Reconnecting Urban Communities with Nature: Advancing Cultural Ecosystem Services Through Forest Healing and Experiential Learning in the Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Center in Quezon City, Philippines

BACKGROUND

Rapid urbanization in the Philippines has increasingly distanced people from nature as urban green spaces become fragmented, degraded, or converted for other uses. This growing disconnect limits important opportunities. People have fewer chances to enjoy recreation and learning outdoors. It also reduces mental restoration and meaningful time in nature. As a result, urban forests provide fewer Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES) to communities.

The Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Center (NAPWC), one of the few remaining green spaces in Metro Manila, offers a unique opportunity to reconnect urban residents with nature while supporting biodiversity conservation. However, the park has yet to fully realize its potential as a hub for nature-based recreation, environmental education, and wellness. Limited valuation of CES, insufficient institutional experience in forest healing programs, and inadequate long-term financing mechanisms have constrained the development of initiatives that strengthen the relationship between people and nature.

To address these challenges, the AFoCO/029/2022 project, was developed. The project entitled "*Ensuring Functioning of Cultural Ecosystem Services in Urban Setting: Assimilating Nature for Forest Healing and Experiential Learning in Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Center*," seeks to enhance the delivery and recognition of cultural ecosystem services by establishing forest healing and experiential learning programs, strengthening stakeholder capacity, and generating evidence on the social, cultural, and economic values of urban forests.

By transforming NAPWC into a center for nature-based learning, wellness, and community engagement, the project promotes stronger connections between people and nature while supporting biodiversity conservation. It also provides a model for integrating CES into urban forest management, contributing to healthier, more resilient, and people-centered cities.

Key Messages

1. **Advancing Cultural Ecosystem Services through Evidence-Based Valuation:** The project demonstrates the economic, social, and health values of urban forests through a comprehensive ecosystem services valuation study. The findings provide a strong evidence base for policy development and support the establishment of a sustainable Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) mechanism.
2. **Promoting Forest Healing as an Urban Nature-Based Solution:** By introducing guided forest bathing and developing dedicated forest healing facilities, the project showcases how urban forests can improve mental well-being, public health, and human–nature connections while supporting biodiversity conservation.
3. **Building Capacity and Establishing a Replicable Urban Forestry Model**: Through stakeholder training, institutional capacity development, improved park infrastructure, and multi-stakeholder collaboration, the project establishes a scalable model for integrating cultural ecosystem services into urban forest management across the Asia Region.

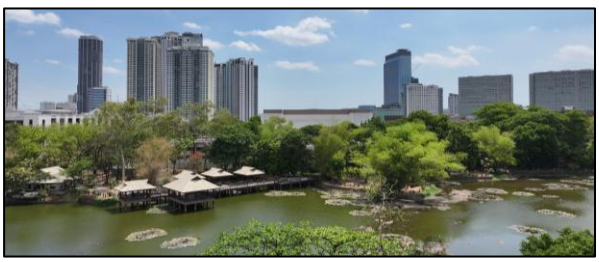

Figure 1. The NAPWC being at the center of urban communities. Source: DENR Biodiversity Management Bureau. 2026

IMPACTS

Strengthened Conservation Financing and Policy Frameworks

The completion of GRIDS (https://www.grids.ph/) ecosystem services valuation study (September–December 2025) generated critical baseline data to support evidence-based restructuring of park user fees.

This landmark achievement establishes the foundation for a PES mechanism, creating opportunities for sustainable and long-term financing of conservation and park management initiatives.

Enhanced Green Infrastructure for Wellness and Environmental Education

The project exceeded its restoration target by achieving 140% of the planned planting goal, introducing 140 threatened native tree species into the arboretum for ex-situ conservation. To further enrich visitor experiences and environmental awareness, 90 customized educational signages were strategically installed throughout key park areas, transforming the park into a more engaging learning environment.

Established Innovative Nature-Based Health and Wellness Facilities

Construction of dedicated forest healing infrastructure, marking a significant step toward integrating nature-based health interventions into urban park management. Key facilities include a Sensory Garden with a reflexology pathway, an inclusive Outdoor Fitness Facility, and a Forest Bathing Peninsula loop trail designed to promote mental well-being, physical activity, and deeper connections with nature.

Figure 2. The Project Team during one of their capacity building activities for the project.
Source: DENR Biodiversity Management Bureau. 2026

Figure 3. The Project Team during their benchmarking and learning visit in the Republic of Korea
Source: DENR Biodiversity Management Bureau. 2025

Strengthened Institutional Capacity and Knowledge Systems

Through collaboration with Nature Therapy PH, the project delivered a series of specialized training programs that enhanced the capacities of DENR personnel, park managers, and community-based operators in forest healing and cultural ecosystem services management. Complementing these efforts, a study visit to South Korea enabled key stakeholders to gain firsthand insights into internationally recognized forest healing models and best practices.

Promoted Inclusive Governance and Community Participation

Building on lessons from cross-regional consultations with established PES initiatives in Mindanao, the project successfully trained and accredited 19 local community members as Partner Forest Bathing Operators (PFBOs). This innovative governance model strengthens community stewardship while creating livelihood opportunities linked to urban biodiversity conservation and nature-based tourism.

