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FOREST FACES

Hopes and regrets in Philippine forestry

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
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Environmental Science for Social Change (ESSC)

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Forest Faces: Hopes and regrets in Philippine forestry

In few countries of the world has forest management and its successes and failures been played out as dramatically as in the Philippines. The rapid deforestation that has taken place over the past decades has been embedded within a unique context – one that has included vibrant civil society involvement and keen media attention on a range of forest-related issues including natural disasters, corruption, misuse and mismanagement, indigenous peoples' rights and conflicts over the use and distribution of national endowments. The growing influence of civil society and NGOs in the Philippines has been mirrored by drives towards increasing participation and by the rapid politicization of natural resource management. In the forest sector, these elements have led to vociferous calls for a total ban on logging and a re-visioning of forests as much more than a source of timber. Forests are now far more readily recognized for their roles in providing clean water, maintaining biodiversity, mitigating climate change and sustaining traditional forest-based cultures and peoples. Unfortunately, the scale of forest loss experienced in the past has irrevocably altered the identity of many Filipinos – communities and individuals with collective memories deeply rooted in relationships with the surrounding natural environment.

Forest Faces: Hopes and regrets in Philippine forestry is a testament to the rich and multifaceted connection that exists between Filipinos and their forests. As elsewhere, there is no simplistic snapshot of how people view and interact with the environment. Rather this publication seeks to provide a kaleidoscope, displaying the depth and diversity of these fluid relationships. The profiles contained within this publication cover a wide and at times surprising range of viewpoints. One of

the key values maintained throughout is the honesty and openness of the individuals profiled and the frankness of the perspectives they share. Some appear on an almost spiritual plane, particularly indigenous or tribal members, as they interpret their own identities – individually and ethnically – as inextricably linked to the well-being and continued existence of ancestral forests. However, as much as we might idealize the connection between people and forests, the reality is that not all embrace the value and indispensability of trees and forests. Underlying the story told by this publication are currents of regret for what has gone before, and cautionary notes for what may yet be to come.

The masterful way in which the interviewers portray their subjects reveals hidden sides to otherwise well-known public figures. The sensitivity of the enquiry, uncovering aspirations, memories and a wealth of experience, serves as a backdrop to the mapping out of the future of Philippine forests. Featuring both the weak and the powerful, the unknown as well as the most influential individuals in recent Philippine forest history, the profiles provide rare insights of the past and tantalizing glimpses of the future. In concert with powerful photography, this publication offers a holistic and artistic representation of Philippine forests – through the eyes of those most intimately connected to them.

FAO perceives this publication as a decisive step in the move to re-define forestry in terms of multiple benefits – encompassing the full range of functional, economic, social and spiritual values. In essence, this publication takes us closer to Jack Westoby’s famous observation that, *“Forestry is not about trees, it is about people.”*

However, as much as we might idealize the connection between people and forests, the reality is that not all embrace the value and indispensability of trees and forests. Underlying the story told by this publication are currents of regret for what has gone before, and cautionary notes for what may yet be to come.



JOSE L. ATIENZA, JR.

Secretary

Department of Environment and Natural Resources

Having recently been appointed to head the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), I find it encouraging that publications such as “Forest Faces” are written and made available to the public. Efforts outside of the government are highly appreciated, especially in DENR, as we recognize that the environment and natural resources of the country are of concern to everybody, not just DENR.

Forest Faces provides the reader with personal and intimate glimpses of different generations of Filipinos from various sectors and their understanding of Philippine forests and the environment: where these forests were before and places where they still remain. Purposely, the publication did not limit itself to foresters, although there are a number featured. Thus, the book is about people and people’s lives in relation to forests. Featured stories range from the older generation’s experiences and lessons learnt to the younger generation’s expectations and hopes.

I was born and bred in Manila and it was a very different place during my boyhood. I grew up in a ravaged city after the Second World War, but the natural environment was a lot better then. I grew up in the Malate area right beside Manila Bay. Its waters were clear and clean, and we could swim any time of the day, within sight of the sunken ships. The Pasig River was also very clean, with free flowing water where we could swim and fish. The creeks and esteros still flowed with comparatively clear water. I have good memories of a city that was well laid out by the American architect Daniel Burnham, with playgrounds in many parts of the city.

