

PRESERVING THE MOUNTAINS

Zenaida G. Delica *

The worldwide regard for sustainable development and the ecological requirements have evolved particular approaches such as the concern for the mountains. In the Philippines, the situation of the mountains and the actions to save and preserve them is in a flux. The outcome is yet uncertain. There is a growing recognition that to be effective, the actions to preserve the mountains must transcend national boundaries

Introduction

The Philippines, lying along a typhoon belt, is visited by an average of 19-20 cyclones a year. Most typhoons emanate from the Pacific Ocean which lie at the eastern board of the Philippines. A natural mitigation measure is the mountain range located along the eastern coast of the country. Other mountains which dot the country have aided as natural barriers to the strong winds which often reach the velocity of more than 250 kms. per hour.

Most mountains situated near the major population centers have been denuded by logging and uncontrolled subdivision development programs initiated more than fifty years ago. Recently, leveling average-sized mountains and strip mining have combined to destroy the mountains themselves.

This situation has been described as alarming and Philippine NGOs have taken active role in defense of the Philippine mountains. Government policies have pronounced active measures to control the destruction of the environment, including the mountains. There is, however, a perceived need to make implementation of pro-environment measures a reality.

Development and Counter-development

Floods that yearly inundate the highly urbanized areas of Metropolitan Manila are caused by multiple factors one of which is the run-off water from denuded mountains. Flashfloods that have washed away rural communities have also been abetted by destruction of forests and mountains. The unwanted effects are results of government development programs and investments lacking proper environmental study or implementation of activities which have purposely veered away from the approved/prescribed plan.

Whatever the cause, the fact remains that there is an alarming rate in the denudation and destruction of the mountains in the Philippines.

Saving The Mountains

The growing awareness of many Filipinos regarding the role of mountains and forests in the general ecological and environmental well-being of the country has aided in the national movement towards preservation of the mountains and the forests. Laws have been passed enunciating the principles of sustainable development with respect to forest exploitation. However, observance of the laws has not been consistent or conscientious. More ominous is the impending passage of a law on mining which would open the floodgates to unrestrained and destructive exploitation of the mountains.

In this situation, the NGOs have taken the cudgels to protect the mountains and preserve the forests. The activities of the NGOs include: initiation of and engagement in reforestation projects and piloting of community-based forestry management, lobbying with the national and local executives and law-making bodies; press releases in newspapers of national and local circulation; forums and symposia among students and other NGOs; pickets and blockades in areas leading to or near the forests and mountains; drama and plays in public and private places, and similar actions.

In some cases, on-going exploitation of mountain sites for mining and tree-cutting in forests have been stopped. By and large, however, there are many logging and mining (specially, quarrying) activities which are allowed or abetted, openly or not, by local and national government units authorities and personnel.

Caring for the Mountains

The mountains of Banaue in the northern portion of Luzon island in the Philippines are famous for the rice terraces. Known to have existed for about two milleniums, these rice terraces have been the source of the staple food of the Kiangans*or Ifugao peoples. About a decade ago, most Kiangans harvested paddy only once a year. Presently, the influx of high-yielding varieties for commercial production is overcoming the practice of planting traditional varieties for self-consumption.

Kiangan*is a local term for ***Ifugao***, an indigenous tribe inhabiting the mountain province of Northern Luzon, Philippines.

The paddies in the mountains of Banaue are fed through natural springs which come from the higher mountains covered by trees of secondary growth. This forest is called “muyong”* and is covered by an indigenous forest management observed by the Kiangans. In this scheme, firewood to be used by the people is taken from the branches. No tree is felled in the *muyong*. For timber needed in house repair or new construction, the Kiangans have to walk farther to other forested mountains which do not affect the water system for the rice terraces. The practice of logging for commercial purposes is a recent, though very limited, activity in the mountains worked on by the Kiangans.

