

# ESSENCE

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Philippine Reef and Rainforest Conservation Foundation, Inc.



Danjungan Island Sanctuary



## PROJECT ACE YEAR 3 ENDTERM REPORT (ACTIONS FOR COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT)

# ESSENCE

Project ACE

Endterm Report

SEPTEMBER 2025 | NO. 4



Actions for Communities and Environment





## ABOUT THE COVER

**Paul Sumanion**  
President, BIDAFFSWISA

Essence is an abstract concept—qualities that define who we are at our core.

For Project ACE, that essence lives in the communities and the people who represent them. They are the faces and voices that shape our journey.

From ACE 1 to 3, we've listened, learned, and walked alongside individuals whose stories carry both challenges and triumphs. As we look ahead, we're taking the journey deeper—sharing meals, sitting beside them, and hearing their stories firsthand. Their lives have opened doors of understanding, inspiring us to co-create solutions that ripple outward to families and communities.

Together, amid environmental, economic, and social challenges, we collaborate to design tools and opportunities that matter now—and for the future.

This third edition of ESSENCE features Paul Sumanion, President of the Biga-a Dam Fisherfolk & Farmers Small Water Irrigation Association (BIDAFFSWISA). His story captures the spirit of resilience that drives Project ACE forward.

Paul has farmed for decades, raising his family through the land and leading with consistency and heart. With his fellow association members, and with support from Project ACE, Paul helped revive tilapia farming and strengthen BIDAFFSWISA into a growing, sustainable association. Their harvests now nourish both families and futures.

Typhoons, droughts, and losses have tested him, but Paul remains steadfast. He is one of many who show us what resilience looks like when communities and partners work hand in hand.





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

01 About the Cover

---

02 Messages

---

03 About Project ACE

---

04 Project ACE Impact

---

05 Deep-Dive: ACE 3 Projects

- Community Development
  - Climate Action
  - Youth Empowerment
  - Science, Environment, and Education
- 

06 People of ACE: Uncovering In-Depth Stories

---

07 Highlights & Looking Onwards

---

08 Acknowledgements

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## MESSAGES



**Gerry L. Ledesma**

President  
PRRCFI

Last year, ACE implemented various sustainable livelihood initiatives for some coastal communities that have formed people's organizations with a total of 331 members.

Starting on the right foot, the program has directly engaged with 1,655 members of people's organizations, supporting their families and extending its impact to a wider community of 6,864 people.

We have seen the dire situation of Biga-a Dam, an important watershed of Barangay Bulata, but it is deforested.

We have seen the noble efforts of women of the Bulata Small Fisherfolks Association (BUSFA) in organic farming, the Bulata Resorts & Balsa Tour Guide and Workers Association (BREBATGAWA), whose facilities and marketing need improvement, and the income augmentation for the *bantay dagat* (sea wardens) of the Danjugan Marine Reserve and Sanctuary (DMRS). While these are definitely positive efforts towards the goals of ACE, we at PRRCFI must do more.

Today, we are exploring the reforestation of Biga-a Dam and the enhancement of alternative livelihood projects, embracing the principles of Terra Madre's Slow Food movement, which emphasizes good, clean, and fair food for all. We know this won't be easy, as the chickens and tilapia feeds must be organically grown. Without the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), our communities may succeed in providing that (Slow Food) market and achieve another dimension towards their untiring efforts for the sustainability of their communities and families.

While ACE is working on the tip of a vast iceberg, we at PRRCFI are hoping these models for replication will earn the attention of the local government units (LGUs), who have the resources to replicate and reduce the poverty incidence of Southern Negros Occidental, which has increased from 19.3% in 2021 to 25.7% in 2023.

These models would not have had the opportunities without the generous assistance of LMAX Group, and we are deeply grateful to David Mercer, Andy Phillips, Aidan, and the staff.



## MESSAGES



**Rhoda Avanzado Phillips**  
CEO  
Communities for Nature

As we close the third year of Project ACE, I am struck by how far we have come—and how powerfully the heart of this work continues to beat in our communities. What began as a bold pilot has evolved into a living system—where regeneration, education, science, and community development come together, grounded in place and powered by people.

Project ACE is built from the ground up. It's always been about legacy—about growing what lasts.

And if ACE 3 taught us anything, it's this: communities are not just part of the solution—they are the solution. When we work together, there is nothing impossible.

Whether it's restoring coral reefs, regenerating biodiversity, building local livelihoods, or empowering young leaders, every step has reminded us that the future is community-led and collective by design.

We are especially grateful to LMAX Group—not just as funders, but as committed partners who've stood with us in this journey. And to our communities and partners on the ground, local government allies, and the Philippine Reef and Rainforest Conservation Foundation—thank you for making this ecosystem possible.

As we look to ACE 4, we move forward with clarity, purpose, and shared belief in what's possible when communities lead.

Onward, together.

## MESSAGES



**Aidan Browning**  
Head of Corporate Sustainability  
LMAX Group

At LMAX Group, we believe real impact happens when we collaborate, not just contribute.

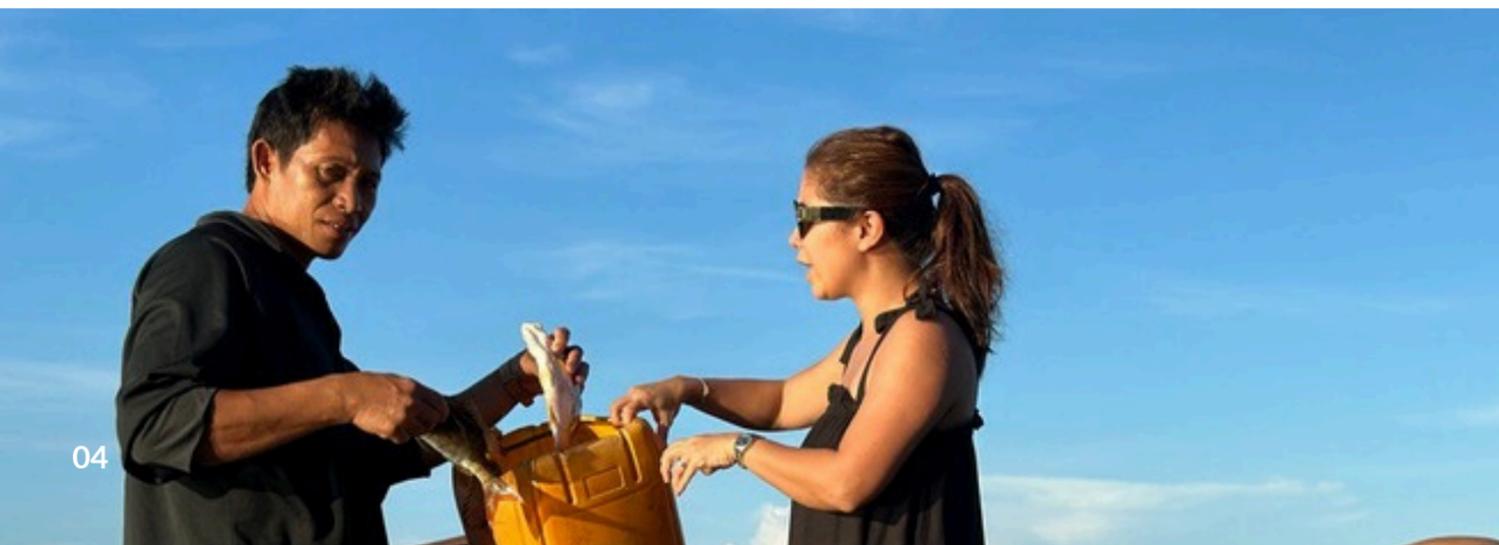
That's at the heart of our partnership with the Philippine Reef and Rainforest Conservation Foundation, Inc. (PRRCFI), made possible through Communities for Nature.

