



[Rice terraces becoming residential zone unstoppable - Baguilat](http://www.cordilleravoice.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2572:rice-terraces-becoming-residential-zone-unstoppable-baguilat&catid=93:ifugao&Itemid=159)

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By Sly L. Quintos, Editor, The Baguio Chronicle - Sunday, 08 July 2012 14:47

LAGAWE, Ifugao --- Despite huge successes reaped by the movement to conserve the world-famous Ifugao Rice Terraces, the continued construction of residential houses within the terraces area is "really a big dilemma", Ifugao Congressman Teddy Baguilat, Jr. told the Baguio Chronicle. "The rice terraces are private properties; they can do what they want," Baguilat said.

This writer was with media practitioners who were in town for the formal opening of the province's 46th foundation anniversary.

The week-long festivity is dubbed as "Gotad ad Ifugao 2012" with the theme "Harnessing our Agri-Industrial Tourism Potential: Our gift to mankind". Gotad is an Ifugao term which usually refers to a large gathering of people and a certain phase of prestige rites where people converge in the village of the family conducting the rites.

Meanwhile, the world's "wonder" has been dropped from the list of World Heritage in Danger during the 36th session of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee held recently in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Accordingly, the "delisting" was prompted by the vigorous conservation efforts which contributed mainly to the success of restoring the rice terraces as well as support from non-government organizations and the local government unit intervention programs.

Ifugao Governor Eugene Balitang said the formal removal from the list of endangered World Heritage Sites since its enlistment in 2001 marks the end of a long battle yet signals another challenge that the Ifugaos must face on, adding that the conservation efforts do not end there but vigilance in safeguarding the terraces from activities that would destroy the heritage site should be sustained.

The Rice Terraces in 1995 became the first-ever property to be enshrined in the cultural landscape category of the World Heritage List. But six years later in 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee, during its 25th session held in Helsinki, Finland, announced that the Rice Terraces faced serious risks and was officially listed as one of the world's treasures that humanity risked losing forever.

The committee said these threats include neglected irrigation systems and migration and warned against unregulated developments in the site, lack of focus on tourism requirements and a weak management system.

The International Committee on Monument and Sites or ICOMOS said that "a worrying percentage of [the] rice terraces had deteriorated; springs had dried up and deforestation within the watershed had occurred; subsistence farming and limited alternative economic opportunities had forced many Ifugaos to seek work elsewhere; and traditions and rituals associated with the cultivation of rice had been disappearing."

In response, the Ifugao Cultural Heritage Office (ICHO) was established and has worked closely with various groups, such as the Provincial Government of Ifugao and Non-profit Group SITMo (Save the Ifugao Terraces Monument).

"What we can only do is to try to convince them and make them reflect on the future of the rice terraces," Baguilat said. "If they want to preserve it as it is, then make it a barangay ordinance or a collective decision of the family not to put up houses," he added. "But if the people think that because of the population explosion some of the terraces must be converted into residential areas, then that is their decision."

"At the end of the day, it is the people who would decide what they want to do with the rice terraces," Baguilat added. According to him, "as officials, the rice terraces is not just about tourism; it is not just about taking pictures or staying in a nice hotel". "It is also our source of food," he said.

"The Ifugaos should realize that everybody is concerned about the (conservation of the) rice terraces," he said, stressing the age-old tradition that the rice terraces were built (re-built) through community and voluntary efforts.

Is it right for the government to allocate funds for the restoration of a private property?

"It must be voluntary," Baguilat contended. "Right now, it is a mix of volunteerism at the same time providing them with livelihood; we pay them labor cost and the materials," he said. "The rice terraces would be maintained voluntarily by the people while the government maintains the roads leading thereto."

Meanwhile, the campaign to preserve the rice terraces scored a major victory on June 26, as the 36th Session of the World Heritage Committee formally removed the site from the List of the World Heritage in Danger. Composed of 21 of the State Parties to the World Heritage Convention, the Committee decided that the Philippines had successfully met the Desired State of Conservation. The factors affecting the committees' decision included successful landscape restoration and conservation, protection and planning and proper management. According to the international body, the Philippines achieved the restoration of at least 50 percent of the collapsed terraces and the required documentation and rehabilitation of major irrigation systems in the site had been accomplished.

The body also noted that policies and laws preserving the site were now in place. Community-based land use and zoning plans are being developed and measures ensuring the site's proper management and its protection from natural disasters had been implemented.

"This decision is a historic moment for the Philippines," Ambassador Cristina Ortega, Philippine Permanent Delegate to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) said. "To have the international community recognize our commitment and effort in reinstating the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras in the World Heritage List is, for us, a great honor and accomplishment. Its removal from the list of World Heritage in Danger reinforces anew its grandeur and relevance as a globally important cultural landscape."

"For Filipinos, the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras best embody the harmonious relationship between humankind and nature. More than 2,000 years ago, the Ifugao community of the Philippines built the terraces in a strong spirit of cooperation and mutual respect," she added. According to UNESCO, the Rice Terraces represent the "fruit of knowledge handed down from one generation to the next and the expression of sacred traditions and a delicate social balance; (a) landscape of great beauty that expresses the harmony between humankind and the environment."*