

# Tides of time

The Philippines' Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park includes not only the underground river but also a significant habitat for biodiversity conservation with important primary forests



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Tourism helps finance the running of the park, but it must be managed carefully so that it doesn't have a negative impact.

PEOPLE | James Albert Mendoza, superintendent of Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, the Philippines

## Engaging the local community in protecting the natural environment

As a child, James Albert Mendoza would accompany his father to the fields in their native Philippines to plant, cultivate and harvest crops. He remembers seeing local wildlife feeding in the surrounding forest, and he became interested in how they behaved and, later, how to conserve and protect the wildlife and the forest. So when, as an adult, he was appointed superintendent of Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, a World Heritage site since 1999, he was well prepared for the task. He had come to appreciate the interrelationship between local people and endemic plant and animal species, and credits this appreciation to his childhood experiences: "This foundation is fundamental to understanding why the environment is really important to the people, and vice versa," he says.

In the early 1990s, Mendoza was working for a non-governmental organization in Palawan, an island province of the Philippines, where what is now known as the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park is located. In December 1992, the national Department of Environment and Natural Resources transferred management of the

park to the city government of Puerto Princesa. This was the first time that management of a national park in the Philippines had been transferred to a local government, Mendoza emphasizes, and many were unsure whether the arrangement would succeed.

At the time, the park was not included on Unesco's World Heritage List. Mendoza became involved in the qualification process, responsible for consulting with local communities and involving them directly in the effort. "It took me a few years to just get everyone concerned to agree to support the progress of the park," recalls Mendoza. "One of Unesco's requirements was that the local community agree to the inscription. And they had to do so in writing, so I had to talk to all of them individually."

His efforts to engage the local community continue today. At present, the park has a staff of 52, and 45 of them are drawn from the surrounding communities. The 17-person management board of the park includes



James Albert Mendoza.

seven local community members, including four that head committees and three indigenous chieftains.

"My number one challenge is trying to understand and work with the local community," says Mendoza, "which is really important for any conservation or World Heritage management site to succeed or be effective."

In November 1999, the park expanded its size to 22,202 hectares (86 square miles) from 3,901 hectares, encompassing an underground river that flows directly into the sea and old-growth forest. Less than a month after the expansion, on December 4, 1999, Unesco inscribed Puerto Princesa on the World Heritage List.

From the beginning, Mendoza has been responsible for managing the park. His challenges include not only community engagement but also the complexities of administering an area of great biodiversity. In addition, he has to balance the needs of the site with the demands of tourism development.

"It's a challenge to help people understand that, while we need development, we still have to protect what we have," he explains, "because there would be no tourism without the main attractions."

Since the Philippines is a developing country where the average income is low, no one is surprised that locals are tempted to cut down trees or kill protected birds. Mendoza and his staff try to counter that by involving local residents in tourism activities offering alternative livelihoods. The people living within the park's boundaries are mostly engaged in gathering of non-timber forest products, rice farming and hunting. "As ecotourism grew," he says, "they had alternative income, and they understand that protecting the forest and the wildlife brought income in a sustainable way or a long-term way."

Mendoza reports proudly that the park has been a self-sustaining protected area for the past three years. "I think we're one of the first in the Philippines to be financing our own operations," he says. "Since the income has also gone to the community, it is now easier to convince them of the value of conservation."

### About World Heritage

The aim of the World Heritage Convention, adopted by Unesco members in 1972, is "to encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding universal value to humanity."

"Tides of Time" is a partnership among Jaeger-LeCoultre, Unesco's World Heritage Centre and the International Herald Tribune. The series presents some of the people who are helping preserve marine sites on the World Heritage List.

To see videos about World Heritage marine sites, visit the "Tides of Time" archive at [whc.unesco.org/tidesoftime](http://whc.unesco.org/tidesoftime)

### Watchmaker supports cultural as well as natural heritage

Jaeger-LeCoultre, a Swiss watchmaker with a distinguished cultural and artistic heritage, works to preserve not only the world's natural heritage, in its partnership with the World Heritage Centre, but also the diversity and richness of cultural expression. A notable example is its support for filmmaking, an art that shares with fine watchmaking an emphasis on beauty, advanced technology and expertise.

