

Mongabay Series: Saving Life on Earth: Words on the Wild

The ambitious plan to recover and rewild the feisty, dwarf cow

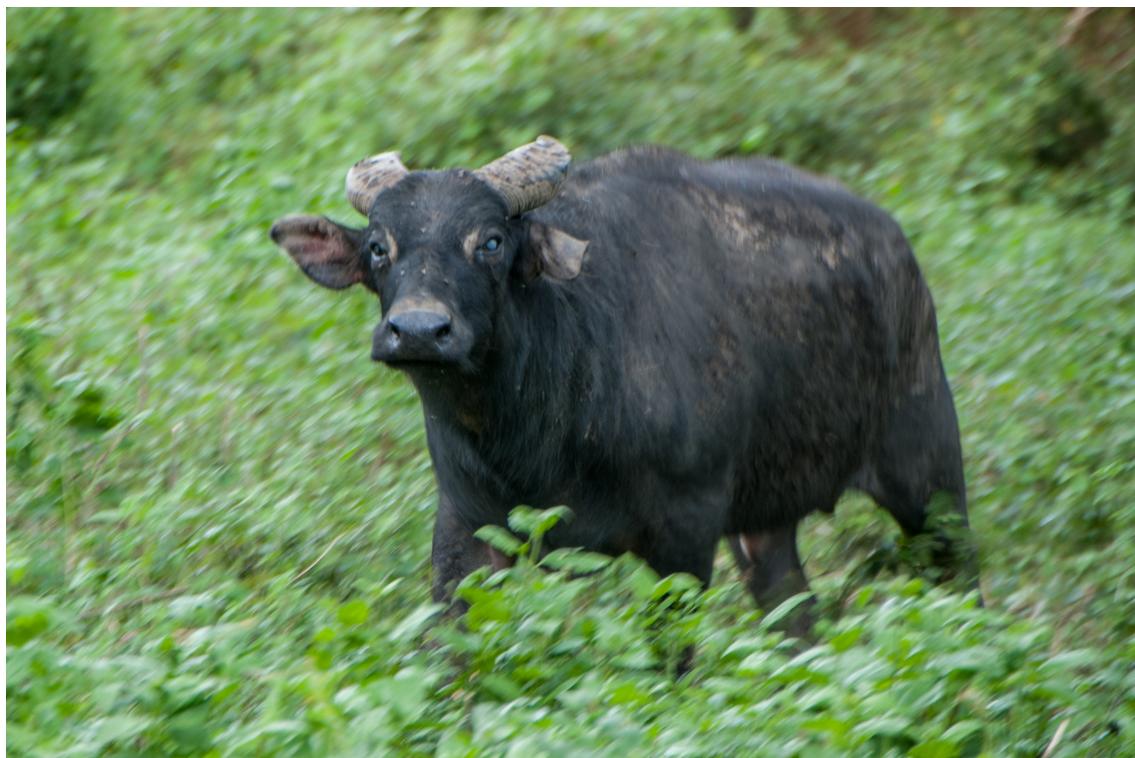
by Jeremy Hance on 19 July 2019

- *Although critically endangered, the population of tamaraw has stabilized and grown over the last two decades.*
- *Conservationists along with indigenous people are now planning on using the core population to rebuild and rewild other populations across the island of Mindoro.*
- *Conservationists say none of this would be possible without the active support of Mindoro's indigenous tribal groups, who are leading efforts to restore the tamaraw.*

Don't let appearances fool you. The animal pictured above — the dwarf cattle known as tamaraw (*Bubalus mindorensis*) from the island of Mindoro in the Philippines — may look cute; it may even look like an animal you'd like to touch, pet, or feed by hand at a petting zoo. But this little cow will mess you up.

"The local communities and guides ... don't want to get anywhere near it," says Barney Long, senior director of species conservation at Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC), which works with the local group the D'Aboville Foundation on tamaraw conservation. "Everyone says it's dangerous and it will attack you if you get too close. When you think of a water buffalo in Asia — which has had 3,000 years of genetic and breeding to make sure it's as docile as possible — it's the opposite of that."

