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## Constituency Building and Protected Areas Management Board – Taal Lake

**Maria Paz G. Luna**

*Tanggol Kalikasan, Inc. and Pusod, Inc.*

*Pusod, Inc.*

*201 Mediatix Rd., Miracle Heights Subd.,*

*Antipolo Del Norte, Lipa City, Batangas 4217*

*Tel: +63 (43) 757-3192/ +63(43) 757-3996*

*[www.pusod.org](http://www.pusod.org)*

Taal Lake is one of the more famous scenes in the Philippines, present in postcards, elementary schoolbooks and ecotourism brochures. Visitors to Tagaytay Ridge get treated to the awesome vista of the deepest lake in the Philippines (172 m) and the third largest in area (234.2 km<sup>2</sup>), but the real wonders of the lake far, far surpass the mere beauty of the scenery.

The lake is highly important in biodiversity terms, with endemic species in various families. About 4 species of endemic fish thrive in the lake. The most important is clupeid (*Sardinella tawilis*), which is the basis of subsistence fishery among the coastal populace. The fish fauna also includes important migratory components composed mainly of mullets (*Mugilidae*) and jacks (*Carangidae*) which move up the Pansipit River when juvenile and spend their lives in the lake until they are sexually mature, at which time they return to the sea. These fishes also support valuable fisheries, but the indications are that their numbers have been declining due to over-fishing the Pansipit River and fishcage development along its banks. Two instances of demolition of the illegal cages have been initiated, in 1997 and again in October 2001.

Major threats to the lake include over-exploitation of fishery resources, inappropriate development for tourism and subdivision development on the Tagaytay ridge area, and an increasing floating cage culture of *Oreochromis nilotica* likely threatening the endemic species and causing pollution from excess feed.

It is not only the biological and evolutionary importance of Taal Lake that is shrouded in secrecy by reason of lack of study and discussion. It is also its mysterious geologic, archeological and social history. During the 10th century, it

was allegedly connected to the sea at Balayan Bay by a wide channel, but an extremely powerful eruption of the Taal Volcano in 1754 rearranged the shape of the lake and narrowed the outlet to form the present day Pansipit River, the lake's only outflow, which leaves the lake in its southwest corner and travels about 10 km to the sea.

Formerly called Bombon Lake, the name Taal was from the town that used to be on the coast of the lake until the channel connecting it to the sea closed. Six of the volcano's 24 known eruptions since 1572 have caused fatalities, many from tsunamis in the lake. At least four ancient towns lie submerged and mostly unexplored in the lake. Its major 1965 eruption that killed at least 150 people and was followed by frequent explosive activity until 1970. Minor phreatic activity resumed in 1976 and again in late 1977. This volcanic activity almost certainly affected the evolutionary patterns of the endemic species on the lake.

The only entity that has undertaken management planning in TVPL was the Presidential Commission on Tagaytay-Taal created in 1993 but abolished in 2000. By virtue of a Presidential Proclamation, the lake basin was designated as a protected landscape under the National Integrated Protected Areas Act. The Protected Area Management Board was set up in the late 90's overlapping with the functions of the Commission. In 2000, the Commission was abolished but the PAMB has not been able to fully take over its functions and fully implement the management plan created. By then, active fishing gear has become rampant and fishcages have proliferated even in the declared sanctuary. The resulting spate of executive action in the 90's creating three management authorities merely confused rather than integrated the responses to the issues.

The confusion in legal mandates include the creation of (1) a Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) under the protected areas law, (2) an Integrated Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Board under the Fisheries Code (IFARMC), and (3) a Lakewide Development Council created by the provincial government. 9 towns and 2 cities also share the governance of the lake which rely strongly on the Local Government Code and to assert their authority over their areas in the lake. Currently, the Protected Area Management Board has 25 appointed members while the law specifies a membership of 200 considering the area covered. A conservation project is underway to convene the members as required by law and to find common ground for lake management and conservation.

Taal Lake is the Philippines' deepest lake and third largest, yet very few initiatives have been undertaken for its conservation. Major threats to the lake include over-exploitation of fishery resources, development for tourism, and solid waste and agricultural runoff. A lakewide community-based organization of small fisherfolk called the Kilusan ng Maliliit na Mangingisda sa Lawa ng Taal (KMMLT)

has been active in conservation issues for the past two decades. management mandates in several levels has resulted in a confused management regime. A Presidential Commission for managing the lake had only a three year lifespan. As a protected area, a management board (PAMB) was created but had 25 instead of the 200 members as required by law. A recent conservation project aims to convene the full 200 members as a means to increase constituency, increase capacity and affirm the legal mandate of the PAMB.