



# International Journal of Social Sciences & Cultural Studies (IJSSCS)

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 2 (2025)



PUBLISHED BY  
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

## Life along Pulangi: The River's Influence on the Bukidnon Tribe in Lumbayao, Valencia City, Philippines

Cheed Augustine Tan<sup>1</sup>, Ramil Shane Sayson<sup>1</sup>, Kenth Joshua Wayas<sup>1</sup>, John Lloyd Alarcon<sup>1\*</sup>

### Article Information

**Received:** June 26, 2025

**Accepted:** August 01, 2025

**Published:** December 23, 2025

### Keywords

*Bukidnon Tribe, Environmental Degradation, Indigenous Communities, Livelihood, Pulangi River*

### ABSTRACT

For the indigenous Bukidnon tribe in Lumbayao, Valencia City, Philippines, the Pulangi River is essential, having a significant impact on their identity, traditions, and way of life. This study aimed to discover the significance of Pulangi river among the Bukidnon tribe. The link between the Bukidnon tribe and the Pulangi River was examined in this study using a phenomenological design. Current issues, cultural relevance, environmental changes, and the tribe's suggestions to the government were all examined. The river's watershed is essential for wildlife, and it sustains traditional livelihoods like farming and fishing. The community does, however, confront several difficulties, including as overfishing brought on by illicit methods and alien species, as well as environmental damage from garbage dumping, industrialization, and quarrying. These problems have affected the tribe's economic and health well-being by turning the once-clean river into a contaminated hazard. The results demonstrate the tribe's wish for government action to preserve their culture and the environment for coming generations through waste management, policy enforcement, and fishing practice control.

### INTRODUCTION

As a lifeline that has shaped the identities, traditions, and lifestyles of the Indigenous Bukidnon communities that reside along its banks, particularly in Lumbayao, Valencia City, the Pulangi River, which runs through the heart of Bukidnon in Mindanao, Philippines, is more than just a geographical feature. Together with meeting the region's agricultural needs, the river's watershed serves as the ancestral home of groups like the Bukidnon and Higaonon, whose long-standing traditions and environmental knowledge are intricately woven into the river's rhythm.

The watershed of the river supports traditional activities including hunting, gathering, and subsistence farming, which are ingrained in the cultural identity of the Bukidnon people and are an important source of biodiversity (Philippine Eagle Foundation, 2015). Ecological integrity and Indigenous ways of life are at risk due to the watershed's severe environmental problems, which include sedimentation brought on by land conversion and unsustainable farming methods (Panondi & Izumi, 2021).

This research is significant because it sheds light on the ways in which the Pulangi River impacts the lives of the Bukidnon residents of Lumbayao, Valencia City. The community's way of life, food, and water are all provided by the river. Understanding their relationship to the river can help us better preserve both their environment and culture. The Bukidnon people are also assisted by this study in protecting their land and customs from impacts such as logging, farming, and climate change. All things considered, it ensures the river and those who rely on it can live comfortably both today and in the future.

The complex link between Lumbayao's Bukidnon tribe and the Pulangi River is still poorly understood, despite its relevance. This research sought to address the gap in understanding how the Pulangi River continues to influence the daily life, cultural practices, and adaptive strategies of the Bukidnon tribe.

### Research Objectives

This study sought to investigate the interaction between the community and their crucial waterway, taking into account the urgent concerns of the Bukidnon tribe and the poor condition of the Pulangi River. With a qualitative inquiry, this study aimed to:

- Investigate the contemporary challenges confronting the Bukidnon tribe residing along the Pulangi River;
- Describe the cultural significance of the Pulangi River in the lives of the Bukidnon tribe;
- Analyze the environmental changes occurring in the Pulangi River and their subsequent impact on the Bukidnon tribe, and;
- Articulate the Bukidnon tribe's recommendations to the government concerning the challenges they face.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout history, rivers have been essential in forming the social, cultural, and economic facets of societies all across the world. Many indigenous and ethnic groups in the Philippines, a country known for its archipelagic terrain, rely heavily on rivers for their identity, subsistence, and spirituality.

### Cultural Significance of Rivers

The strong cultural and spiritual ties that ethnic groups

<sup>1</sup> Paramount School of Arts, Languages, Management, and Sciences Incorporated, Philippines

\* Corresponding author's e-mail: [alarcon.johnlloydpalmes@gmail.com](mailto:alarcon.johnlloydpalmes@gmail.com)

in the Philippines have with rivers are highlighted by a number of studies. For example, Andaya (2016) highlights that rivers are frequently considered sacred objects, representing ancestor spirits and acting as locations for rites and rituals. For instance, the community's respect for rivers is reflected in their festival, which includes water-based ceremonies that represent purification and rejuvenation.

