

Engaging students and local residents in park interpretation and education: experiences from the Makiling Botanic Gardens and Mount Makiling Forest Reserve, Philippines

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Park interpretation and botanic gardens education are among the services being offered by the Makiling Botanic Gardens (MBG) to its visiting public in accordance with its legal mandate “to support professional instruction and research related to forestry and plant sciences and to serve the educational, recreational, and tourism needs of the public”. MBG is located on the upper campus of the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) and occupies 200 hectares of the Mount Makiling Forest Reserve (MMFR). Since 2000, MBG has developed and implemented tree walks, tour guiding, biodiversity camps, arbor day events, seminars, and advocacy campaigns with its visitors, benefactors and partner organizations. Undergraduate students of UPLB enrolled in agriculture, biology, forestry, communication arts, and development communication degree programs have been serving as “Educators for Nature Tourism” or ENTs after undergoing rigorous capability building sessions. Meanwhile local residents have been capacitated and involved as “Ecoguides” for day-long or overnight visitors of the Mount Makiling Forest Reserve. They are also serving as Quick Response Volunteers when needed. Based on MBG’s experiences, the participation and engagement of university students as well as residents of its immediate ‘barangays’ or villages in MBG’s tour guiding and educational services has put a premium on its value as a center for biodiversity education, ecotourism, and livelihood generation. Sustainability planning is ongoing for MBG to become a more resilient and responsive botanic garden inside an ASEAN Heritage Park.