model Forest is located inside the Samar Island Natural Park, a forest reserve zoned for multiple-use, including biodiversity protection and sustainable NTFP extraction. The forests are also valued for the protection they offer against typhoons and landslides, as well as ecosystem services such as clean water. Logging is prohibited. However, widespread poverty has led to serious conflicts over resource use due to intense pressure from island residents who rely on illegal mineral and timber extraction, dynamite fishing, hunting, charcoal production and subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods and consumption.



## Ulot Watershed Model Forest, Philippines

Year established: 2000 | Area of Model Forest: 87 536 ha

## Facts

- Samar Island is considered one of the most biologically diverse islands in the Philippines and has a large number of endemic species.
- To supplement farming, people depend on fresh water fish, wild animals and non-timber forest products (NTFP) such as rattan, bamboo, and medicinal and culinary plants.
- In 1996, the rainforests of Samar Island were declared a Forest Reserve to protect against illegal logging, excessive slash-and-burn agriculture and unregulated collection of wildlife.
- Ulot Watershed is the third-largest of the 41 watersheds found on Samar Island and Ulot is its longest river (90 km).

## Finding a solution

In an effort to reduce dependence on illegal logging and unsustainable activities, Ulot Watershed Model Forest partners have been focusing on the development of conservation-compatible livelihood alternatives. With this goal in mind, in 2010 the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR, the national lead on Model Forests), the Department of Tourism, the UN Development Program and the Global Environment Facility invited recreation specialists to provide recommendations on ecotourism options for the watershed. The specialists traveled to potential sites in traditional boats — the same ones commonly used for illegal logging activities. Their recommendation was to offer boat rides on the Ulot River for tourists, provided passenger comfort and security could be improved. The community agreed with the recommendation and set to work converting the illegal logging vessels into what would become known as “TORPEDO boats” for river tours.



## Results and impact

Ulot Watershed's pride is now its ecotourism service. Local residents are increasingly convinced that sustainable sources of income, such as ecotourism, can offer viable alternatives to illegal logging. Of the 713 visitors to the Samar Island Natural Park headquarters in 2012, 558 took a TORPEDO boat ride—double the number from 2011. Since the establishment of the ecotourism business, timber poaching has not disappeared, but it has decreased. “Based on our inventory, there were 40 boats along the river being used by illegal loggers and 20 used to transport the illegal lumber items”, said Manolito Ragub of the DENR. “We developed the ecotourism venture instead of using these boats for the transport of illegal items. That is a very important conversion of people's livelihood.”

When community members sell their tour package, they also market their culture and way of life. Before roads, the river functioned as a navigational route connecting the eastern and western sides of Samar. By teaching visitors about their ancestral ways through experiential learning, tradition breathes new life into their community and reminds them of their connection to the land. Karina Rosa, Regional Director, Department of Tourism for Eastern Visayas, agrees. “Before, the people from the community were involved in illegal fishing. Now we call them champions of ecotourism, protectors of our environment. We're saving all of this for tomorrow,” said Rosa. “When we see that [the project was] successful, the story in itself becomes the advocacy.”

While several improvements to the activities and services are still needed, the community has already upgraded their ecotourism experience in many ways. They now produce handicrafts from NTFPs and offer catering services. Along with boat rides, community members also plan to further develop activities such as kayaking and scenic stops as part of a larger River Cruise package.

“In terms of what I've seen in my last year, the boat guides have all become first aid and water rescue-certified,” explains Joy Salazar, a local tourism officer with the Municipality of Paranas. “I think it's a huge step, and they're not only applying that knowledge and skills when they work — they have become the lifeguards of the community... the community here is thankful for the change in lifestyle.”

As a catalyst for change, the Model Forest seeks funding from the international community. It also acts as a platform from which to engage the national government and local agencies alike, facilitating the investment of public and private resources into that particular region of the Island. Importantly, the income generated through user fees for the Ulot River TORPEDO Boat Ride Adventure and associated activities goes directly to the local community and the Samar Island Natural Park.

Stakeholders in the Carood Watershed Model Forest, the second Model Forest established in the country, are looking at the Ulot experience to help them also establish ecotourism businesses. They are particularly interested in the TORPEDO boat idea as a model for community engagement on the Island of Bohol.

As Elaine Springgay, Eco-tourism and Enterprise Development Advisor for the Ulot Watershed Model Forest and Cuso International volunteer said, “The Model Forest can actually become what is implied through their name. They can serve as models for other forest communities and practices around the globe.”

### For further information

- International Model Forest Network: [imfn.net](http://imfn.net)
- Ulot Watershed Model Forest: [imfn.net/ulot-watershed-model-forest](http://imfn.net/ulot-watershed-model-forest)
- Video: [youtu.be/IVJsHCjg89w](https://youtu.be/IVJsHCjg89w)

*The International Model Forest Network brings people together to test and apply innovative approaches to the sustainable management and use of the world's landscapes and natural resources.*

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