

Forest Ecosystem Restoration Initiative (FERI) in the Philippines

Scaling Ecosystem-Based Restoration for Biodiversity Recovery, Livelihood Security, and Climate Resilience

BACKGROUND

The Philippines faces persistent forest degradation and loss of ecosystem services despite decades of reforestation and greening efforts. Forest cover loss and fragmented landscapes continue to undermine biodiversity, water regulation, and disaster resilience across island watersheds. In a country highly exposed to typhoons, flooding, droughts, and landslides, degraded forest ecosystems directly translate into heightened climate and socio-economic vulnerability.

Reforestation remains an important but ongoing national priority, shaped by environmental pressures, rural poverty, competing land uses, and institutional constraints. Past initiatives often achieved planting targets but struggled to secure long-term ecological recovery. Weak post-planting maintenance, limited community ownership, inappropriate species selection, and insufficient monitoring systems have contributed to uneven restoration outcomes. In several instances, numerical targets were met while ecosystem functionality and survival rates remained uncertain.

National efforts such as the National Greening Program (NGP), led by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), demonstrate sustained political commitment to forest recovery. At the international level, the Forest Ecosystem Restoration Initiative (FERI) and broader Forest & Landscape Restoration (FLR) frameworks offer technical and policy guidance to strengthen restoration quality through assisted natural regeneration, native species prioritization, community-based management, and landscape-scale planning.

FERI represents a shift from area-based planting toward ecosystem-based recovery. By emphasizing biodiversity, resilience, governance integrity, and long-term ecosystem functionality, it provides an opportunity for the Philippines to recalibrate restoration strategies beyond tree-count metrics.

Key Messages

1. Restoration success must be measured by ecosystem functionality and resilience, not only by planting targets.
2. Assisted Natural Regeneration (ANR) provides a cost-effective and biodiversity-rich pathway for national-scale restoration.
3. Governance reform, secure tenure, and transparent financing systems are central to sustainable outcomes.
4. Aligning national restoration efforts with the Forest Ecosystem Restoration Initiative (FERI) strengthens ecological integrity and climate resilience in the Philippines.

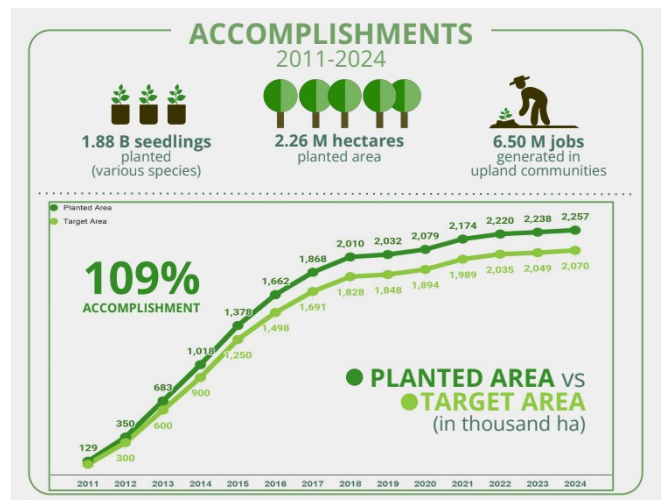


Figure 1: Data of Philippine National Greening Program 2011-2024
Source: Philippine forest at a glance 2025 edition

These systemic constraints underscore the importance of institutionalizing ecosystem-based principles under FERI. To translate these principles into effective national implementation, structural weaknesses identified in past restoration efforts must be systematically addressed.

Country Trend Highlight

Reorient Restoration from Planting Targets to Ecosystem Functionality

One of the central challenges in past reforestation efforts has been the prioritization of hectares planted rather than ecosystems restored. While large-scale planting demonstrates political commitment, it does not automatically restore ecological processes, watershed stability, or biodiversity.

A FERI-aligned approach requires redefining restoration success through:

- Native species diversity and ecological suitability
- Multi-layered forest structure and natural succession
- Long-term survival and adaptive monitoring
- Watershed stabilization and soil protection functions

By shifting performance metrics from output-based targets to ecosystem-based indicators, the Philippines can directly address the survival gaps, resilience weaknesses, and functionality limitations observed in earlier programs.

Institutionalize Assisted Natural Regeneration (ANR) as a Core National Strategy

Background analysis highlights inappropriate species selection, high establishment costs, and weak maintenance as recurring constraints. Assisted Natural Regeneration (ANR) addresses these systemic limitations by leveraging existing ecological potential rather than relying exclusively on plantation establishment.

ANR strengthens restoration performance by:

- Protecting naturally regenerating seedlings
- Managing fire and grazing pressures
- Suppressing competitive grasses such as Imperata
- Encouraging sustained community stewardship

Compared to monoculture plantations, ANR is more cost-effective, more resilient to climate variability, and more supportive of biodiversity recovery. Institutionalizing ANR under a FERI framework directly responds to both ecological inefficiencies and financial sustainability concerns identified in past reforestation models.



Restored forest landscapes



Figure 2: Illustrating how ANR intervenes reforestation.

Source: Generating AI

Single tree reforestation photo: dreamstime-free stock photo.

Restored forest landscape: ASEAN Center for Biodiversity

Strengthen Governance, Tenure Security, and Community-Based Management

Institutional weaknesses and limited local ownership have constrained restoration durability. Ecosystem recovery cannot be sustained where tenure is insecure or incentives for long-term stewardship are weak.