Project ACE is about more than conservation; it's about connection. Together, we're protecting the biodiversity of Danjungan Island in the Philippines, supporting the next generation of local conservationists, and building pathways for long-term, community-led sustainability.

We know that meaningful change comes when organisations bring more than funding to the table. When we share knowledge, creativity, and a genuine commitment to people and planet, we can go further.

Environmental action must be rooted in the community. From education and livelihoods to conservation and development, Project ACE reflects our belief that when business works alongside local communities, the potential for lasting change grows stronger.

We're proud of what we've started together, and excited for what's still to come.





## ABOUT PROJECT ACE

Project ACE is a multi-year initiative of the Philippine Reef and Rainforest Conservation Foundation, Inc. (PRRCFI), LMAX Group and Communities for Nature (CfN).

The project works to empower coastal communities and support the regeneration and conservation of ecosystems in southern Negros Occidental, focusing on areas most affected by the climate crisis, systemic poverty, and limited access to resources.

Now in its third year, ACE builds on the lessons, partnerships, and momentum established since its inception.

This phase focused on deepening impact by supporting local initiatives, nurturing young conservation leaders, expanding environmental education, and strengthening grassroots development across southern Negros.





# PROJECT ACE IMPACT

## ESSENCE

Project ACE  
Endterm Report  
SEPTEMBER 2025 | NO. 4



Actions for Communities and Environment



# PROJECT ACE IMPACT

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & CAPACITY BUILDING

♂ Male - 152 ♀ Female - 179



8

People's organizations (POs) formed  
(Total of 331 members)



26

PO members trained in leadership & teamwork



28

PO members trained in fishery law enforcement



118

New PO members in ACE 3  
(+55% from ACE 2)

## SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS & INCOME GROWTH

♂ Male - 129 ♀ Female - 144



110

Native chickens dispersed to Purok 6 Integrated Farmers & Fisherfolk Association (PIFFA)



200

Ducklings + 1 incubator received by Bulata Small Fisherfolks Association (BUSFA) → 60 eggs incubated



1

Organic vegetable garden diversified (with vermicompost and free-range chickens)



10

Community artisans crafting sustainable jewelry



₱7,812

Average collective income of *bantay dagat* (sea wardens) each month



50

Additional hens reinvested to increase egg production



200 kgs

Vermicast produced each month



75%

Increase in family beneficiaries of native chicken dispersal

## AWARENESS & OUTREACH



150,000

Views of the Danjugan Documentary: Climate, Corals, Communities



350,000

People reached through social media campaigns

## SCIENCE & CONSERVATION ♂ Male - 6



3 staff 2 volunteers  
1 scholar

Trained to be citizen scientists with enhanced knowledge and skills on reef and fish monitoring

## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

♀ Female - 405



354

Women engaged in coastal cleanups & waste management



60%

Women PO members involved in leadership and decision-making roles



Women-led

Community enterprises (farming, vermiculture & crafts)

## COMMUNITY RESILIENCE & SUPPORT



1,655

Estimated indirect beneficiaries (households of PO members)



126

Community members received free medical & dental services



17

Household members accessed electricity for the first time



## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

In ACE 3, community development efforts expanded significantly, boosting the capacity of POs and advancing their sustainable livelihood programs. Membership grew by 55% from ACE 2, with 331 PO members now taking a more active and empowered role in driving lasting change in their communities.

## ESSENCE

Project ACE

Endterm Report

SEPTEMBER 2025 | NO. 4

# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: THE HEART OF ACE

At the core of Project ACE lies a simple truth: when communities thrive, conservation thrives. By nurturing livelihoods, strengthening organizations, and empowering women and their families, ACE has built a foundation of resilience that supports both people and nature.



Women of Bulata Small Fisherfolks Association (BUSFA)

From the sea to the uplands, livelihoods are flourishing. The *bantay dagat* (sea wardens) have doubled their egg production and are currently earning an average collective monthly income of P7,812.



Egg production and native chicken raising



ACE sustainability scholars and the PRRCFI team in the thriving garden of the Bulata Small Fisherfolks Association (BUSFA)



Transition to natural tilapia feeds like azolla, a nutrient-rich aquatic plant that reduces costs and supports healthier fish, by the Biga-a Dam Farmers and Fisherfolks Small Water Irrigation System (BIDAFFSWISA) members

## SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

ACE 3 communities are actively expanding sustainable livelihoods that protect local ecosystems and habitats, achieving inspiring progress and milestones.



### NATIVE CHICKEN RAISING

Members of the Biga-a Dam Farmers and Fisherfolks Small Water Irrigation System Association (BIDAFFSWISA) and Purok 6, Integrated Farmers and Fisherfolks Association (PIFFA) are adopting native chicken production to boost both household food security and community livelihood. Native chickens are prized for their disease resistance, low-maintenance needs and uniquely flavorful meat. This initiative is providing families with a steady source of protein through fresh eggs and meat, while surplus stocks are sold to generate additional income. This year, they've started supplying native chicken meat to Danjungan Island, where it is served to guests and visitors.



### FREE RANGE HERITAGE CHICKEN

The Bulata Small Fisherfolks Association (BUSFA) and Bulata Watershed and Sustainable Fisherfolk Association (BWASSFA) are promoting sustainable poultry production by raising heritage chicken breeds that are naturally resilient and well-suited to local conditions. Grown in a free-range system, the chickens are free to roam, forage, and thrive in a natural environment, resulting in healthier flocks and more nutritious meat and eggs. This not only provides families with food and income, but also connects them to premium markets that value heritage breeds and offer better returns.



### WOMEN-LED ORGANIC VEGETABLE GARDEN

Led by women, the organic vegetable farm of the Bulata Small Fisherfolks Association (BUSFA) empowers members by generating extra income and ensuring a steady supply of nutritious food for their families. Through organic vermicomposting and waste segregation, their thriving garden now produces okra, jute leaves, cucumber, moringa, eggplant, and more.

### SOIL CARE THROUGH VERICOMPOSTING



Vermicomposting plays a vital role in building healthy, productive, and sustainable gardens. By using earthworms to break down organic waste such as vegetable and fruit scraps, dried leaves, and other biodegradable materials, vermicomposting produces a nutrient-rich compost that significantly improves soil structure and fertility. For the women of BUSFA, this method not only recycles waste but also restores and regenerates the soil, ensuring long-term productivity of their organic garden while protecting the environment.

### TRANSITION TO NATURAL FEEDS FOR TILAPIA



BIDAFFSWISA is shifting to natural tilapia feeds like azolla, a nutrient-rich aquatic plant that reduces costs and supports healthier fish. This sustainable approach aligns with Slow Food values—promoting food that is good, clean, and fair for both people and the planet.

### EGG PRODUCTION



PIFFA, BUSFA and the *bantay dagat* (sea wardens) are actively sustaining their egg production projects by practicing proper poultry management and ensuring the health and welfare of their hens. Using eco-friendly methods and locally available resources, they consistently produce fresh, high-quality eggs to sell to Danjungan Island (about 7-10 trays a month) and other interested buyers in the community. This sustainable initiative provides an alternative income source for poor households and improves community resilience.



## BUILDING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

ACE's impact is felt in the everyday lives of the Bulata community, indirectly benefitting 1,655 household members.