Expanded Public Awareness and Technical Operations

Equipped with advanced field documentation and monitoring tools including GPS units, a DJI Mavic 3 Pro Cine drone, and dedicated information management system, the project enhanced its operational efficiency and knowledge dissemination efforts. These investments supported the production of four technical articles and a comprehensive multimedia advocacy campaign, significantly increasing public awareness and recognition of cultural ecosystem services and their role in sustainable urban development.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Scaling Forest Healing and Cultural Ecosystem Services Across Protected Areas

The forest healing infrastructure, operational guidelines, training modules, and management approaches developed at NAPWC provide a proven and replicable model for other urban parks and protected areas in the Philippines. Scaling this initiative can establish a nationwide network of wellness-oriented urban forests that promote biodiversity conservation, public health, and community well-being.

Institutionalizing Sustainable Conservation Financing through PES

The completion of the ecosystem services valuation study creates a strong foundation for operationalizing a PES mechanism at NAPWC. As one of the pioneering applications of PES in an urban protected area, the initiative can demonstrate how ecosystem services can be translated into sustainable revenue streams, providing a model for long-term conservation financing across the country's protected area system.

Expanding Green Jobs and Nature-Based Enterprises

The project opens opportunities to develop sustainable livelihood programs linked to forest healing, guided nature experiences, environmental education, and ecotourism services. By engaging and accrediting local community members as service providers, the park can foster inclusive green economic growth while strengthening local stewardship of natural resources.

Figure 4. The bridge going to the forest bathing facilities (Upper) and the arboretum (Lower) being constructed for the project.
Source: DENR Biodiversity Management Bureau. 2026

Figure 5. Some of the facilities at the NAPWC being offered to the visitors to have more engagement with nature at the center of urban areas.
Source: DENR Biodiversity Management Bureau. 2026

Advancing Research, Innovation, and Evidence-Based Policy Development

NAPWC is uniquely positioned to serve as a living laboratory for studying the social, psychological, and ecological benefits of forest healing and cultural ecosystem services in tropical urban environments.

Continued research and monitoring can generate valuable evidence to inform urban forestry policies, public health programs, and nature-based solutions at local, national, and regional levels.

Strengthening Environmental Education and Public Engagement

The newly established experiential learning facilities provide an ideal platform for partnerships with schools, universities, civil society organizations, and local governments.

By promoting hands-on learning and nature immersion activities, the park can inspire greater environmental awareness, foster conservation values among urban residents, and nurture a new generation of environmental stewards.

Positioning NAPWC as a Regional Demonstration and Learning Hub

Building on its pioneering achievements, NAPWC can evolve into a center of excellence for cultural ecosystem services, forest healing, and urban biodiversity conservation. The park can facilitate knowledge exchange, capacity building, and South-South cooperation among cities and protected area managers across Asia, contributing to the wider adoption of innovative nature-based solutions.

THE WAY FORWARD

To advance forest ecosystem services, countries should finalize and operationalize ecosystem valuation and PES systems, accelerate the development of forest healing facilities, and establish national standards for forest healing programs.

Strengthening capacity-building, promoting knowledge sharing, integrating cultural ecosystem services into policy and planning, and expanding partnerships among governments, communities, academia, and the private sector will be essential to ensure effective implementation, sustainable financing, and long-term impact.

The immediate priority is completing the extended ecosystem valuation study consultation to lock in final field-validation data. These results will be instantly translated into concrete park-fee structures to operationalize the new payment mechanism.

Project management must strictly monitor the contractor to ensure that all sensory, fitness, and loop-trail infrastructures are fully completed before the project's formal close in September 2026.

The project team was convened a dedicated Technical Working Group in coordination with the BMB National Parks Division. This body will finalize the official *Manual for Forest Bathing Operations* and set standardized public pricing structures.

The team will systematically compile all training modules, technical articles, and multimedia assets into a centralized public repository. This ensures that the specialized technical knowledge generated during the pilot is preserved and easily accessible for future projects.

The final project outcomes will be packaged into policy briefs and presented to national urban planners and lawmakers. This strategic push aims to formally embed cultural ecosystem services into national city planning and climate resilience frameworks.

Management will officially evaluate potential community operators using national Management Effectiveness Assessment metrics to ensure strict operational compliance. Finalizing these operating agreements secures long-term, community-led maintenance of the wellness spaces.

Figure 6. The Project Team with the ODA Project team of AFoCO Secretariat during the Monitoring Visit in May 2026. Source: DENR Biodiversity Management Bureau. 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

AFoCO sincerely acknowledges the Philippines' national project directors, country project directors, project managers and key stakeholders for their hard works and contributions in implementing the project. Here we examine the project's impacts in the strengthening the connection between people and nature, promoting cultural ecosystem services, and advancing sustainable urban forest management in the Philippines. (AFoCO/029/2022).

https://afocosec.org/project/029/