Tides of Time

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

Engaging the local community in protecting the natural environment

When James Albert Mendoza was about seven years old, he was taken to the underground river in Puerto Princesa, Mindoro Island. He was awed by the sight of the river and its surrounding, and from that moment on, he knew he wanted to be a wildlife expert. He continued his studies and eventually became a scientist who worked with local communities to protect the environment.

Mendoza recalls, "It took me a few years to just get everyone committed to support the progress of the park. Mendoza notes, "One of the key requirements was that the local community agree to the protection of the park, and they do it as a way of life, so it's not just an arrangement that would succeed."

By December 1992, the national Department of Environment and Natural Resources transferred management of the park to the local government of Puerto Princesa. This move was the first time that management of a national park in the Philippines was transferred to a local government. Mendoza emphasizes, and thereby win-win outcomes where the arrangement would succeed.

At the time, the park was not included on Unesco’s tentative list of World Heritage properties. Mendoza recalls that he and his colleagues interviewed over 100 people and reviewed them directly in the field. "It took a few years to get just everyone committed to support the progress of the park," Mendoza notes. "One of the key requirements was that the local community agree to the protection of the park, and they do it as a way of life, so it's not just an arrangement that would succeed."

"It was a challenge to help people understand what we were doing, and we still face these challenges," Mendoza says. "But we continue to work on it, trying to find ways to make it happen."

Mendoza has been responsible for consulting with local communities in accordance with the finest conservation principles. "I think we're one of the first in the Philippines to be doing so," Mendoza says. "With the support of the community, we can continue to work on it."

In 2009, Mendoza was awarded the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme Award, which recognizes individuals and organizations for their contributions to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. "The indigenous people really don't have the training in our water catchment areas," Mendoza says. "We need to help them with the management of their water catchment areas.""