People's Organizations team building activity held at Punta Pantalan, Brgy. Bulata, Cauayan



Medical mission held last October 10, 2024, with over 126 beneficiaries

## UNITED FOR CONSERVATION

Together, these stories form a larger narrative: empowered communities standing as protectors of their seas, their farmlands, and their futures.

From leadership capacity building to formalizing ecotourism workers in Bulata, ACE's community development work continues to prove that people are not just passive recipients but integral partners in conservation.

With each egg collected, each seed planted, and each locally-crafted product sold, the heart of ACE beats stronger—driven by the resilience and agency of the communities it serves.



"Balsas" (floating cottages) are found on the coast of Purok 1, Barangay Bulata in Cauayan, Negros Occidental, facing Danjugan Island.

Once individually operated, they are now organized under the Bulata Resorts and Balsa Tour Guides and Workers Association (BREBATGAWA)—a people's organization established in 2023 through Project ACE to formalize and strengthen the work of local ecotourism workers.



*Kagawad King Guanzon with the officers of Biga-a Dam Farmers and Fisherfolks Small Water Irrigation System (BIDAFFSWISA)*

## COMMUNITY STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Collective action lies at the heart of development.

Membership continues to grow, with ACE 3 welcoming 118 new members, a 55% increase from the previous cycle. These POs have now agreed to become a federated organization, a goal targeted for ACE 4.

These POs aren't just names on a list—they're leaders in the making, with 331 members (152 women, 179 men) with improved leadership and teamwork skills.





## WOMEN LEADING THE WAY

One of the most powerful transformations is the rise of women as leaders. No longer just participants, they are driving change—leading in farming, vermiculture, and crafts; designing farm layouts; managing waste and coastal cleanups; and building enterprises that sustain their households and communities. Women now make up 60% of PO members, with many holding key leadership roles. With women at the forefront, they are not only shaping stronger livelihoods—they're leading the way in community-driven conservation.





## CRAFTING FUTURES: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES THROUGH JEWELRY DESIGN

On the shores of Danjungan Island, where the sea meets the forest and stories of resilience echo through the waves, a new kind of treasure was created—not pearls or gold, but handcrafted jewelry born from clay, wire, and sea glass.

Here, select members of the Purok 6 Integrated Farmers and Fisherfolks Association (PIFFA) and the Bulata Solo Parents Integrated Vendors Association (BUSPIVA), with one male and nine females, gathered last August 11–12, 2025, for a Jewelry Design & Creative Enterprise Workshop that blended artistry, livelihood, and sustainability.

Guided by artisan mentors Kaila Ledesma-Trebol (PRRCFI trustee & artist) and Remus Pediengco (Bacolod-based designer), participants learned the foundations of jewelry-making while exploring branding and creative enterprise. Every terracotta bead, every loop of aluminum wire, and every polished shard of sea glass told a story of transformation—of simple materials becoming beautiful adornments, and of communities discovering their creative power.

More than a skill-building workshop, it became a space of empowerment.

For these community artisans, the new crafts represent more than accessories—they are stepping stones toward financial independence, dignity, and sustainable livelihoods.

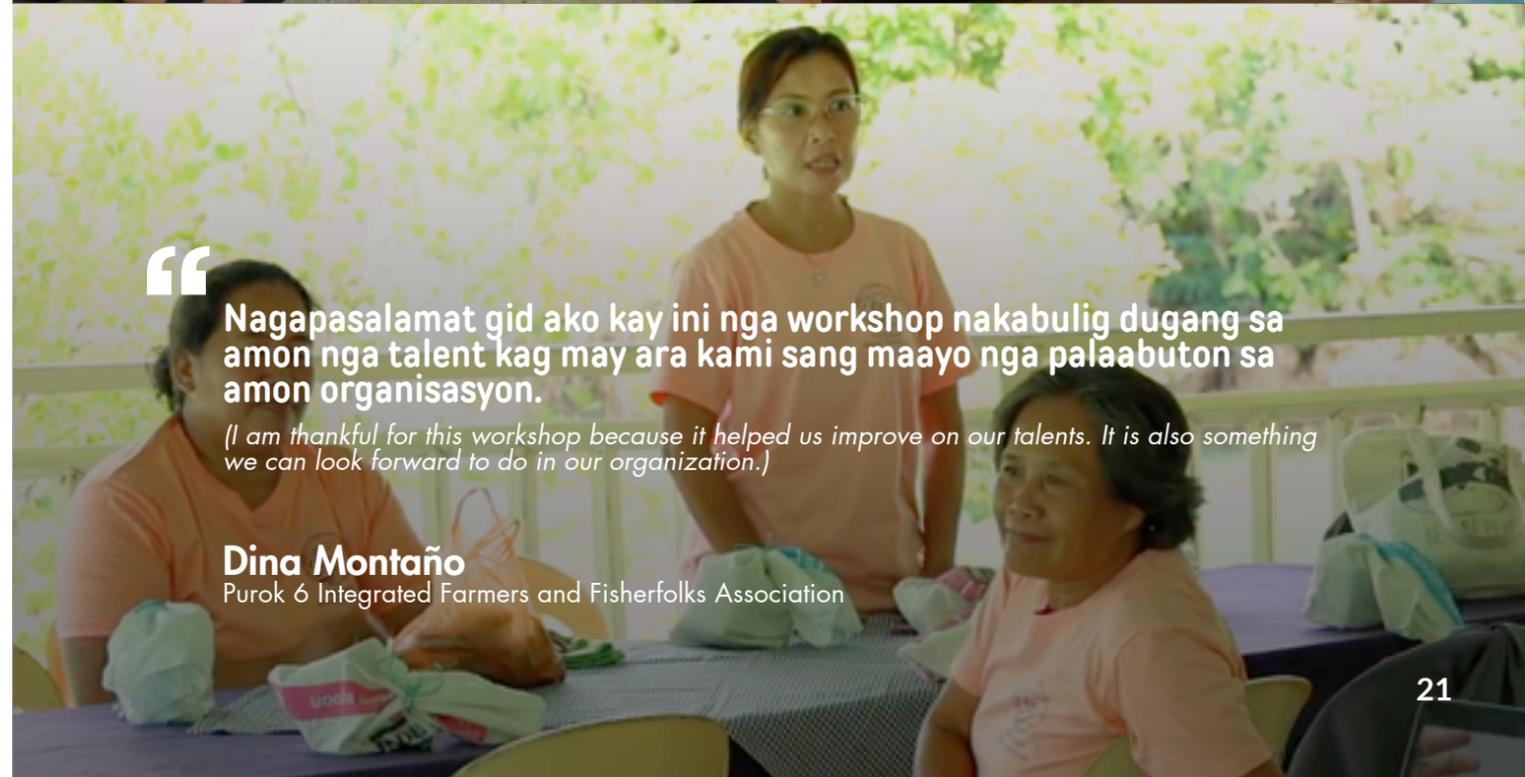
They also collectively agreed on a brand for their jewelry: *Dagyaw* — a Hiligaynon word that means togetherness. It signifies a spirit of unity, mutual support and shared responsibility.



Each *Dagyaw* piece embodies collaboration, resilience, and the spirit of conservation-driven community development. And so, from an island sanctuary in Negros Occidental, the ripple spreads outward: handmade jewelry crafted not just to be worn, but to carry with it a story of hope, empowerment, and the promise of a future where communities shine as brightly as the treasures they create.



Official Brand Name & Logo of "Dagyaw" (Unite)



“

Nagapasalamat gid ako kay ini nga workshop nakabulig dugang sa amon nga talent kag may ara kami sang maayo nga palaabuton sa amon organisasyon.

(I am thankful for this workshop because it helped us improve on our talents. It is also something we can look forward to do in our organization.)

