

Abstract

Meet Bobby Chan, better known as the infamous Chainsaw Man of Palawan Island, Philippines. This photo essay details the arc of how Chan, a Filipino lawyer and activist, has helped police the environmental and conservation laws of “The Last Frontier” as the leader of a civilian enforcement team, despite threats and deaths, for over twenty years. How have recent challenges (including the COVID pandemic) affected his team of eco-enforcers?

Keywords

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ENFORCING IN PARADISE WITH THE CHAINSAW MAN

WORDS AND MONOCHROME PHOTOGRAPHS BY **KARL R. DE MESA**

MEET ROBERT “BOBBY” CHAN. Round these parts though, he’s better known as The Chainsaw Man of Palawan.

Chan is a Filipino lawyer who leads the PNNI (Palawan NGO Network Inc.). On paper it’s just one of the many conservation and environmental protection organizations in “The Last Frontier,” the Philippine island of Palawan. Located southwest of Manila, protected forests and critically endangered wildlife abound there alongside famous white sand beaches and shimmering turquoise waters that have led many tourists to call it, sans hyperbole, paradise on Earth.

Among the local endangered fauna are the Calamian deer (*Hyelaphus calamianensis*), the Philippine forest turtle (*Siebenrockiella leytensis*), and the Philippine freshwater crocodile (*Crocodylus Mindorensis*)—one of these reptilian prodigies was Lolong, who graced headlines in 2011 for the plum of largest ever croc on record at 21 feet and 2,370 lbs when he was captured in Agusan del Sur.

But what differentiates PNNI from the other organizations who hold your garden-variety street protests and paper lobbying for protection of the turtles, crocs, and Bambi? Chan and his team exercise eco-enforcement. Which means exactly what it says. There's nothing extenuate about it. Enforcement means they go after wildlife poachers, illegal loggers, and environmental law violators by confiscating their equipment and transport, trying to keep the dark side in check and literally disarming those who abuse paradise.

So while the resorts and tourist attractions constantly win for Palawan a top five ranking in the World Travel Awards (the "Oscar of Travel Awards"), it is thanks to the efforts of PNNI, and other organizations like it, that the island remains the last stronghold of Philippine biodiversity.

With constant threats from big timber, the elusiveness of local poachers, and how local public officials are usually in on the take, plus the deaths of many of his eco-enforcers, it's far from an easy job. And Chan has been doing this since the 1990s.

Last time I saw Chan was in 2009, when I had previously written longreads for magazines detailing the hazards of operating an eco-protection unit in a corrupt land. That time, their confiscated chainsaws were already 300, along with poaching cages and transports, illegal fishing boat motors, dynamite and cyanide capsules, as well as bootleg rifles favored by illegal logging militia.

The chainsaws are the centerpiece of their collection though, and imbued Chan with his moniker. Rather than balk, Chan embraced the "Chainsaw Man" nickname and even made a tower out of the chainsaws, stacking them dangerously on top of one another in what he calls "the illegal logging Christmas tree" to spite his enemies and in brazen display of fearlessness.

That same year, he had taken me to the local wildlife rescue center and asked the head veterinarian to bring out a male bearcat, one of the exotic animals they had saved from a poacher who had snatched the mammal in a protected wildlife area and eventually sold for the exotic pet trade. Known locally as *binturong*, the bearcat feeds on fruit, small animals, and the occasional carrion. It's damn cute and looks like a cross between an anteater and a pudgy, black-furred puppy that has grown claws. Plus, it's surprisingly agile for its chubby bulk even as it obviously likes to cuddle with people. "These bearcats are affectionate," said the head vet as the animal climbed his leg and torso, nuzzling at his neck. Two other bearcats, a few mynah birds, parrots, leopard cats, and even an eagle were part of this same batch that the poachers had in their possession when they were busted by the PNNI.

The publications I wrote Chan up for have since folded, one of them due to the financial ravages of COVID-19, but the team is still very much alive, continuing their work unabated despite unreliable funding as well as the usual hazards.

In 2020, PNNI's chainsaw collection stands at 700, plus some odd change. When I tracked Chan down again, they'd moved offices in Puerto Princesa, on to private land that he owned. The threats to Chan's life have since escalated so much that he very rarely leaves their new compound and almost never goes on enforcement operations any more.