In a similar context, Acabado and Martin (2016) talks about how the Ifugao regard the rivers that are part of their ancestral lands as guardians of their culture. The mythology and oral traditions that uphold their cultural identity are interwoven with these rivers, which are more than just geographical characteristics.

### **Economic and Subsistence Roles**

Rivers are essential for supplying the resources needed for livelihood and nutrition. Many indigenous groups, including the Tagbanua tribe, rely significantly on river systems for agriculture, transportation, and fishing, according to Capistrano (2010). River accessibility promotes social cohesion by facilitating trade and communication between scattered populations.

Additionally, Hallwass *et al.* (2020) emphasizes how traditional livelihood activities including fishing, small-scale farming, and craft production are supported by riverine ecosystems. The community's bond with their aquatic environment is strengthened by these economic activities, which are frequently entwined with cultural customs.

### **Environmental and Ecological Impact**

The contamination of river systems by illegal logging and mining activities has resulted in a decrease in fish populations and disrupted traditional fishing practices among the Bagobo tribes (Lausa, 2025). These environmental degradations not only affect their economic stability but also threaten their cultural heritage. River health is directly related to the well-being of the communities that depend on rivers. Deforestation, pollution, and climate change are major threats to these waterways, thereby endangering the livelihoods and cultural practices of indigenous groups.

Rivers are living things that are woven into the social, cultural, spiritual, and economic fabric of indigenous tribes and communities in the Philippines. They are more than just geographical characteristics. It is essential to acknowledge their diverse impact in order to promote sustainable development and protect indigenous culture. To guarantee the preservation and protection of these important rivers and the communities that depend on them, further study and cooperative efforts are needed.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Research Design**

In order to investigate and comprehend the lived experiences of the Bukidnon tribe in connection to the Pulangi River, this study used a phenomenological

research design. The selection of phenomenology stems from its strong alignment with Indigenous oral traditions and methods of knowing, which enables the researchers to holistically and culturally respectfully capture the substance and meaning of the participants' experiences.

### **Study Area and Participants**

The study is being carried out at Lumbayao, Valencia City, Bukidnon, which is a community that is home to the Bukidnon tribe and is located beside the Pulangi River. Five tribal elders, who are acknowledged as knowledge keepers and guardians of the community's cultural legacy and river-related customs, are among the participants. Their stories offer deep insights into how the community and the river interact.

### **Cultural Protocol**

A pamuhat, a customary ritual that asks for approval and blessings from the spiritual and community leaders, was performed by the researchers and the Bukidnon community prior to data collection. By respecting Indigenous customs and fostering mutual respect and trust between participants and researchers, this ceremony guarantees that the research process is both morally and culturally sound.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In-depth interviews with tribal elders are used to gather data, with an emphasis on their individual experiences, cultural customs, and opinions regarding the Pulangi River. Because the interviews are conversational in nature, participants are free to share their meanings and tales.

Thematic analysis, a technique that finds, arranges, and interprets patterns or themes in qualitative data, is used to examine the gathered data. This method honors the contextual and cultural subtleties woven within the participants' narratives while assisting in revealing the essential elements of their lived experiences, which is consistent with phenomenological inquiry.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study adheres to Indigenous research values, which place a strong emphasis on responsibility, reciprocity, relevance, and respect. In order to ensure that the research benefits the Bukidnon tribe and that findings are communicated and validated with participants, the researchers involve the community in the process.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **On the Contemporary Challenges of the Bukidnon Tribe residing along Pulangi River**

In addressing the fundamental requirements for sustenance, productive business is essential, enabling people to obtain essential provisions. According to the Bukidnon tribe, fishing emerges as their primary economic activity along the Pulangi River, facilitating the acquisition of fish for both commercial purposes and domestic consumption within their households.

“Before, we used to fish Tilapia and other types of fish, it was our norm and it’s also part of our culture. We fish with our wooden rods and that’s our way of living here in Pulangi River.” (Participant 1);

“Fishing is our main source of livelihood and sustenance, feeding our families since the time of our ancestors” (Participant 2)

Accordingly, identifying the relevance of the Pulangi River towards the indigenous peoples’ livelihood shapes their culture of the community. Fabinyi and Barclay (2021) stated that fishing livelihood are varied, adaptable, and responsive to changes in the environment, weather, and economy. This means that Pulangi River is important in shaping the culture of the Bukidnon Tribe living near it.