**Dina Montaña**

Purok 6 Integrated Farmers and Fisherfolks Association

# CLIMATE ACTION

Building on the successes of ACE 2, ACE 3 deepened its climate action support by promoting community-based solutions focused on regenerative farming, sustainable materials, and renewable energy. These approaches directly address climate challenges such as soil degradation, plastic pollution, and fossil fuel dependence.

A climate camp brought together local stakeholders to share their firsthand experiences with the effects of climate change—rising temperatures, erratic weather, and crop losses—and to explore collective strategies for climate mitigation and adaptation.

By empowering communities to lead with practical, low-carbon solutions, ACE 3 played a vital role in building resilience and advancing grassroots climate action.



## ESSENCE

Project ACE  
Endterm Report  
SEPTEMBER 2025 | NO. 4



## FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

Change starts with one passionate individual. In Hinoba-an, that person is Louie John Gelluagan, a dedicated community organizer behind the Organic Foliar Fertilizer Project. Seeing the urgent need for eco-friendly farming, Louie John championed plant-based fertilizers to reduce farmers' reliance on harmful chemical inputs and prioritize soil health.

Local farmers began exploring what was already around them—alugbati, bamboo shoots, and ipil-ipil leaves—and discovered they could make their own organic fertilizers using these materials.

The project is already showing promise: 15 families are using the fertilizer in a trial run, supported by six young agricultural students (two women and four men) who are receiving hands-on training in production.

Driven by a clear vision, Louie John aims to transform his community into a model for sustainable agriculture—improving livelihoods while protecting soil, water, and biodiversity.

As ACE 3 concludes, he's actively seeking partners and institutional support, including a collaboration with the Central Philippine State University (CPSU), to ensure the project's long-term sustainability. His passion and leadership continue to inspire the community, proving that sustainable agriculture can lead to meaningful, lasting change.

## BAMBOO CRAFTING: FORGING CREATIVITY & SUSTAINABILITY

In Southern Negros, bamboo is an abundant resource now offering a sustainable livelihood for residents of Cauayan through the “Bamboo Craft Training for Artisan-Planters” program. While bamboo has many uses, this initiative focuses on reducing dependence on single-use plastics by developing a local bamboo craft industry.

Thirty members (13 women and 17 men) of the Barangay Inayawan Tree Growers Association (BIGTA) completed an intensive five-day training in bamboo crafting. The program helped participants see bamboo not just as a raw material, but as a means of creating sustainable income.

The project unfolded in two phases. The first involved the hands-on training, followed by a community-led action research phase and the establishment of a bamboo *kubo* (crafting workshop). The second phase supported ongoing skill development, market access, and environmental sustainability.

The Bamboo Crafts project aims to build a thriving local industry—empowering artisans while promoting a greener, more sustainable future for Cauayan.





## PROJECT SULO: LIGHTING THE WAY TOWARDS RELIABLE AND RENEWABLE ENERGY

What began as a humble dream by two passionate teachers from Cauayan—Ramonito Villanueva and Ana Mae Catacutan—has grown into a powerful symbol of hope for students, schools, and entire communities.

Through Project SHINE, their vision of a brighter future became reality with the installation of solar panels, bringing clean and sustainable energy to areas once reliant on hazardous kerosene lamps.

More than just a source of light, Project SHINE helped bridge the gap between energy poverty and access to online learning, allowing students to pursue education without the barriers of unreliable electricity. Now, their classrooms are not only brighter—but more connected, more inclusive, and more empowered.

But the journey doesn't end there. This year, a new chapter begins with Project SULO (meaning "torch"). Building on the success of SHINE, Project SULO aims to bring clean, affordable, and reliable energy to Guiljungan National High School - Camindangan Extension and to the Bukidnon Tribe of Barangay Camindangan.

The initiative will provide students with free charging stations, enhance the school's capacity for sustainable education, and introduce technical and maintenance skills training—ensuring the community can sustain and grow this progress for generations to come.

None of this would have been possible without the collective efforts of students, teachers, parents, and local government officials, who stood behind the vision of Project SULO. Today, the solar panels at Camalanda-an National High School are already transforming lives—benefiting 802 students (402 girls and 400 boys) and empowering 17 household members, many of whom are experiencing electricity for the first time.

With reliable, renewable energy now within reach, Project SULO is not only lighting homes and classrooms—it's illuminating the path to quality education, community empowerment, and a more sustainable future.

## #PARASAKLIMA (FOR THE CLIMATE) CAMP

South Negros, one of the areas most vulnerable to climate change, called its residents to action. In response, the #ParaSaKlima (For the Climate) Camp was conducted to raise awareness about the impacts of the climate crisis.

The camp brought together 24 participants (14 women, 10 men), including representatives from local government, academe, people's organizations, women and youth groups. Together, they tackled the urgent challenges posed by climate change and shared stories on how climate change has impacted their own lives and their communities.

Through interactive discussions and engaging activities, #ParaSaKlima participants deepened their understanding of climate science and its real-world effects—particularly how marginalized communities, particularly women, are disproportionately impacted.



# BLACK SOLDIER FLY (BSF): EXPLORING PATHWAYS FOR WASTE, RESOURCE, AND ENERGY SOLUTIONS

The BSF project, one of the awardees of the Climate Solutions Hackathon (ACE 2), reflects the creativity and ambition of local innovators in tackling interconnected challenges. Spearheaded by educator and sustainability advocate Rhodora Gaurana, the initiative has become a testing ground for community-driven ideas that bridge waste reduction, resource recovery, and renewable energy.



The project has underscored the potential of BSF systems to divert organic waste from landfills, recover protein-rich larvae for animal feed, and generate biogas as a sustainable energy source.

In early 2025, work began on a larger biopond and refinements to the digester system—steps designed to test the technical feasibility of scaling BSF production and energy generation.



Early efforts have highlighted the technical complexities, resource requirements, and importance of sustained dialogue with local partners, including academic institutions, to ensure viability. Conversations are ongoing with the recipient community and stakeholders on how best to adapt, complement, and potentially expand the use of BSF products such as larvae and frass (larvae residue) as feedstock for integrated farming systems.

Rather than claiming results prematurely, the project is contributing to a broader conversation: how local innovations can be nurtured, tested, and refined before scaling up. These discussions are essential in determining whether BSF can play a meaningful role in waste management and sustainable energy systems in Negros and beyond.

By remaining transparent about challenges and committed to continuous learning, the BSF project is inspiring communities to imagine ambitious solutions, while grounding expectations in dialogue, adaptation, and careful evaluation of what works in practice.



## YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

ACE has always had a deep and growing commitment to youth empowerment and environmental stewardship—a commitment that will continue to expand into ACE 4. Young people are not just included in the conversation; they are being equipped, uplifted, and empowered to lead it.

## ESSENCE

Project ACE  
Endterm Report  
SEPTEMBER 2025 | NO. 4



## SINE KAG SUGILANON (FILM & STORIES)

What happens when young people are given the tools to tell their own stories?

In the coastal barangay of Bulata and surrounding communities in Cauayan, Negros Occidental, a group of energetic, curious, and passionate youth came together for a storytelling and filmmaking workshop—a creative space where they learned how to frame, shoot, edit, and compose visual narratives. But more than technical skills, what they walked away with was something deeper: a renewed connection to themselves, their community, and the world around them.

Rel, one of the participants, shared that it was only through this workshop that she actually met people from their own barangay. She is now able to collaborate, connect, and be creative not just as an individual, but with others.

In communities facing climate uncertainty, economic hardship, and environmental degradation, the voices of young people are often unheard.