During the Japanese occupation, our family evacuated to Montalban where I have memories of the big, rushing Montalban River. The river is still there today, but



Secretary Jose L. Atienza, Jr., prior to his appointment as DENR Secretary in August 2007, served as Mayor of the City of Manila for three consecutive terms from 1998 until June 2007. He also served as Vice Mayor from 1992-1998. Other government positions included a brief one-year stint as General Manager of the National Housing Authority and as an assemblyman from 1984-1986 in the Regular Batasang Pambansa [the parliamentary system of that time].

No doubt we still need to thicken the forest areas more, though I am more conscious now of the need to review and scrutinize every cutting permit and forest management agreement. Meticulous analysis is needed.

back then it was about six times wider. My father used to take me to the nearby forests for walks and this was where I had my earliest experiences with forests, the trees, and the river I used to swim in.

We went back to Manila after the war and I remember Taft Avenue (a major thoroughfare at the heart of the city) with acacia trees on both sides. It was a lovely avenue but during the ravages of the liberation struggles many of the acacia were burned; after a while the stumps and branches sprouted anew. Manila recovered and its re-growth occurred in the 1950s and in the 1960s.

As an architect by profession I am inspired by natural beauty, by green and natural surroundings. I enjoy looking at trees, their architecture, and to me every tree is a monument to nature. I enjoyed drawing trees as a hobby.

As chief executive of Manila from 1998 to 2007 and working with a population that grew from 200 thousand to four million, I ensured the deliberate provision of open spaces for public congregation. Even in areas that are densely populated, I insisted on providing open spaces, however small the areas were, and developed those spaces to a level that people better appreciate. Amenities such as benches, tile flooring, and trees were also added. I also had to ensure that the services were maximized.

As I shift this model of city management to the Philippine environment, the application is in attending to reforestation needs more appropriately, the protection of what's left of the natural resources, and the restoration of bodies of water that have become excessively polluted (e.g. Manila Bay, Laguna Lake, Pasig River, even Taal Lake) and the major rivers that have been lost. Admittedly, we still do not have enough forest cover and have not restored what we used to have. But we have greatly improved from the recent past. I always view the landscape when I travel and used to see very barren, bald areas and mountains, but now there are many green mountains. No doubt we still need to thicken the forest areas more, though I am more conscious now of the need to review and scrutinize every cutting permit and forest management agreement. Meticulous analysis is needed.

At DENR, I am pursuing programs that greatly draw on people's capacities and willingness to share and contribute, and to respond accordingly and take action. I hope that this publication attains a readership as wide as possible and serves to encourage a continuing care and concern for our forests, our biodiversity, and all our natural resources. My best wishes and congratulations to Environmental Science for Social Change (ESSC) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for their support!

The development of this publication was born of an interest to give a “face” to forest management and to society in relation to Philippine forests. The initial inspiration for the publication came from Christopher Brown and Patrick Durst of FAO, who have worked with various partners in the Asia-Pacific region over the last few years to increase the focus on poverty among marginalized communities and how it hinders progress toward sustainable forest management. We have shared many stories, humorous and wise, always acknowledging the deeper human struggles – from the personal to the bureaucratic – that genuinely seek to keep our forests intact and slowly turn the corner on unsustainable forest use in the Philippines.

Acknowledgment first goes to the more than one hundred individuals interviewed for this publication. Their generosity, hospitality and acceptance – despite the occasional risks and work pressures – telling their stories without having full knowledge of the final picture, is much appreciated. Their patience and willingness to have their photos taken as part of the interview process is also appreciated. Apologies go to the many interviewees who could not be accommodated in the publication, and to those whose experiences and stories have not been adequately presented.