“The introduction of new fishing techniques, particularly those employing electricity, has led to a severe case of overfishing. This methods affects the abundance of the fishes...” (Participant 3);

“...Janitor fished is the dominant fish in the river becoming a nuisance for Pulangi...” (Participant 5)

Challenges like the use of illegal fishing tools and the widespread distribution of the janitor fish creates a negative impact on the fishing livelihood of the indigenous communities that live near the Pulangi River. Kravik (2021) states that Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fisheries and invasive fish species pose a direct threat to food security and socio-economic stability in many parts of the world. Hence, this includes the livelihood of the indigenous communities residing near the river.

### **On the Cultural Significance of the Pulangi River to the Bukidnon Tribe**

The Bukidnon Tribe’s way of living near the Pulangi River is profoundly influenced by their culture, with shared beliefs and traditions showcasing a strong reverence for the river. This reverence is reflected in their daily practices and rituals, which serve as expressions of gratitude for the river’s blessings.

“Once a year, we perform a pamuhat (ritual) dedicated to the river to prevent accidents and ensure our safety for another year...” (Participant 2)

“...our connection with the river is rooted since the time of the memorial.” (Participant 3)

The ritual shows the significance of the Pulangi River to the community, serving as an expression of gratitude towards the spirits for their blessings through the Pamuhat ceremony, which involves the sacrifice of pigs and chickens. This vividly demonstrates the community’s commitment to environmental stewardship and the preservation of their cultural practices (Geng *et al.*, 2017).

### **On the Environmental Changes in the Pulangi River and Its Impact**

The on-going construction of the irrigation that proves to be beneficial in the field of agriculture. However, due to the advancement and city’s economic stability, several

businesses have opened up that caused environmental degradation.

“...the Pulangi River before was much nicer and much cleaner compared to now. Before, there were no bulldozers and most of the fish here are swimming away from the area because of the disturbances from these heavy equipments.” (Participant 1)

One of the causes of the environmental degradation is the on-going industrialization through quarrying. Several serious environmental impacts related to quarrying activities on and near the river, such as vibrations, land degradation, land subsidence and landslides, water pollution, occupational noise pollution, and air pollution, will lead to health-related problems and loss of biodiversity (Ozcan *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, what changed the environment in Pulangi River is the water pollution caused by the quarries near the area.

“There has been a significant transformation in the quality of the water here. In the past, it was safe enough for drinking, bathing...” (Participant 2)

“...the once-clear waters have become heavily polluted due to the excessive waste from numerous piggeries.” (Participant 4)

The indigenous people of the community recall a time from their youth when the Pulangi River underwent a profound transformation. Back then, its waters were pure and drinkable, teeming with aquatic life that made fishing effortless. Environmental degradation and poverty are interconnected with each other (Burki *et al.*, 2021). As the environment degrades, so does the primary source of livelihood for these indigenous communities, highlighting the intricate connection between environmental health and socioeconomic well-being.

### **On the Bukidnon Tribe’s Recommendations to the Government**

The Bukidnon Tribe has proposed strategies to the government aimed at addressing environmental degradation in the Pulangi River. These proposals prioritize actions to enhance the river’s cleanliness and rejuvenate its pivotal role as the primary source of livelihood for indigenous communities.

“While I can’t speak for all indigenous peoples here, it seems that the primary concern for many is simply to prevent garbage from being discarded into the river. Their focus lies in ensuring that the water remains clear and free from debris, such as plastic bags.” (Participant 4)

This observation indicates a troubling trend among residents residing near the Pulangi River, who appear to be disposing of their waste directly into the water. The tribe emphasizes the urgent need for government intervention to formulate and enforce policies addressing this issue. Research highlights the consequences of improper waste disposal, including heightened risks of flooding, landslides, and disease outbreaks (Nofrma, 2022). The once-pure waters of the river have undergone a distressing transformation, turning from a source of potable water to a hazard to public health and safety.

“Our primary concern revolves around addressing the presence of pests, particularly those responsible for damaging our environment, such as overfishing. We advocate for the assignment of individuals to manage and control these invasive species, alongside the implementation of legislation that mandates size clearance for fishing gear to prevent the capture of juvenile fish. Furthermore, regulations should be enacted to restrict certain types of fishing gear, as they contribute significantly to overfishing. Unlike the Bisaya people who utilize modern fishing gear, we, the indigenous peoples, adhere to traditional methods. Establishing such regulations would necessitate the deployment of guards to enforce compliance. Additionally, the disturbance caused by quarry operations further exacerbates the situation by disrupting fish habitats, prompting them to seek refuge elsewhere.” (Participant 3)

According to Nofrima (2022), human activity is a primary driver of disruption in the aquatic ecosystem, manifesting both directly through practices like overfishing and indirectly through the improper disposal of waste in marine environments. This underscores the importance of governmental intervention to establish policies aimed at regulating activities responsible for environmental degradation in the Pulangi River.