This workshop changed that. It gave them a voice—and a lens—through which they could express what's in their hearts and minds: the erratic weather, the struggles of daily life, the strength of their families, and the beauty of their surroundings.

Through hands-on lessons in storyboarding, framing, shooting, and editing, they learned to tell stories that are uniquely their own.

Art heals. By activating artistic sensibilities at an early stage, we help young people build emotional resilience and a stronger sense of identity and belonging. For these youth, filmmaking became a way to process their reality and reflect on their experiences.

Watch out for their stories—raw, real, and resonant. These youth of Cauayan aren't just the future, they are the voice of the now.



## YOUTH AS ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS



Leadership and responsibility toward the land and sea also began to take tangible shape with the formation of the Bulata Young Farmers and Fisherfolk Association (BUYFFA). Initially, they came together because of a love for sports (volleyball), but this youth-led initiative is now starting to cultivate a new generation of environmentally conscious food producers—young people who understand the importance of sustainable practices in farming and fishing, and who are ready to take ownership of their role as stewards of natural resources.



## ACE 3 SUSTAINABILITY SCHOLARS



**Christian Gamao**  
AGRIBUSINESS



**Shara Gane Matulac**  
EDUCATION

This year, Project ACE awarded scholarships to two outstanding students who excel in their studies and demonstrate a deep commitment to their communities. With strong academic records, proven leadership, and a passion for positive change, they bring fresh energy and vision to the team.

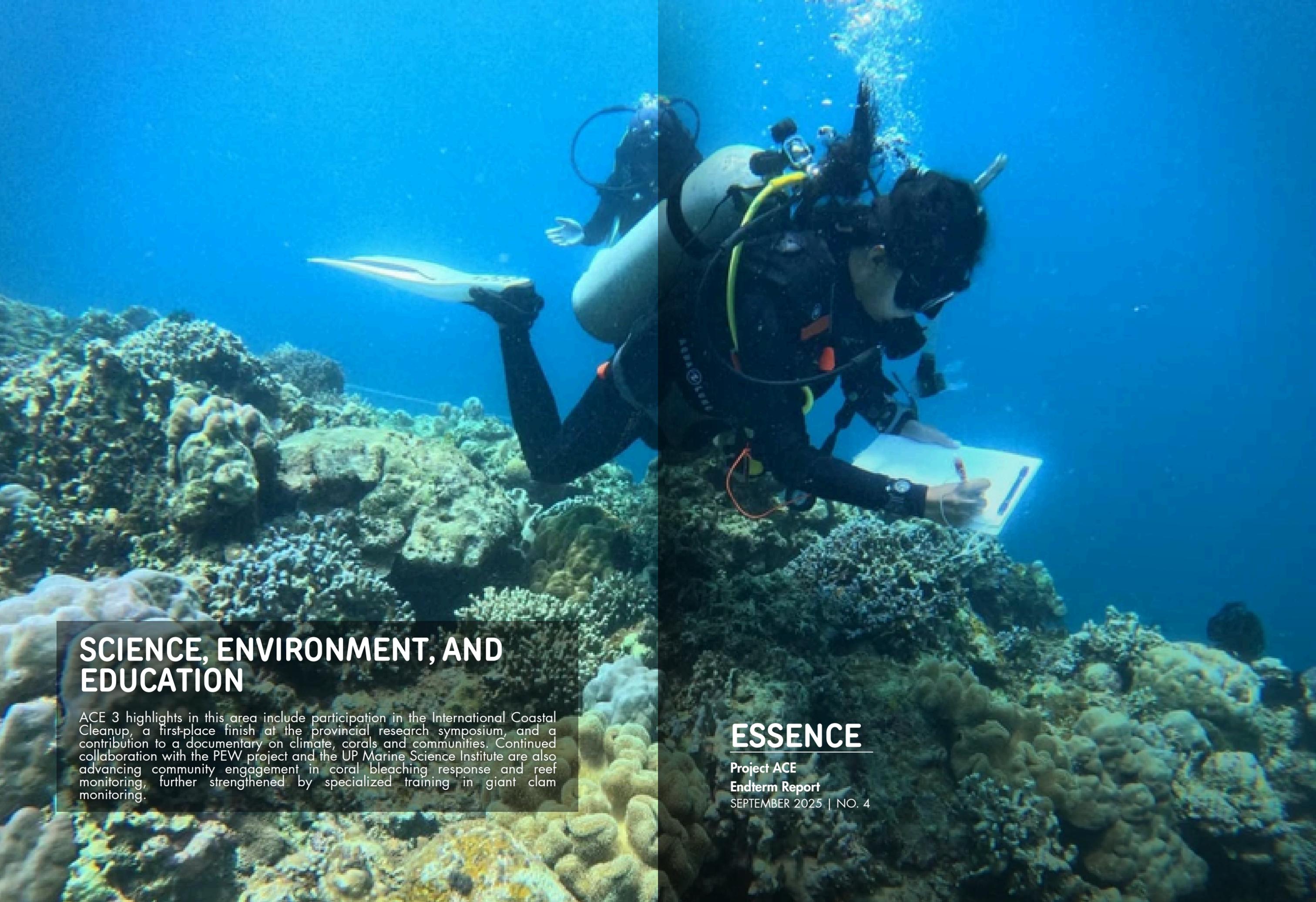
Their onboarding included an orientation, a digital literacy workshop, agreement signing, and provision of laptops. Like other ACE sustainability scholars, they are expected to take active roles in fieldwork and advance conservation efforts.

The ACE Sustainability Scholarship program has grown to seven scholars. They have helped nurture tree nurseries, gaining hands-on experience in plant propagation and care. Their active involvement in the foundation's marine and wildlife camps has also deepened their knowledge of environmental issues and strengthened their commitment to Project ACE's mission.

Building on these experiences, some of the scholars are now developing thesis projects that tackle themes such as sustainable livelihoods, environmental conservation, and community development.



ACE Sustainability Scholars (left - right) Myle Gascon, Christian Gamao, Rica Mae Cabanero, Ryan Ellanic, Angelica Entrealgo, John Christian Matia-ong, Shara Gane Matulac



## SCIENCE, ENVIRONMENT, AND EDUCATION

ACE 3 highlights in this area include participation in the International Coastal Cleanup, a first-place finish at the provincial research symposium, and a contribution to a documentary on climate, corals and communities. Continued collaboration with the PEW project and the UP Marine Science Institute are also advancing community engagement in coral bleaching response and reef monitoring, further strengthened by specialized training in giant clam monitoring.

## ESSENCE

Project ACE  
Endterm Report  
SEPTEMBER 2025 | NO. 4



## #SEATHECHANGE: 609 KG OF TRASH COLLECTED DURING INTERNATIONAL COASTAL CLEANUP DAY

On September 21, 2024, Project ACE marked International Coastal Cleanup Day with strong community engagement in Cauayan. Seventy-one volunteers (37 women, 34 men) from 14 organizations conducted land and dive cleanups across Purok 1 and 3 of Bulata and Hulao-Hulao Reef, collectively removing 609 kilograms of marine debris—a clear demonstration of local commitment to coastal conservation.



## 1ST PLACE AT THE PROVINCIAL RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM



Project ACE joined the 7th Provincial Biodiversity Research Symposium, where Science Officer Georgievic Jessica Cruz presented the paper "Rewilding of Endangered Giant Clams, *Tridacna gigas*, in Danjugan Island, Cauayan, Negros Occidental, Philippines."

The paper, which showcased the team's conservation work on Danjugan Island, earned first place among 12 research entries from various institutions and researchers. This recognition affirms the impact of Project ACE's rewilding efforts and their contribution to conserving endangered species in Negros Occidental.