For the seventh consecutive year, Jaeger-LeCoultre is a sponsor of the Venice International Film Festival. The 68th festival opened Aug. 31 and runs until Sept. 10, and Jaeger-LeCoultre will be actively involved in all the highlights of the event. Three unique engraved Reverso watches will reward the Best Actress and Best Actor of the year as well as the winner of the Golden Lion, for the director of the Best Film. The watches will feature a lacquered engraving, handcrafted in

accordance with the finest traditions, depicting the lion symbol of Venice and bearing the inscription "68. Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica." Finally, this year's "Jaeger-LeCoultre Glory to the Filmmaker Award" will honor Al Pacino, who is presenting his third movie as a director. Previous honorees were Takeshi Kitano in 2007, Agnès Varda and Abbas Kiarostami in 2008, Sylvester Stallone in 2009 and Mani Ratnam in 2010.

Jaeger-LeCoultre is also an official partner of the Shanghai International Film Festival. The partners are cooperating on a three-year project to restore classic Chinese films and support young and prominent Chinese film directors. Jaeger-LeCoultre and SIFF will set up a series of film exhibitions called the "World Cruise of Jaeger-LeCoultre's Rehabilitation of Chinese Classic Films," culminating in a gala event to be held at the Shanghai Festival in 2014.

C.F.

PUERTO PRINCESA SUBTERRANEAN RIVER NATIONAL PARK | A complete mountain-to-sea ecosystem

## A river that meanders through limestone caves and old-growth forest

Only a handful of caves have been chosen as Unesco World Heritage sites, and only one of them is a coastal cavern rather than an inland wonder — the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park in the Philippines.

That alone is enough to suggest that the Palawan Island landmark is something special. Thought to be the world's longest navigable underground river, the waterway meanders five miles, or 8.2 kilometers, through porous limestone karst topography. An outstanding feature of the river is that it flows directly into the sea, and the lower portions of the river are subject to tidal influence and have brackish water.

While the main focus is on the cave and its underground river, the park covers 22,202 hectares, or 86 square miles, and includes an extremely biodiverse forest area. More than 800 plant species and 165 types of bird have been recorded in the park, as well as extremely rare mammal species like the dugong, the stink badger, the bearcat and the Palawan porcupine.

The park also includes part of Ulugan Bay, a nationally significant marine area. Its

mangrove forests make up as much as 15 percent of the mangroves in the Philippines.

The park, created in the early 1970s, was inscribed on the World Heritage List for two major reasons, says the park superintendent, James Albert Mendoza: "One is the underground river. And the other one is the existence of a complete mountain-to-the-sea ecosystem, which really has remained intact and with primary growth forest."

Another thing that makes the park unique is that it's been managed (since 1992) by a municipal authority — the city of Puerto Princesa — rather than a national or regional government body.

"This gives us advantages," says Mendoza. "Decisions are made faster, unlike being under the national government. Before it was turned over, decisions would have to go up all the way to the secretariat. Now it's just through the mayor, who is the chairman of the management board."

Puerto Princesa manages the park through a Protected Area Management Board comprising 17 members, including the mayor, members of the city council and

representatives from various community and indigenous organizations.

"National parks in the Philippines used to have trouble with management, especially with the community," Mendoza explains. "We have demonstrated that it could be done at the local level, and effectively. I can't take credit for all of it, because I couldn't have done it without the support of the city government leadership and local people. I'm very proud of it." All income generated from tourist user fees goes straight into a trust fund used only for management purposes. Mendoza says this system has enabled the park to fund all of its own operations since 2008.

That's not to say that everything is perfect. More visitors means more income, but it also means greater impact on the environment in terms of boats, docks, trails and other infrastructure, as well as more

hotels around the park periphery. The evaluation of the park by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, an advisory body to World Heritage, noted: "Tourism in the area, if not carefully planned and implemented, also has great potential to adversely impact on the natural values of the core zone."

There is also a need to closely monitor upstream agricultural activities in the water catchment area that feeds the underground river. Poaching of both forest products and wildlife is another concern.

"The indigenous people really don't have that much income," says Mendoza. "So once in a while they try and poach inside the park boundaries. We try to counter that by really trying to get them involved in tourism or other activities that offer an alternative livelihood."

J.R.Y.

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