When visiting tamaraw areas, Long says, locals will avoid both forests and long grass areas, and instead stick to the short grass "because you can see far enough ahead in front of you."



A tamaraw in Iglit Baco National Park. The park is stronghold for this critically endangered species with a population that ranges from 400-500 animals currently.
Photo by: Barney Long.

"The tamaraw aren't out to attack anyone, but they certainly will defend themselves if need be," says James Slade, the wildlife crime prevention officer for GWC, who's gone on numerous patrols with local rangers. Conservationists, local people and indigenous groups have recently agreed to a plan as bold as the tamaraw itself: to rebuild the critically endangered species' core population while also prepping for rewilding parts of the island.

The hope is that one day the tamaraw will again roam the mountains of Mindoro from coast to coast, keeping everyone out of the long grass.

Comeback cattle

June Pineda-David is the project coordinator of the Tamaraw Conservation Program (TCP), a special project under the Philippine government's Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). As such, she's actively involved in all things tamaraw: from getting information to local schools, to making sure rangers have necessary equipment, to working with indigenous communities inside the park. She says first seeing wild tamaraw in 1995 was a "truly life-changing" experience.

"The tamaraw is our treasure, pride and heritage," she says of its wider value to her home country.



A statue of the tamaraw on its home island of Mindoro. The species has become a point of pride for the Philippines. Photo by: Barney Long.

The tamaraw is not the world's smallest wild cattle species; that honor belongs to the mountain anoa (*Bubalus quarlesi*) of Sulawesi, an Indonesian island. But Long describes the tamaraw as about "half the size" of a water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*), known locally as carabao. It weighs around 180 to 300 kilograms (400 to 660 pounds) and stands

around 100 centimeters (40 inches) at shoulder height. It has attractive V-shaped horns that slope upward from its head and, like many dwarf species, short limbs and a stocky body.

Despite being considered a dwarf species, the tamaraw is still the largest wild land animal in the Philippines.

In 2000, the IUCN estimated a population of somewhere between 30 and 200 of the animals. Not only was the tamaraw believed to be on the edge of extinction, but conservationists really had only a vague idea how many remained. Today, the global population stands at nearly 500 animals at three confirmed locations, the bulk of them at Mounts Iglit-Baco National Park.

What conservationists have managed to do in the last 20 years is secure, and even grow, a core population in the park. This population, while by no means unthreatened, presents today a security against total extinction — and an opportunity to grow the population beyond.

The park today is actively monitored; conservationists are working closely with the indigenous tribe there to co-protect the tamaraw, and rangers patrol regularly.

"[Rangers] record anything they find and report it back to the headquarters where they can plan an operation together with other national authorities as needed. They provide a much needed and consistent presence within the protected," says Slade.



A ranger on patrol in Iglit Baco. Rangers have been instrumental in decreasing threats to this species, working with tribal groups, and educating the public. Photo by: Barney Long.

At the same time the tamaraw has become quite a celebrity in the Philippines, even though it's only found in Mindoro. It's currently being considered for formal recognition as the Philippines' national animal (that title is held, unofficially, by the carabao, even though the animal is not native). It has a popular pickup truck model named after it and its notoriously independent reputation. And the Philippine government isn't just actively involved, but enthusiastically so.

This means the tamaraw is now in the enviable position of having the best chance of long-term survival of the three wild cattle species deemed critically endangered, according to James Burton, chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Asian Wild Cattle Specialist Group.

The two other species are the kouprey (*Bos sauveli*), native to the Southeast Asian mainland and considered possibly extinct, not having been seen in more than 30 years; and the saola (*Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*), the most recently discovered large land mammal on Earth, found only in Vietnam and Laos, and among the most threatened.

The tamaraw, though, is not out of the long grass yet. It remains threatened by poaching, both by wealthier Filipinos and indigenous tribes, and can fall into traps set for wild pigs.