The symposium was organized by the Provincial Environment Management Office (PEMO) in partnership with PENRO Negros Occidental, Negros Women for Tomorrow, Philippine Normal University-Visayas, and the Philippine Biodiversity Conservation Foundation Inc. (PhilBio).

## ADVANCING CITIZEN SCIENCE AT THE BIOLOGY TEACHERS ASSOCIATION (BIOTA) CONFERENCE



Project ACE also participated in the Biology Teachers Association (BIOTA) - West Visayas Chapter's Annual Regional Conference in Iloilo City. During the conference, a presentation titled "Empowering Communities through Citizen Science: Advancing Conservation and Ecotourism in Barangay Bulata and Cauayan, Negros Occidental, Philippines" was presented by Science Officer Georgievic Jessica Cruz, showcasing the significant contributions of citizen science initiatives undertaken by Project ACE.

This presentation highlighted the valuable role that community members play in collecting data, monitoring environmental changes, and contributing to conservation efforts.

GMA DIGI DOKYU  
INTEGRATED NEWS Climate+

# REVIVING THE CORALS of DANJUGAN



## 150,000 VIEWS FOR DANJUGAN DOCUMENTARY ON CLIMATE, CORALS, COMMUNITIES

The Project ACE team facilitated the filming of a GMA National News Digital Documentary in Danjugan Island and Bulata.

The feature spotlighted coral reef conservation, the climate crisis, and the vital role of local communities, reaching an estimated 150,000 viewers nationwide and abroad. This exposure through one of the Philippines' largest media networks significantly raised awareness of the conservation efforts led by Project ACE and its partners.



## SCIENCE IN ACTION, COMMUNITIES IN MOTION

In 2023, the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute (UPMSI) and the PEW project, led by PRRCFI trustee Dr. Rene Abesamis, launched a coral reef study in Danjungan Island in response to the global bleaching event that also struck southern Negros.

What began as a rapid assessment has since evolved into a long-term collaboration linking scientists, conservationists, and local communities. Marine biologist Czarmayne Escoro has since conducted regular reef surveys in Danjungan and across marine protected areas in Sipalay and Hinoba-an.



In July 2024, monitoring expanded further with the involvement of De La Salle University's Br. Alfred Shields FSC Ocean Research Center, represented by marine biologist Jaime Ferrer, joining UPMSI and PEW in assessing coral health.

Beyond scientific monitoring, the initiative has strengthened community participation through Project ACE. Citizen scientists—including divers, snorkelers, and fish wardens from Cauayan, Hinoba-an, Bulata, and Sipalay—are now trained to identify corals and fish, collect data, and recognize the impacts of climate change on local reefs.

Within the Project ACE community, three PRRCFI staff, two bantay dagat, and one scholar have been trained in UPMSI's methods.

These efforts are cultivating a culture of stewardship that extends from the reefs to local households. The partnership of UPMSI, PEW, and Project ACE demonstrates that when communities are empowered with knowledge, they become active guardians of their marine ecosystems.

What began as a scientific response to a global crisis is now taking root as a movement in southern Negros—where research, conservation, and community action converge to give the reefs a fighting chance to endure and thrive.





## PROJECT ACE AND SEED: RESTORING GIANTS, RESTORING REEFS

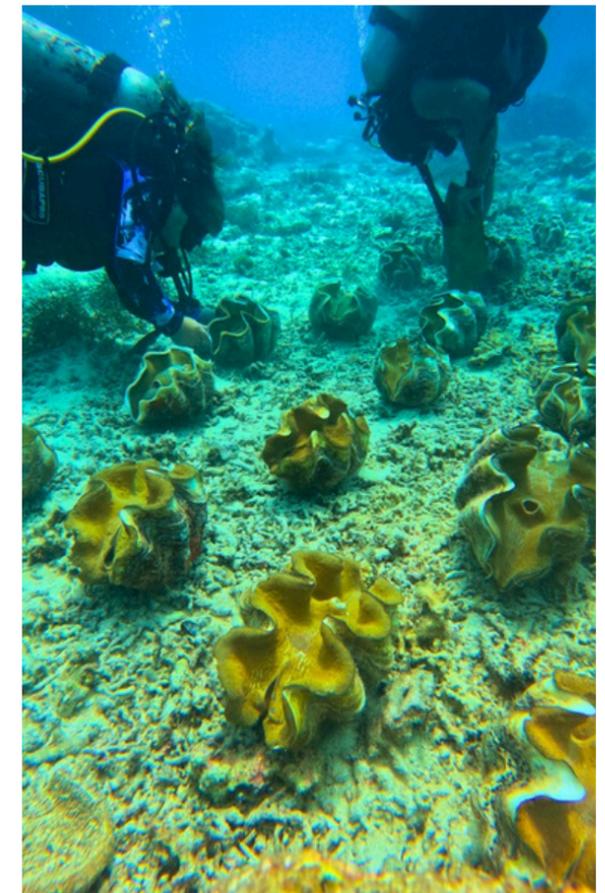
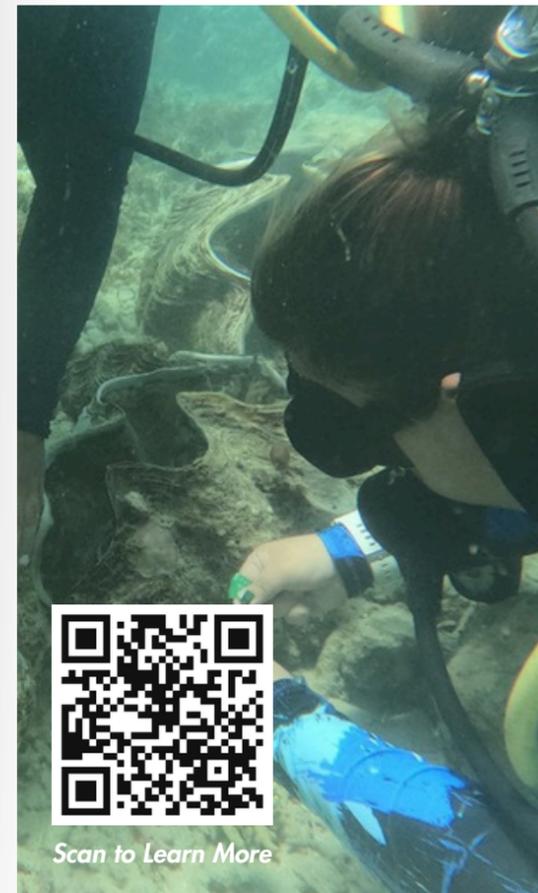
Project ACE, in collaboration with Project SEED, has expanded its conservation work to include giant clam monitoring in Danjungan Island.

These clams—*Tridacna gigas*, the largest of their kind—are vital reef engineers, filtering water, cycling nutrients, and providing shelter for countless marine species. Of the 12 giant clam species in the world, eight are found in the Philippines, with seven thriving around Danjungan.

Yet, their survival is increasingly at risk.

Rising sea temperatures trigger bleaching, a stress response where the symbiotic algae that give clams their color and energy are expelled, leaving them pale and vulnerable. Reseeding efforts in Danjungan marked the beginning of local clam restoration, and monitoring now ensures that populations are tracked and protected over time.

By integrating science with community action, Project ACE and Project SEED are giving these threatened giants a renewed chance to strengthen reefs and sustain marine biodiversity for generations to come.