This publication could not have materialized without the quiet support of Patrick Durst, and his patient and industrious team, corresponding and responding to a multitude of issues and tasks. Regan Suzuki took up the unenviable role of overseeing the completion of all edits. Janice Naewboonnien invested considerable time and skill in the final polishing of the interviews and Chanida Chavanich has pursued many of the logistics involving the printing of the publication. As well, Tarina Ayazi and the FAO Publications Review Committee have contributed their time and effort into ensuring the final quality of this publication.

Last, but certainly not least, has been the team in the Philippines. Sylvia Micalat and Maricel de Jesus deftly managed the interview materials and photographs while smoothing out bottlenecks in scheduling, and along with Pat Durst wondered what percentage of the Philippine population would be interviewed in the long process – or rather, what small percentage might be left out. Sylvia’s ability to stay true to the flow of discussion, technical and emotional, while keeping the personal thought and character tangible, reflected true art. Maricel’s night forays continued to present the team with the layout of text and photographs with style, contributing much to the quality of the work and its overall appeal. Cesar Aguinaldo and Rowena Soriaga pulled in the resources and contacts not only of the Environmental Science for Social Change, but also the Asia Forest Network and Apu Palamguwan Cultural Education Center in order to connect us with the range of people and forests.

Many thanks to all of these people for making Forest Faces possible.





Who gives us our forests?

We often speak today of what makes up our forests, with the rich biodiversity and the natural ecosystems, splendid and full of resources, that sustain countless ecological services for our economy and society. But who are the people who give us our forests today?

The initial intention of this publication was to broaden the understanding of the Philippine forestry sector by not only presenting the experiences of the people living and working around the forest, but also by listening to the thoughts of people down the line and at the consumer end of the value chain and how society itself views forests. In doing so, the values associated with forest ecosystems and the services provided can be revealed, especially in relation to conservation and biodiversity. This includes reflections on the present state of forest management, the consumption of forest products, and the recognition of forest benefits beyond timber. Non-technical people do not think in these terms, as their thoughts relate to their particular context, yet there is an increasing need for clearer and more accountable management of forests.

I went around and spoke with people about the forests and the environment, asking about their lives and what their present concerns were, what they thought should be done and what their future hopes were. In the interviews, the people's recollections of images and experiences of a past reality constituted the common framework in understanding the present. But to use this past reality as an example of what to try to achieve in the present, as people were wont to do, is not only unrealistic, but we may be setting ourselves up for failure.

As I went around and spoke with people, these were some of the forest faces I encountered:

- Indigenous cultures who still depend on forests for their livelihood and subsistence needs, and others who have abandoned their traditional forest life;
- Foresters whose duties are to technically manage forests for timber;
- Laborers who find daily work extracting wood, clearing forest, and engaging in shifting cultivation;
- Logging companies who seek a sustainable extraction against all odds;
- Seasonal or occasional visitors who want to explore, absorb, research and protect forests;

- People who subsist without security at the margins of society.
- Business people and professionals who work and hope for a better economy and a better society;
- Children who are enraptured by a beautiful world in harmony, unbounded by challenge and responsibility;
- Small and large tree farmers who make degraded lands productive again;
- People who try to protect the remaining forests by putting out fires, conserving resources and recycling;
- Artists, architects, and artisans who inspire action through their creative expressions;
- People who make time to plant a tree, care for it, and try to build community spirit;
- Leaders, decision makers, and development planners, who can bring about better management decisions;
- People who invest and act for the long-term security of our resources and environment; and
- People who have never had the opportunity to see a forest but believe that forests must be preserved.

Forest Faces is about how we as a people, with little time for reflection, face and speak of how we once lived in relation to forests, and what we would like to see happen in the future. Indeed, nobody wants the outright destruction of forests, yet collectively we have done much to undermine the integrity of our environment, threatening not only our own surroundings, but possibly the global ecological balance as well.

We all have images of forests in our minds, even if we have never seen a real or natural forest. Most of us can relate to the forest or the land, or to the trees of our childhood and the memories they conjure for us. Our grandparents in the provinces may be the sources of our lifetime memory of the forest or verdant riverbanks. For many, the fresh sweet scents of the land and air and the cool sensations of shade and water dominate most recollections. Forests are an inspiration for art and music and our creative aspirations.