“There’s nothing we can do...” (Participant 2)

Some indigenous individuals have acknowledged their perceived powerlessness in certain matters, opting to defer to local authorities. While they recognize the economic benefits associated with these activities, they also express distress over the rapid degradation of the Pulangi River’s appearance.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to document the influence of the Pulangi river in the lives of the Bukidnon tribe residing in Lumbayao, Valencia City, Bukidnon. It utilized phenomenological research design, and interview method and thematic analysis in collecting and analyzing the data. The results showed the difficulties the Bukidnon Tribe, who live beside the Pulangi River, faces. Current problems pose a serious danger to their long-standing reliance on fishing for food and income, which is closely linked to their cultural identity. Fish stocks have been severely reduced by overfishing, which has been made worse by illicit fishing methods and the spread of invasive species like the janitor fish. The ecological health of the river is also declining at the same time as a result of environmental damage brought on by industrialization, especially quarrying, and widespread trash disposal. These activities have affected the tribe’s economic and health well-being by turning the previously clean and drinkable rivers into a contaminated hazard. In order to address these problems, the tribe clearly wants the government to step in and control waste, enforce policies, and regulate fishing methods.

## REFERENCES

- Andaya, B. W. (2016). Rivers, oceans, and spirits: Water cosmologies, gender, and religious change in Southeast Asia. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 4(2), 239-263.
- Acabado, S., & Martin, M. (2016). The sacred and the secular: practical applications of water rituals in the Ifugao agricultural system. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 4(2), 307-327.
- Burki, M. A. K., Burki, U., & Najam, U. (2021). Environmental degradation and poverty: A bibliometric review. *Regional Sustainability*, 2(4), 324-336.
- Capistrano, R. C. G. (2010). Reclaiming the ancestral waters of indigenous peoples in the Philippines: The Tagbanua experience with fishing rights and indigenous rights. *Marine Policy*, 34(3), 453-460.
- Fabinyi, M., & Barclay, K. (2022). Fishing Livelihoods and Wellbeing. *Asia-Pacific Fishing Livelihoods*, 91-109.
- Geng, Y., Hu, G., Ranjekar, S., Shi, Y., Zhang, Y., & Wang, Y. (2017). The implications of ritual practices and ritual plant uses on nature conservation: a case study among the Naxi in Yunnan Province, Southwest China. *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, 13, 1-11.
- Hallwass, G., da Silva, L. H. T., Nagl, P., Clauzet, M., & Begossi, A. (2020). Small-scale fisheries, livelihoods, and food security of riverine people. In *Fish and fisheries in the Brazilian Amazon: People, ecology and conservation in black and clear water rivers* (pp. 23–39). Springer.
- Kravik, A. M. (2021). An analysis of stagnation in multilateral law-making—and why the law of the sea has transcended the stagnation trend. *Leiden Journal of international law*, 34(4), 935-956.
- Lausa, J. S. (2025). Exploring the Water Practices of the Bagobo Tagabawa Tribe: Cultural and Ecological Significance through an Ecocentric Lens. *International Journal of English and Studies*, 7 (1), 62-67.
- Nofrima, S. (2022). The environmental damage caused by the waste problem in the batanghari jambi river affect economic sustainability?. *The Journalish: Social and Government*, 3(4), 293-290.
- Ozcan, O., Musaoglu, N., & Seker, D. Z. (2012). Environmental impact analysis of quarrying activities established on and near a river bed by using remotely sensed data. *Fresenius Environmental Bulletin*, 21(11), 3147-3153.
- Philippine Eagle Foundation. (2015). *Protecting watersheds and ancestral domain: The Pulangi Watershed Integrated NGO-PO Community-based Resource Management Project (PULWIN-CBRMP)*. FPE Impact Story. [https://fpe.ph/impact\\_story/protecting-watersheds-and-ancestral-domain/6](https://fpe.ph/impact_story/protecting-watersheds-and-ancestral-domain/6)
- Panondi, W., & Izumi, N. (2021). Climate change impact on the hydrologic regimes and sediment yield of Pulangi River Basin (PRB) for watershed sustainability. *Sustainability*, 13(16), 9041.