NATURE

THE PHILIPPINES
ISLANDS ON THE EDGE

4K

2 × 50 min.

4K, 5.1 and Stereo

Executive producers: **Roman Landauer, Sabine Holzer, Walter Köhler**

TERRA MATER
Factual Studios

The Philippines have been formed by Earth's powerful forces for millions of years. Oceans, seas, volcanos and the diverse marine life at the edge of the Coral Triangle make these islands a truly unique natural paradise on the Pacific Ring of Fire.

PART I: ABUNDANCE

A shadow drifts across the green of the rainforest. It is early afternoon and the warm, damp air rises far above the steaming trees. Two massive wings circle lazily above the treetops, as though the movement of individual feathers is sufficient to detect the perfect air current. A pair of eyes stares out between the wings, never losing sight of the trees below. Not for an instant.

The bird of prey's attack comes out of nowhere. Its target: a group of macaques that have settled comfortably high in the branches. The surprise attack provokes screeching and screaming as the monkeys scatter… The Philippine eagle's attack has been a failure, it will have to seek out new prey. These spectacular birds have a wingspan of up to two metres and hunt monkeys, reptiles, flying squirrels, other aerial predators like owls and colugos.

Colugos, also known as flying lemurs, are nocturnal gliding mammals that inhabit the higher reaches of the rainforest and search for food in the early hours of the morning or in the evening. They move slowly, making them easy prey for the Philippine eagle. There are just two species of colugo worldwide. One of these is the Philippine gliding lemur, which is found primarily on the islands of Bohol and Mindanao.

The Philippines consist of more than 7,000 islands and are located on the Pacific Ring of Fire. The Visayas archipelago connects the two main islands, Luzon in the north and Mindanao in the south. Here, the mighty eastern Pacific Plate pushes itself under the Philippine Plate, creating one of the world's deepest submarine trenches off the coast of the islands. The Philippine Trench is more than 10,000 metres deep and 1,300 kilometres long. A little further east lie the Palau, Yap and Marianas trenches. This deeply unstable tectonic situation leads to increased volcanic activity on the Philippines, where tropical rainforests and volcanos lie side by side and saltwater and freshwater mix. It is the perfect environment for stunning biodiversity.

Mindanao is home to the tarsier, which inhabits the lower branches of trees and spends much of the day sleeping hidden among the leaves. Tarsiers are small enough to fit in a human hand. Their most distinctive feature is their large eyes. Their tiny fingers resemble those of human babies.

The Agusan swamps and the marshes near Ligawasan are the perfect habitat for the Philippine crocodile, but only an estimated 250 of the reptiles remain as a result of hunting and deforestation. These freshwater crocodiles don't pose much risk to humans—unlike the saltwater crocodiles that frequently inhabit the brackish waters of the Philippine river deltas: "Salties" captured near Bunawan have been up to 6.5 metres long. These crocodiles have no problem killing buffalo or, indeed, humans.

PART II: DIVERSITY

When the evening sun falls across the surface of the sea, an unusual predator emerges to hunt. Although it is also known as the Palawan bearcat, it is more closely related to the Asian palm civets than to bears or cats. Binturongs prefer to live alone or in small groups led by dominant females. These short-legged, somewhat plump-looking mammals eat fruits as well as fish, insects and birds.

Waters are shallow around the western side of the Philippine archipelago. 18,000 years ago, this part of the Philippines was connected to the Asian continent by way of Borneo, Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. At the end of the Ice Age the inland ice melted, and the ensuing rise in sea levels created the islands around the Sulu Sea. This is reflected in the local animal population, which contains very few endemic species but many that are also found on Borneo or the mainland—like the Balabac chevrotain or Philippine mouse-deer, a nocturnal ruminant. It is the world's smallest hoofed mammal.

The area around the limestone caves of the Puerto Princesa National Park attracts an incredible variety of bird species and the region is also home to around 1,000 different plant species. The Palawan peacock-pheasant has become a symbol of Puerto Princesa. Like the olive-backed sunbird, it lives off the sweet nectar provided by the colourful blossoms of smaller plants. The Palawan hornbill, on the other hand, spends much of its time in the treetops. Shimmering Philippine dwarf kingfishers make their homes near bodies of water.

The Puerto Princesa National Park is home to one of the world's most extensive cave systems. A subterranean river flows through the large limestone caves. The discovery of a 20-million-year-old fossil of an extinct sea cow species a few years ago attracted international attention. The mangrove forests and surrounding areas are home to Asian water monitors, spitting cobras and reticulated pythons.

The reefs of Palawan and the Sulu Sea are the primary breeding grounds of green sea turtles, and sharks have established nurseries in underwater caves. Pygmy seahorses hide among the coral branches. Eagle rays drift through the waters in twos and threes. A mimic octopus has settled on the sandy seabed.
Up in the North, Isla Verde Strait not only links the isles of Luzon and Mindanao, but also the South China Sea with the Sibuyan Sea. On the surface shipping is busy as the strait opens the world for Manila, housing not less than two million people. But slide into the water and you meet the most exciting treasure planet earth can offer: here, scientists verified more than thousand species of fish and more than three hundred different kinds of corals. Nowhere else has anybody found such a broad variety of species.

Riffs never fully cover the ground. The flat seabed has a layer of dark sand, a nourishing substratum for the Isla Verde Strait's diverse microfauna. Pfeffer's flamboyant cuttlefish chase careless hermit crabs, devil fish and scorpionfish lurk for prey, unmoved, which does not apply for the male thorny sea horse: it lovingly cares for its offspring that hides in his belly fold. The variety of shapes and colours seems to be unlimited—at least as long as humans don't interfere in the natural flow of this fascinating manufactory of species and life.

The country's biodiversity is considered one of the greatest in the world. However, rising sea levels once again threaten to significantly alter the face of the region, with far-reaching consequences for people, flora and fauna. How will the animals and plants of the Philippines react to the rapid and dramatic climate changes facing the region?

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Terra Mater Factual Studios GmbH
Wambachergasse 2, 1130 Vienna/Austria
phone +43-1-87003-0, office@terramater.at
#terramatters