The life stories and photo sketches in this book capture the perspectives and reflections of those formally involved in the forestry sector as well as many informal stakeholders. It was not possible to portray a complete cross-section of Philippine society in this volume, but the value of forests has to be found in how we live on a daily basis. People's livelihoods and the experiences that they have been exposed to give rise to rich personal comment and testimony, but are seldom analyzed to assess the ecological and economic benefits derived from the forest. People's stories, after all, draw on personal experience rather than a gross national product. This provides an insight on the state of Philippine forests over the last decade and for much longer for some.

There is a conscious attempt to give a face to people's relations, understanding and responsibility for forests. For many people not directly involved in the forestry sector, the effort is to connect and identify their experiences and aspirations that were inspired by the forest and have made a difference to them. The approach is to engage the broader public, not with forest management per se, but with those outside the forest who subsist or derive economic gain from it and with those who have dedicated their lives to public service and appreciate what God has created. The importance of culture, crafts and special interests is recognized, but food security and survival are a fundamental part of the relationship of millions of Filipinos with the environment. Our identity is inseparable from our culture and from how we experience our surroundings.

The people interviewed come from many different types of forests, including streamside, uplands, plantations, mangroves, coastal, marsh, beach and others. There are the forests of old and there are new forests of plantations of monocultures to produce oils, resins, leaves and of course, wood. There are forests on the mountaintops and on the coasts. The diversity of the forests is not as important as the strength shown in the people's faces, reflecting their relationship with the forest, and the photographs will hopefully express another thousand words.

Today's degraded forests reflect a history of logging and abandonment. We have since moved on to mining as a national model for economic

development and to support the national aspiration to join the new rich nations of Asia while equipping the country to respond to basic social needs. Our watersheds and ecological systems will continue to degrade due to deforestation, reduced infiltration, erosion, chemical inputs, damming, siltation, and lowering of the water table. Protected areas are still being encroached on even though they are at the core of a receding biodiversity.

Decision makers, implementers and end users are now turning to the mountains for their remaining resources; a few return to plant trees for the wood industry. Such investments could reduce the occurrences of forest fires, improve the quality of air, and hopefully buffer climate change. Others slowly nurture our endemic trees and bring back the old shade trees of the forest. All is not lost. There is regeneration taking place and the mountaintop primary forest is finding a new connection as the old secondary forests regain their original stature. These realizations illustrate the importance of the ecological services of forests and help to enhance the understanding of the relationship between forests and the demand for wood, water security, protection against flooding and landslides, and improving air quality. But this is not the language used in the people's daily lives.

All of the interviews conducted for this book are highly valued, even though they could not all be included. Many of the stories will stir the heart. Most striking, for me, was the interview with Dante, whom I worked with for many years, but never knew how telling his story was. Unsure of what I was asking for initially, he was hesitant to respond. But once he recognized I wanted his story about the forest lands, he started with vigor and gave a chronology that shows the striking capacity of the cultural ability to describe one's history and thus one's being. After 47 minutes, he declared "And that is it," satisfied that he had given the best account he could!

For Datu Timbang Tungkay, hope and hunger were competing themes in his relationship with the forest. Coming from a tribe of T'boli, much celebrated in the upper village for its colorful culture and ecological

knowledge, the outcome for this man was a far cry from the ideal balance he seeks and a tough reality that will take a long time to overcome. Raul Zapatos exemplifies the commitment needed in the face of corruption to do the right thing, and Romy Acosta is the stalwart bureaucrat, a lover of the people and the land.

Even with the limited time allowed due to deadlines that had to be met, these shared communications contain the very grace of life. I can only recommend that you listen and continue to ask others what they desire and how they manage to draw the best out of life that they can. This experience has left me with so much hope as to how to proceed in getting people to listen to each other, and to trust and work together. I am humbled and challenged to leave something better for the generation to come, for beyond this self awareness of need and responsibility, there is a call for new volition and action.