*Project SEED is a conservation initiative by the Philippine Reef and Rainforest Conservation Foundation, Inc. (PRRCFI), supported by Don Papa Rum and the City of Sipalay. The project focuses on environmental restoration through two main components: coastal reforestation and giant clam reseedling.*



# PEOPLE OF ACE

UNCOVERING  
IN-DEPTH STORIES

## ESSENCE

Project ACE  
Endterm Report  
SEPTEMBER 2025 | NO. 4



# A LIFETIME OF SERVICE, A HEART FOR COMMUNITY

## Bayanihan in the Modern Age

Inviting someone into your home and trusting them with open hands is central to the Filipino concept of *bayanihan*. Centuries ago, friendships were sealed with *sanduguan*—a ritual of mixing blood into a drink. Though the ritual has faded, its essence lives on: strangers treated as kin, united by shared trust and kindness.

In Negros, that spirit thrives in simple gestures—*maayong aga* (good morning) or *panghagda kaon* (come eat). Such everyday hospitality continues to bind communities together.

This same spirit defines Marietta “Mayette” Gersaniva, Community Development Officer of PRRCFI.

## A Life Rooted in Service

For 35 years, Mayette has devoted her life to community development. Raised in rural Bago City, Negros Occidental, she grew up familiar with hardship. Her family relied on farming, and from this she drew the determination to pursue a degree in Agricultural Education—not just to help her family, but also to uplift her community.

Her professional journey began in 1991 with a non-government organization. Since then, she has never left the path of service. She married young, raised two children, supported their studies, and even helped her siblings finish school. Life tested her with hardships, including widowhood, but she balanced motherhood and community work with quiet resilience.

Two years ago, she joined PRRCFI. Already familiar with its mission through its sister organization, Negros Forest and Ecological Foundation Inc., now Talarak Foundation, she shifted from forest conservation to marine work, now serving coastal communities in Barangay Bulata, Cauayan.



## Building Trust in Bulata

In Bulata, Mayette quickly became a familiar and trusted presence.

Families greet her warmly, and many, especially women, turn to her for advice on both projects and personal matters. For her, trust is a responsibility.



“It’s part of my daily life,” she says, embracing extra hours without complaint.

With her children now grown, she serves the community wholeheartedly.



## Learning Through Empathy

Each community has taught Mayette new lessons. In ACE 2 (2023), she saw Bulata exceed expectations in managing marine protected areas and sustaining livelihood projects.

## Championing Women’s Empowerment

A strong advocate for women, Mayette ensures mothers and wives are active players in conservation and livelihood.

She has supported groups in jewelry-making, gardening, and leadership roles, affirming that women’s work is essential to strengthening communities.

“I am grateful to work with PRRCFI and Project ACE,” she says. “Through them, I became closer to the community, especially the women, but also the fathers. Even though I’m new here, they trust me deeply.”

For her, service is passion: “To serve with both heart and mind is my calling. Even simple ideas can change lives.”

## Words for the Next Generation

Her message for the youth is simple: “Learning never ends. Don’t limit yourself. Pursue your passion, even if it isn’t perfect. Every experience is a chance to grow.”

# “KING” OF CHANGE: EMPOWERING BULATA’S YOUTH

## Finding Purpose Back Home

“The world was my oyster,” says Lloyd Kevin “King” Guanzon, Barangay Bulata’s number one *kagawad* (councilor) and Committee Head on Environment, Tourism, and Laws & Ordinances.

In his twenties, King lived a life many aspired to—working as a seafarer, traveling the globe, and earning a substantial income before the age of 30. But the pandemic in 2019 changed everything. Stuck on a cargo vessel for eight months, the longest he had ever been away from home, he confronted the toll of isolation and realized his career no longer fulfilled him. At 27, he made a choice: he would not renew his contract. He would return home and begin again.

## Return to Roots

Back in Bulata, King reconnected through a marine and wildlife camp in Danjugan Island, a program he had once joined as a child. This time, he returned not as a camper but as an adult leader. Watching the kids, he experienced an epiphany: “This is my life and my purpose.”

Months later, he founded Team Malaya (“free” in English), a youth group that engages Bulata’s young people in sports, community building, and environmental awareness. The group formed a volleyball team, joined tournaments, and created an outlet for youth beyond work and screens.

“I’m genuinely happy the kids have accomplished something. Most of the children here are trained to work at a young age. I want them to enjoy what they love and not just work.” Through Malaya, the youth are also able to learn about social media ethics, activism, and responsibility.

“I want them to give back to the community,” he adds, envisioning a future where Bulata’s youth return as empowered professionals who uplift their hometown.



## Choosing Fulfillment Over Comfort

Now 31, King looks back at his past life at sea. Though financially rewarding, it left him empty. Today, he finds meaning in service: “Giving back to the community that raised me is more important than any material thing.”

For his birthday last July, instead of throwing a party, he organized an outreach program across Bulata. The gesture reflects values instilled by his parents: humility, hard work, and responsibility.



King’s family has long ties with PRRCFI. With its support, they started a family business. He remembers British volunteers (*Coral Cay*) visiting his school, teaching environmental awareness, and introducing him to computers. Those early lessons planted seeds of conservation and community spirit.

As a child, frequent trips to Danjugan taught him to respect coral, fish, and wildlife. “I didn’t realize it then,” he says, “but everything I learned as a kid would one day come full circle.”

## Leadership in the Grassroots

As a *kagawad*, King channels his passion into governance. Politics is tough, especially for young leaders advocating transparency, but he remains undeterred.

“I have people who believe in me, but we are not enough,” he admits. “We need more people who are transparent and knowledgeable to fulfill our mission.”

In just three years, he has authored ordinances, led environmental projects, and supported education, earning respect through both charisma and sincerity. King’s journey, from seafarer to community leader, shows the importance of looking back and paying it forward.

By choosing service over comfort, he rediscovered purpose.

## FINDING THE REAL NEMO: FACING CLIMATE REALITIES WITH HOPE



Like many millennials and Gen Z, John Christian “Janjan” Matia-ong grew up watching *Finding Nemo*. But for him, the story wasn’t just a movie—it was the start of a lifelong fascination with the ocean.

At just five years old, Janjan often joined his father, a boat operator, on trips to Danjungan Island, a marine sanctuary in Brgy. Bulata, Negros. “When I was a kid, I used to wear the *Finding Nemo* CD around my neck,” he laughs, remembering how he’d go from house to house just to watch it with his friends.

His most vivid memory came when snorkeling at Danjungan, where he saw a clownfish nestled in a sea anemone. Curious, he reached out to touch it. “I didn’t know it wasn’t allowed,” he recalls, “and my hand itched right after.” That magical moment—meeting “Nemo” in real life—sparked a deep connection with the sea that would define his future.

### **Anchored by the Sea**

Today, Janjan is an ACE sustainability scholar, citizen scientist, and soon-to-be fisheries graduate. Both triumphs and trials have shaped his journey from being a young conservationist.

His father’s passing left Janjan and his younger siblings under the care of their grandmother, Nanay Bebe, in a modest home overlooking Danjungan. Life by the shore brought constant reminders of nature’s power. Typhoons frequently flooded their house and destroyed livestock. “One time, he recalls, the water rose so fast that I had to carry my grandmother’s pig to save it from drowning.”

Despite hardships, Nanay Bebe nurtured his curiosity. A fish vendor her whole life, she taught him to recognize species and understand their value. “Since I was a kid, I always asked Nanay why we live so close to the sea,” Janjan says. “She would answer, ‘Because this has been our livelihood since the beginning.’”

### **Scholar, Citizen Scientist, Achiever**

That childhood curiosity evolved into passion. When Janjan earned his scholarship, it opened doors to opportunities he had once only dreamed of.