It's also imperiled by loss of habitat, the arrival of invasive plant species that could wipe out its habitat, and, most worrying of all, by the potential of disease, especially since the bulk of its population is concentrated in one location. Rinderpest, which could be transmitted by domestic cattle, is of particular concern.

"What we need to do is make sure there's biosecurity between those cattle farms and wild tamaraw which, in their current locations, is not necessarily a risk, but the cattle ranchers are getting closer and closer," says Long.

A plan to build on success

Last December, with tamaraw numbers generally stable in Mounts Iglot-Baco National Park, stakeholders got together to discuss the future of this feisty dwarf.

Long says a meeting 20 years ago came up with a detailed plan of how to recover the tamaraw from the jaws of what then looked like imminent extinction.

"And what needed to be done was done in Iglot-Baco National Park and they went from 200 animals up to 400 or 500," he says. "[But] nothing was done in any of the other sites, and they've all either disappeared or decreased rapidly. What that tells me is we know what to do and we've demonstrated that it can be a success."



Rangers patrolling in the mind-blowing Mount Iglit Baco National Park. Photo by: Emmanuel Schutz / Daboville Foundation.

The key now is to take the success in Iglot-Baco and translate it to other current and potential tamaraw sites.

The December meeting ended with an ambitious 30-year plan to support and rewild populations outside of Iglot-Baco, creating a potentially large and wide-ranging population.

The first goal is to increase the Iglot-Baco population to a stable size of 500-plus animals. At that point, Long says, conservationists believe they can start taking animals out of this core population and moving them to low-population sites such as the Auryan Malati, with only about a dozen animals, and the Amnay River, which may house 65 to 100 animals, though this hasn't been verified.

Then the real fun begins: rewilding sites where the tamaraw is believed to be extinct.

"There's a potential to seed small populations," Long says, "and effectively try and get four or five subpopulations across the island in the next few decades."

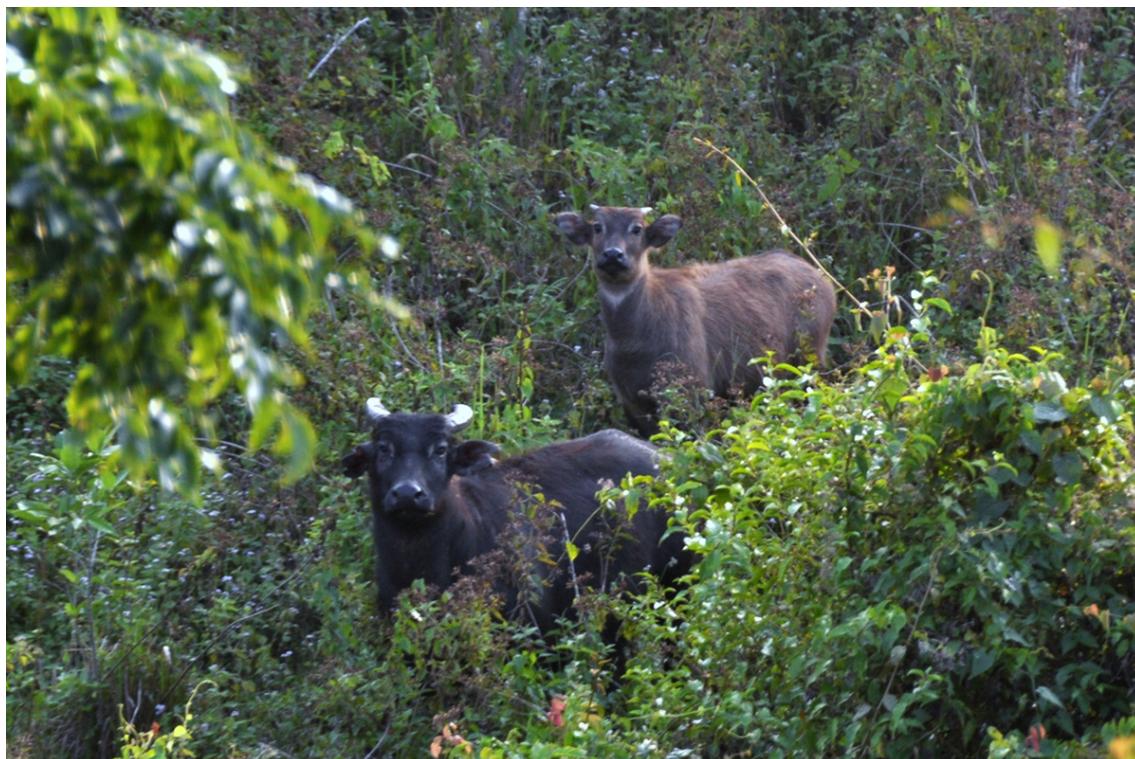
He says conservationists already have eyes on a couple additional sites.