Strengthening governance requires:

- Reinforcing Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM)
- Ensuring Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)
- Integrating restoration into local land-use planning
- Establishing transparent and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms

Secure tenure aligns ecological objectives with livelihood security, reduces land-use conflicts, and strengthens accountability. Governance reform therefore becomes a structural pillar of ecosystem resilience.

Transition to Outcome-Based Monitoring and Financing Systems

Input-driven financing mechanisms have often prioritized compliance with planting quotas rather than ecological performance. To overcome monitoring and accountability gaps, restoration financing must be linked to verifiable ecological and governance outcomes.

Key indicators should include:

- Survival rates and canopy closure at 3–5 years

- Biodiversity and structural diversity metrics
- Watershed and soil stabilization outcomes
- Extent of restoration areas under secure tenure
- Verified ecosystem service improvements

Outcome-based systems improve transparency, reduce corruption risks, and ensure that restoration investments produce measurable long-term benefits. This transition is essential to move from commitment-driven restoration toward performance-based implementation.

The table below presents a conceptual shift from a conventional, input-driven reforestation model toward a more strategic and outcome-oriented approach based on Assisted Natural Regeneration (ANR). Traditional restoration efforts have often prioritized quantitative planting targets, monoculture species selection, and short-term project financing. While these approaches can generate visible outputs, they frequently result in low survival rates, limited ecological resilience, and insufficient long-term impact.

In contrast, the ANR-based approach places greater emphasis on natural regeneration processes, protection of native species, community-based stewardship, and adaptive ecosystem management. By focusing on ecological integrity rather than tree-count metrics alone, this strategy seeks to enhance biodiversity recovery, strengthen climate resilience, improve watershed stability, and support sustainable rural livelihoods. Ultimately, the shift reflects a broader policy transformation from measuring success through inputs and immediate outputs to evaluating restoration through long-term ecological and socioeconomic outcomes.

Conventional Model (Input-Driven)	Strategic Shift (ANR-Based Approach)	Long-Term Ecological & Socioeconomic Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on tree-count targets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize natural regeneration processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biodiversity recovery and structural diversity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monoculture plantation species 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protection of native seedlings and succession. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate-adaptive and resilient forest systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term project financing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based stewardship and tenure security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable watershed regulation and soil protection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low survival and ecological resilience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced planting intensity, ecosystem management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable rural livelihoods and reduced disaster risk

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Achieving large-scale and sustainable forest restoration requires more than ambitious targets it demands strong institutions, accountable governance, and socially inclusive implementation. While significant progress has been made in advancing restoration commitments, several structural constraints continue to affect long-term effectiveness and ecological integrity.

The table below outlines the key challenges related to institutional capacity, financing structures, social safeguards, and monitoring systems, alongside strategic opportunities to strengthen governance and improve outcomes. By transitioning toward outcome-based financing, institutionalizing robust social safeguards, and enhancing multi-stakeholder coordination, restoration efforts can move beyond short-term planting outputs toward measurable ecological resilience and equitable benefits for communities.

Challenges	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited institutional capacity and governance risks within DENR and LGUs, including reliance on input-based restoration approaches. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen institutional capacity through nationwide ANR-focused training and transition toward transparent, outcome-based governance systems.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financing mechanisms prioritize short-term planting targets over long-term ecological integrity and resilience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shift to outcome-based financing linked to verified ecological performance and independent monitoring.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weak social safeguards, including gaps in FPIC implementation, tenure security, and equitable benefit-sharing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institutionalize strong social safeguards through integrated Free, Prior and Informed Consent processes, secure tenure arrangements, and community-based benefit-sharing mechanisms.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring and coordination systems remain fragmented and output-focused. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish ecological and governance-based performance indicators and create a high-level, multi-stakeholder restoration coordination mechanism.

CONCLUSION

The Philippines has demonstrated strong political commitment to forest recovery. The next phase requires strengthening ecological integrity, governance transparency, and resilience-based accountability systems.

By aligning national restoration programs with the Forest Ecosystem Restoration Initiative (FERI), the Philippines can restore degraded landscapes sustainably, reduce disaster risk, and strengthen rural livelihoods positioning itself as a regional leader in ecosystem-based forest restoration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

AFoCO extends its sincere appreciation to Nolie Molina AFoCO Fellowship Official from Philippine in 2025 and Teis Nuraini AFoCO Fellowship Official from Indonesia in 2026 for their valuable contribution and close collaboration in the preparation of the Country Forestry Trend of the Philippines. AFoCO highly values their endeavor works to strengthening knowledge sharing and regional cooperation within AFoCO



Asian Forest Cooperation Organization

AFoCO is a treaty-based intergovernmental organization that is committed to strengthening forest cooperation and taking concrete actions to promote sustainable forest management and address the impacts of climate change.

www.afocosec.org

Country Forestry Trend (CFT) is an AFoCO briefing series prepared by Fellowship Officials, who serve at the Secretariat for six months to one year under the Fellowship Program. Drawing on official government and public sources, CFT synthesizes each Party's latest developments in forest resources, governance, management practices, and environmental impacts. By translating national updates into a shared institutional knowledge base, CFT strengthens day-to-day coordination between the Secretariat and the Parties, supports effective communication toward AFoCO's goals, and reinforces sustainable partnerships grounded in mutual understanding and respect for diverse cultures.