In February 2020, I sat down again with The Chainsaw Man, shot photographs, and took a tour of the new compound to find out what had changed or what had remained the same as the shadow of a COVID-19 lockdown loomed just a few weeks hence.

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MEET THE CHAINSAW MAN



It was back in the early 1990s when Bobby Chan first came to Palawan, still doing human rights work with the Ateneo De Manila University as a legal volunteer. PNNI was founded in 2001 with Chan as executive director and now, decades later, he is both feared and respected. His reputation is measurable in the way that it precedes him.

This also means he has made plenty of enemies. Back in the late 1990s, a death threat was painted on the hood of his car: “Papatayin Kita” (I Will Kill You). But death threats for activists are like breakfast cereal; it’s almost a matter of routine for Chan to lie low when these messages rain down before getting back on the horse again.

Last January 12, 2021, the Palawan Provincial Board (PPB) adopted a resolution declaring Robert Chan as “persona non-grata” in the province. The board members who proposed it themselves admitted that the resolution was in response to Chan’s years of critical statements about the problems of illegal logging and fishing in the province. Chan thinks the timing is suspicious at the least since the resolution comes when a plebiscite to divide Palawan into three separate administrative provinces was in the offing, PNNI is in the staunchly NO camp. And Chan’s vocal, loudmouth activism was a hindrance to their campaign.

Writing this, Chan is still persona non-grata at the province, unable to return from Manila.

THE STACKED CHAINSAW TOWER



The centerpiece of the confiscated equipment is the Chainsaw Christmas Tree. Despite the pandemic, illegal logging has continued unabated in the province, with loggers caught by the team in the midst of hacking down old growth in Narra municipality last November 19, 2020. According to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), one of these machines can drop around twenty trees in a day.

A PHOTO RECORD OF PARA-ENFORCEMENT



According to watchdog group Global Witness, the Philippines is among the world's most dangerous places to be an environmental activist. Since PNNI began conducting enforcement in 2001, thirteen para-enforcers have been killed. Most killings do not happen during operations, instead activists are targeted as they go about their daily lives. Chan believes all the killings are premeditated, including and specially the murder of “Kapitan” Ruben Arzaga, one of PNNI's rangers who died after he was shot in the head by illegal loggers in 2017. A barangay captain in the idyllic tourist town of El Nido, Arzaga regularly received death threats, but he was compelled by a mission of legacy—he wanted his daughter and his daughter's children to still come of age under the shade of the old growth forests. But the father of five never lived to see his youngest grow up and he became one of the land defenders to fall, as he tried to approach illegal loggers one day. The wailing and the rage of his children rose and receded like waves at his wake, still inconsolable as they walked at his funeral cortege.

For a time, because of his grief and his feeling of responsibility over all the deaths, including Arzaga's, Chan seriously thought of closing down the program and disbanding the enforcement unit. “Every time we lose someone, we get weaker,” he said in tears after Arzaga's funeral. Two brothers from El Nido's local community have since been charged with murder over his killing.

FENCING THE NEW OFFICE



In October 2019 PNNI moved to a new location, hauling the chainsaws and other confiscated equipment with them and making use of them to fence the land with concertina wire. “This is my land,” said Chan. “We couldn’t afford the old office anymore since rent was raised to PhP 20,000 a month. And then we ran out of funders. I had to kick them out because the funding agencies were more concerned with the narrative reports and tremendously rigid financial liquidation requirements.”

To operate and administer citizen’s arrests, the team utilize the terms under the DENR Administrative Order No. 97-32 (issued October 10, 1997). The lengthy document lists as a subhead “Rules for the Administrative Adjudication of Illegal Forest Products and the Machinery, Equipment, Tools and Conveyances Used in Connection Thereof.” Under all the obscurantist jargon and legalese, there is a clause there that provides for arrests and seizures that details forests officers and their deputies among those empowered and, at the end, it also says like an afterthought: “Private citizens as provided by law.” Since they’re undeputized, the PNNI team has used this last sentence in the provision to its utmost down the decades, with great results.

700 AND COUNTING



Chan and his team have approximately 700-plus chainsaws in their custody, gathered over a span of decades. Palawan still holds most of the Philippines old growth, the last great trees, the kind you can see on film that seem like they reach to the sky and blot out all sunlight. There are laws that demand they be protected, but the reality is that they are being cut down at an alarming rate. For PNNI's ragtag team of environmental crusaders, Palawan is a battlefield and their targets are illegal loggers.