As I listen to the reverberation of chainsaws during the sweltering day and the calls of tree frogs in moonlit night, I ask myself how we can reflect on how we should care for all life, as we care for our families and as we care for the expanding circles of relations that ripple beyond our sight. How are we facing the loss of our forests and the life and strength that they give our values and culture? Poetry is not enough; neither is a purely economic growth paradigm. Too often we delineate what is personally ours and sometimes manage it well (*bakod at walis tingting*), but do not care about what is dumped just outside. We forget and ignore by our lack of action, the many hungry farmers and land-hungry developers who take for themselves what is public domain. We must define a new path of responsibility for what is for the common good and preserve it in perpetuity. This calls for aggressive social and political monitoring and a thorough evaluation of public resources, which will not be easy, but unless acted upon will allow the prophets of ecological doom to prevail.

No one says there is an increase in real forest cover in the Philippines. Maybe there is an increase in the number of trees, but it is not the forest we idealize, romanticize, log or even live in. The generic response to forest degradation is to plant trees, but we don't know what this accomplishes

or does not. We have lost most of our forests of old over the past 50 years and, along with them, many of the ecological services they provide. We learned that foreign money and fast tracking reforestation cannot have poor outcomes. Assisting the regeneration of forests is still a concept poorly understood, much less implemented. Philippine forestry now passes over these concerns to Philippine society, which lacks resolution. The social equation is not simple, nor are the long-term economics easily resolved. We seem to have lost the ability to pull through together.

Despite the human capital and capacity in the Philippines, and the few faces reflected here that reflect millions more, these challenges remain beyond our present organized capacity and commitment. We spend more on a “fiesta culture,” often celebrating a past relationship with the landscape of life, the true meaning of which has been all but lost. Meanwhile, the “forest culture” which supports the livelihood of many at the margins and lifestyle of many in the fast lane have yet to come together to form strategic, coherent action.

There does not seem to be a common perception as to what lessons have been learned from actions in the past decades and generations, let alone the commitment needed to act comprehensively and for the good of all. We live by anecdote and the hope of sunrise.

There is the possibility of improved land use combining agro-forestry and plantations, over the next 20 years. There are cogon (*Imperata cylindrica*) lands sheltering a new generation of pioneering seedlings, a phoenix forest that could restore and regenerate our landscape. Although the concepts of ancestral domains and community forestry are on the verge of standing still, the call for government support could still materialize. Our protected areas could regenerate the landscape and support local inhabitants. There is the hope that people have planted, but it needs a nurturing hand.

The faces featured in this book reflect many things: cynicism and hope, the prevailing poverty of the uplands, the search for pragmatic solutions and mitigating mechanisms in the lowlands, well-intentioned policies

with no serious implementation, the continuing illegal and “illegitimate” legal activities, painful realizations of past wrong decisions made. All have reflected on the past and come to realize what now needs to and can be done today. The 53 faces here tell their own stories, but they can be held up to reflect all Filipinos and be valued as an articulation of many of our own thoughts and hopes. We need to grow beyond memories not to recreate them, and to generate new realities that can provoke responsibility and pride in our land and people. We must reckon with the decisions needed to transform hopes and regrets to resolute action.

We have both humble and grand impressions of the forest, of what it was, is or could be. The recurring theme in the interviews has been the personal, once in a lifetime, yet lasting memory that we would have wanted to hold onto that would have changed the course of how we use the forests and even the course of history. Yet when mission is placed over management, it is said to be but a headless heart, though memories that do not feed visions are but a lost future. Change is difficult, but not impossible. We need to seriously establish discipline and accountability. Social efficiency in the environment must not just pursue business where the market rules, but develop institutes of society where the common good of generations to come is not sold short.

This publication is not about providing answers, and none were given. The stories and photos are not sequential in time or geographically clustered, yet they form a coherent contemporary understanding and perspective of people living in the Philippines, and offer a complex tableau by which Philippine forest management will hopefully be better informed.

Peter Walpole
Executive Director
Environmental Science for Social Change

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