He has since excelled academically, represented his community as a citizen scientist, and balanced his studies with achievements in sports, such as basketball.

He completed his internship and undergraduate thesis on Danjungan Island’s beach forests. Through ACE and partner trainings, he gained skills in fish and coral identification, turning his regular skin dives into purposeful fieldwork.

“Now, when I look underwater, I’m equipped with knowledge,” he explains. “It’s not just swimming—it’s understanding ecosystems.”



### **A Voice for Climate Action**

Experiencing typhoons firsthand and learning about rising seas deepened his commitment to climate advocacy.

He often reminds peers that climate change is real and already happening, visible in stronger storms and coral bleaching events.

In community gatherings, Janjan shares lessons on marine respect, waste management, and the urgent need to protect biodiversity. He sees himself as both a learner and a teacher—absorbing science in the classroom while translating it into everyday wisdom for Bulata’s youth.

### **Looking Ahead**

As Janjan prepares to graduate with a degree in fisheries, he feels more equipped than ever to serve. His scholarship years honed not only his academic strength but also his sense of responsibility to the community and the environment.

From carrying *Finding Nemo* on a CD to carrying the weight of advocacy, his story reflects how childhood wonder can grow into purposeful action. “Becoming a protector of the seas,” he says, “isn’t just about me. It’s about making sure the next generation in Bulata will still have a sea worth calling home.”

# HIGHLIGHTS & LOOKING ONWARDS

Project Actions for Communities and Environment (ACE) Year 3 was more than a series of activities — it was a story of people coming together, learning from one another, and shaping a shared vision for a sustainable future.

From the upland farms to the coral reefs of southern Negros, ACE 3 celebrated environmental stewardship, climate action, and sustainable livelihoods. At its heart was a simple but powerful idea: when communities are empowered, ecosystems thrive.

We saw this in the way knowledge flowed across generations and sectors. Fisherfolk, farmers, women, and the youth — often the most vulnerable to climate change — stepped forward not only as participants but as champions of action. With our ridge-to-reef approach, connections deepened between coastal and upland communities, and partnerships with institutions added new strength to the cause.

One such collaboration was with the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute (UPMSI) and Dr. Rene Abesamis.



Together, we trained citizen scientists — from young ACE scholars to seasoned sea wardens — equipping them with skills to survey reefs and contribute to both global efforts like the Pew project and local monitoring of marine protected areas in Danjungan and southern Negros.



The commitment to the next generation remained at the center. Seven ACE scholars continued their academic journeys in environmental fields, while other youth joined hands in tree-planting, clean-up drives, and skills development workshops. During the “Para Sa Klima” Camp, young voices from southern Negros shared firsthand how the climate crisis has touched their lives. There, science met story — linking hard facts about accountability for the climate crisis with heartfelt testimonies, and sparking the kind of inspiration that leads to collective action.

Livelihood initiatives also became more nature-positive. ACE 3 strengthened ties with eight people’s organizations whose small-scale projects have grown into sustainable enterprises. What began as support has matured into partnership, with reinvestments and scaling up proving that community-led livelihood models can endure.

These POs now look toward forming a federation — pooling efforts into a stronger, united force for community development.

Looking back, ACE 3 was about momentum — ripples of change spreading outward from the smallest act of stewardship. Looking forward, ACE 4 promises to weave these threads together into a more interconnected ecosystem: one where livelihoods, youth empowerment, climate action, and conservation are not separate strands but part of a single, resilient fabric.

The story of ACE continues — and the possibilities ahead are as vast as the seas we protect and as enduring as the forests we nurture.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt thanks to our project partners whose support and collaboration have made this journey possible.

The culmination of ACE 3 is not the end, but a celebration of the milestones we have achieved together. Every activity, livelihood initiative, and conservation effort was realized through your commitment and partnership. We especially thank our local leaders, people's organizations, our staff and trustees, partner agencies, and community members whose dedication has created a lasting impact. This success reflects your resilience, unity, and shared vision for progress.

As we move to ACE 4, may the lessons and partnerships from ACE 3 continue to inspire stronger communities and more sustainable livelihoods. Together, we have shown that true collaboration drives meaningful change.

*Madamo gid nga salamat*—we look forward to continuing this journey with you.

## PRRCFI PROJECT TEAM

Current:  
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Marietta Gersaniva — Community Development Officer  
Lloyd Kevin Guanzon — Education Officer  
Gianina Consing — Science Officer  
Michael Vincent Padios — Forester  
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Former:  
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Ma. Jaya Ariola  
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## PRRCFI BOARD OF TRUSTEES

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Terence Dacles — Trustee Adviser for Sustainability  
Josine Alexandra Gamboa — Trustee Adviser for Legal Affairs  
Rhoda Phillips — Trustee Adviser for Organisational Development  
Josefa Carandang — Trustee Adviser for Gender & Community Development  
Rene Abesamis — Trustee Adviser for Science & Research

## PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATIONS

Bantay Dagat of Danjugan Marine Reserve and Sanctuary (BD)  
Bulata Small Fisherfolks Association (BUSFA)  
Bulata Solo Parents Integrated Vendors Association (BUSPIVA)  
Bulata Watershed and Sustainable Fisherfolk Association (BWASSFFA)  
Biga-a Dam Farmers and Fisherfolks Small Water Irrigation System Association (BIDAFFSWISA)  
Bulata Resorts and Balsa Tour Guide and Workers Association (BREBATGAWA)  
Purok 6 Integrated Farmers and Fisherfolk Association (PIFFA)  
Bulata Youth Farmers and Fisherfolk Association (BUYFFA)

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Carlos Hilado Memorial State University Forestry Department (CHMSU)  
State University of Northern Negros Fisheries Department (SUNN)  
University of St. La Salle Biology Department (USLS)  
Youth Empowering Youth Initiative Inc. (YEY)  
Slow Food Negros

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Local Government Unit of Barangay Bulata, Cauayan  
Local Government Unit of Barangay Elijan, Cauayan  
Local Government Unit of the City of Sipalay  
Local Government Unit of Barangay Cartagena, Sipalay  
Department of Tourism - Negros Island Region  
Province of Negros Occidental - Provincial Environmental Management Office

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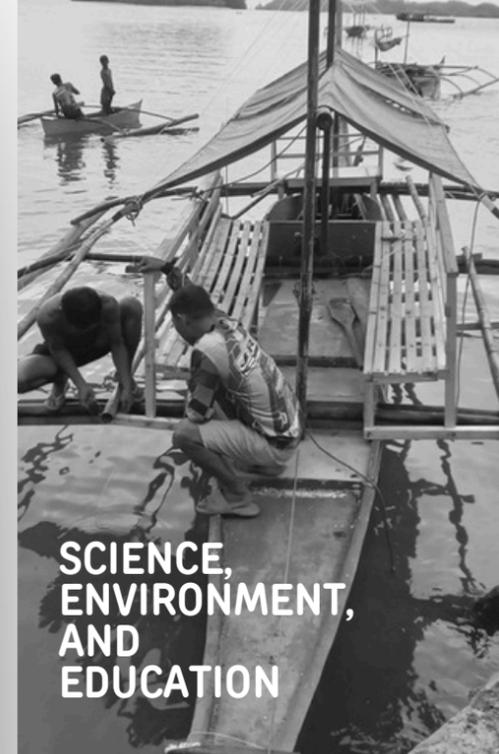
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## ESSENCE

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# ESSENCE

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Philippine Reef  
and Rainforest  
Conservation  
Foundation, Inc.



Danjungan  
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**PROJECT ACE YEAR 3 ENDTERM REPORT  
(ACTIONS FOR COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT)**