In PNNI's collection of confiscated items is a catalog of men's tools for crimes against nature: on the wall are machetes specifically designed to hack off obstinate roots, crude axes, and even homemade shotguns—the favored weapon of logger sentries. The chainsaws and cutting tools are the main attraction though. Labeled by marker pen with the date, owner, and area of confiscation, most of the chainsaw are brands of Stihl with a 070-grade petroleum-powered motor. This model is often used for agriculture, horticulture, and trimming tall wooden fences. Each chainsaw motor has a bright orange top and sides and, at the end where the motor and the running blade meet, are five big blades for thwarting stray wood chips away from the operator. Off the current market, exported from China, they can cost between USD 350 all the way to USD 600.

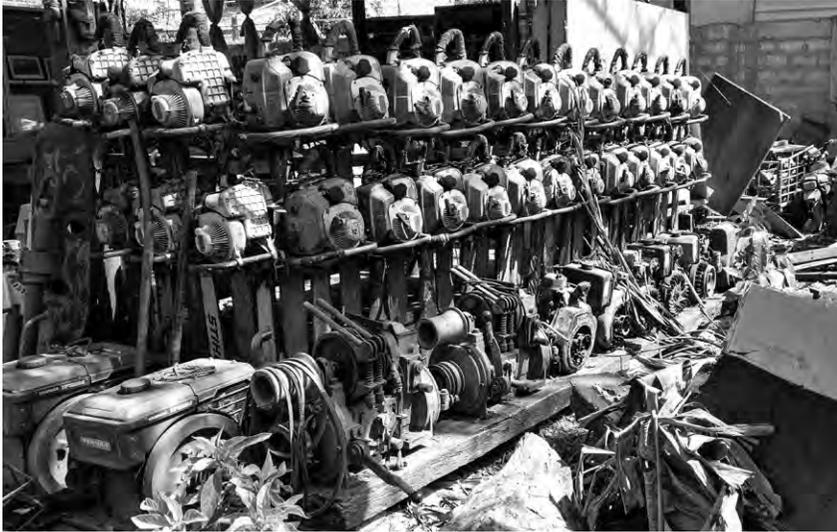
A YEAR-ROUND AFFAIR



Wildlife poaching arrests usually take place from May to November because of the seasonal mating of the animals, but illegal logging is a year-round affair. And this is despite the pandemic. In March 21, 2021, the para-enforcers were a bit too late to save a century-old tree but the chainsaw that felled it was confiscated and now under the custody of PNNI.

When the enforcement team executes a confiscation and arrest, they split into two or three squads to surround the loggers. They sneak up and get the jump on them before they even know what's happening. The para-enforcers ask for permits, machine registration, and documentation as a matter of due diligence but the criminals, caught in flagrante, usually do not protest and surrender willingly. The team then measure and take photos of the cut tree while another member recites the violation and seizure receipt aloud and then reads the criminal his Miranda Rights. They take the chainsaw and the petroleum. It's usually all over in under 10 minutes.

“NOW WE HAVE TO STOP THE SALE”



“We have more dead and we have more chainsaws. Progress? I think so,” said Chan to me in February 2020. “But our biggest problem now is in the political field. The biggest problem here is land grabbing and there is more land to grab than most.”

“What we are experiencing now is the rise of plantations. The rubber plantations, the palm oil plantations, the banana plantations, the coconut plantations, the coffee plantations and now the most recent are the tropical fruit plantations. This means a decrease in our forested area. Why? Because in order to break even with let’s say rubber or coconut, you got to have at least 5,000 hectares. That’s to make a profit and just break even. I have nothing against the coconut farmers, but the problem is the coconut plantation eats into ancestral domain areas or tribal areas that are heavily forested.”

“Back in the day when you were first here [in 2009],” Chan said and pointed to me. “I told you I realized I should really get the transport, confiscate that and not just the chainsaws. Now we even have to stop the sale of timber to make a difference.”