Indigenous people are key

None of this would have happened without Mindoro's indigenous people.

"The indigenous peoples of Mindoro ... believe that they co-exist with the tamaraws since time immemorial," says Pineda-David. "Their elders have taught them that tamaraws are part of their culture and tradition, including the fact that it is part of their diet. They also believe that if the species is lost, it will be their end too."

The plan of rewilding, says Long, was really ignited by the island's indigenous people.



Female tamaraw and her calf in Mount Iglit-Baco Natural Park. Photo by Emmanuel Schutz / D'ABOVILLE Foundation.

"At this workshop, the [indigenous] leaders were standing up basically saying that the tamaraw are us, we are the tamaraw," he says.

When the conversation turned to the fact that tamaraw were disappearing from certain areas, Long says it was the tribal groups who took the lead. The Tawbuid tribe, who inhabit Iglot-Baco, expressed a desire to give the tamaraw back to tribes who had lost them.

"That's when this workshop turned from ... really getting momentum around how we could actually recover tamaraw across the whole island," Long says. "The Tawbuid could basically become the spiritual home of the tamaraw giving back to other ancestral groups across the island." In partnering with the Tawbuid and other groups, Long says that conservationists support the indigenous people's efforts to finally get ancestral domain, legal land rights, within Iglot-Baco.

"[The Tawbuid] actually don't like the park because it stops them getting ancestral domain. Really, those two things are not in competition," he says. "We've been working with the park to develop a new management

plan and actually get it."

Another issue is traditional hunting of tamaraw by the indigenous groups.



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A group of tamaraw caught on camera trap in the Arugan Malati region of Mindoro. The population here could range anywhere from . Photo by: WWF-Philippines and D'Abouville Foundation.

Long says this kind of hunting, likely practiced for thousands of years but illegal now, was probably sustainable historically when the cattle population was much larger.

"We want to be able to work with the indigenous peoples to somehow control their traditional hunts but not necessarily stop them, but certainly make sure they are sustainable," he says. "That's going to be a balance and a conversation as we go forward."

New surprise

In mid-June, the feisty cattle of Mindoro gave conservationists another surprise.

An expedition in Mount Calavite Wildlife Sanctuary, located at the far west end of the island, spotted a young male tamaraw. It was the first sighting (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1134525/tamaraw-seen-again-at-mindoro-park>) of an animal there in 27 years, and marks a fourth location that the species still calls home.

It means Mount Calavite Wildlife Sanctuary could be a future place not for rewilding, but simply rebuilding what is already there.

In an age of mass extinction and vast ecological decline, the tamaraw shows what can happen when people come together.

Pineda-David says "partnership and collaboration" have been vital in successfully fending off extinction and finding a way forward for the island's rising star, the feisty tamaraw.

Banner Image: Tamaraw caught on camera trap installed at the core habitat of Tamaraw in Mts. Iglit-Baco Natural Park. Photo by: WWF-Philippines and the Tamaraw Conservation Program.

Article published by Jeremy Hance