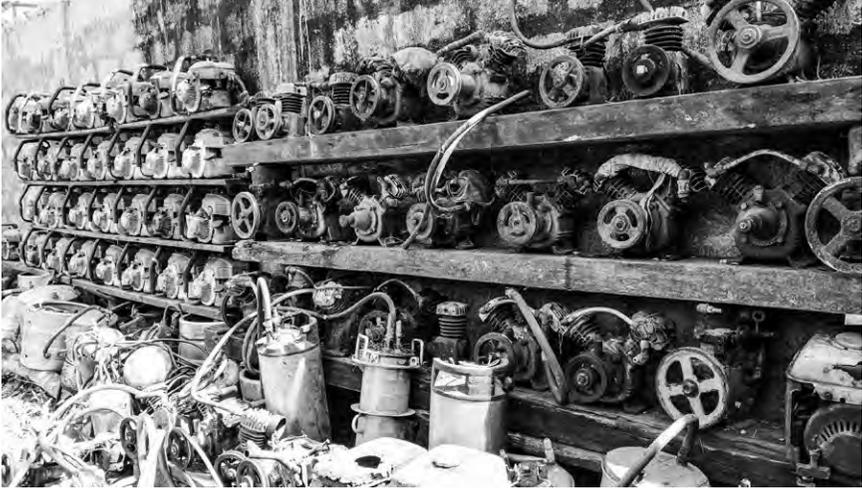
SLEEPING BESIDE CHAINSAWS



Chan rarely leaves the new office any more, for fear of the rising death threats against his person. He sleeps at this makeshift kubo, beside a stack of the chainsaws thrust blade-down into the soil.

“My para-enforcer body count in 2020 is now 13,” said Chan. “One of them, inabangan sa kurbada ng forested road tapos doon binaril. They don’t really welcome investigations kasi yung tingin nila sa mga NGOs ay mga komunista. But auspiciously PNNI was not included in the red-tagging.” Last January 24, 2020, PNNI lost its latest community para-enforcer in what’s been called a “motorcycle accident.” Dado Crael, an outspoken member of PNNI, was on his way home from a drinking session when he allegedly hit another motorcycle and crashed to his death. Suspiciously, the incident also conveniently came right after Crael and his team seized a notorious illegal logging tricycle from a rubber plantation in the forests of Punta Baja, Rizal.

CRIMES AGAINST LAND AND SEA



Pictured above are compressors used as breathing apparatus by fishermen in blast dynamite and cyanide fishing. Also in PNNI's collection are blue hoses used to ferry poison to coral levels and, after I opened a few more boxes, hundreds of PET and soda plastic bottles filled with a white powder bunched into balls: cyanide.

The biggest hindrance when it comes to enforcement on blast fishing is the lack of patrol boats, and in a matter of seconds, dynamite fishing can destroy a coral reef that took hundreds or thousands of years to develop. According to the *Philippine Journal of Science* on a survey of Philippine coral reefs conducted from 2015 to 2017, there are no longer any reefs in excellent condition in the country and 90 percent were classified as either poor or fair. In a 2017 report by the UN, all 29 World Heritage coral reefs, including the one in the Philippines, are predicted to die by 2100. Dynamite fishing destroys the corals where the fish nest and grow, as well as the entire food chain, including plankton.



PERSONA NON-GRATA IN PALAWAN

“The textbook answer is: ‘I do this because it’s my passion.’ That’s the biggest pile of horseshit I’ve ever heard!” this was what Chan told me in our interview back in 2009. “The real answer is ‘I do this because of my frustration.’ Being passionate about it means you want to be acknowledged and glorified. If you’re frustrated about it that means you’ll carry on despite having zero attention.”

Chan is still unable to return to Palawan after being declared persona non-grata last January 2021, after

decades of work in environmental activism and enforcement. Among his awards is a Gawad Bayani ng Kalikasan where he was recognized along with late environment secretary Gina Lopez, for his outstanding work in protecting the resources of the country.

Much of the wanton timber poaching, Chan stated, is to boost an unregulated tourism industry. “The strategy for enforcement remains the same,” said Chan to me in February 2020. “But what’s changed is we really need somebody now who can lobby for policy changes and be supportive of the enforcement. You cannot go very far in addressing the first step of environmental defense, which is to stop the violation. But we have to put money on the basic step, still: stop the loggers, stop the wildlife smugglers, stop the illegal miners, stop the dynamite and cyanide fishermen.”

All monochrome photographs were shot with a mobile phone.