Education as to the use and care of the forests and the terraces is part of the process of learning by children who are helpers in gathering firewood and planting rice. The upkeep of the terraces is the responsibility of the families using the area for paddy production. The major maintenance activity is to ensure that the paddies are always wet or with water and do not dry up. In times when natural calamities would create damage to the terraces such as during strong typhoons, every able-bodied Kiangan is expected to help in the repair works

The planting and harvesting of rice in the terraces are accompanied by ritual that call on the gods for blessing and thanksgiving. The *mumbaki*, the Kiangan spiritual leader, heads the rituals of blessings and protection for the planting and growing of rice and for thanksgiving during harvests as well as protection by the gods of the mountains

Some parts of the mountains are held sacred because of the belief that these parts are the domain of the spirits of the ancestors of the Kiangan people. In such places, no agricultural or extractive/productive activities are undertaken by any member of the tribe.

The Kiangans believe that the mountains are theirs and in this state of belief they protect and preserve the Banaue mountains. The NGOs such as the Cordillera Resource Center (CRC), the Montanosa Relief and Rehabilitation Services (MRRS), and the Cordillera Peoples' Alliance (CPA) assist the Kiangans' struggle to keep sovereignty over their mountains through publications, media coverage and networking with other similar cause-oriented groups.

**Muyong (also called Pinugo) - Ifugao term for a forested area communally owned and managed where the only activity permitted is the breaking of branches for a household's firewood needs/use while lumber/timber requirements are sourced from other forests not covered by the muyong.*

The Pinatubo mountain is part of a cluster of mountains at the west-central portion of the Luzon islands. Prior to its eruption, Pinatubo mountain was considered an extinct volcano. Most of the area has been logged over by private concessionaires and only secondary growth of scattered clusters of trees dot the mountains. After the Pinatubo eruption, the little secondary growth was further destroyed and the birds and animals that depended on such flora were also destroyed or were forced to move to other mountains.

The Aetas or Agtas are the main group of people who reside and live off the mountain. Being a nomadic people, there was little agricultural activity by the families while hunting was the main preoccupation. An area is cleared by the "slash-and-burn" technique (swidden agriculture) and used for planting rootcrops like cassava, sweet potato, different varieties of banana and of traditional upland rice. The families leave the plants and migrate to other parts of the mountain where hunting is more productive. They return to the planted areas after a span of time to harvest the crops. The Aetas allow about 1-1/2 years to 3 years, to allow forest growth, before they undertake swidden farming in the same area.

The Aetas, who call themselves Kulot or curly-haired, believe in a deity called Apo Namalyari who inhabits the mountaintops of Pinatubo. However, the area is not considered sacred through which no one can pass or engage in any activity such as hunting. Some form of limited logging occur at the instance of lowlanders who pay the Aetas for labor or lumber they bring down from the mountain.

There is no mining by the Aetas. Any prospecting and mining is done by the lowlanders. Only a few Aetas join as hired hands or laborers/workers. It is thought by the Aetas that the mining activities such as boring deep and use of blasting were the causes of the anger of Apo Namalyari, as shown in Pinatubo's eruption.

Having lived in the mountain, the Aetas know the characteristics of the area. Even the sounds of and the movements in the mountain are familiar to them. Thus, when tremors occurred and rumbling sounds emanated from the Pinatubo, it was the Aetas who first alerted the NGO, Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM)* which worked in their place that something was very wrong about the mountain. It was the Aetas who first expressed the fear of the possible eruption of Pinatubo.

FMM is a church NGO that has been working with the Aeta. The warning was received by its Director, Sister Emma Fondevilla.

The Aetas usually avoid conflicts with the lowlanders. Incursions by the lowlanders into the mountains are met by the Aetas by simply moving higher or farther into the forested area. The mountains, including the Pinatubo mountain could not be protected by the Aetas.

Less than a decade ago, with the help of the NGOs like the Alyansa ng mga Magbubukid sa Gitnang Luzon (AMGL), the Central Luzon Association of Aetas (CLAA), and the Social Action Center of Pampanga (SACOP), the Aetas are able to resist the pressure of lowlander-businessmen to engage in illegal logging or mining even if the Pinatubo mountain is presently not a desirable place for habitation.

Actions to Preserve the Mountains

In the context of the Philippine experience, all actions have been exhausted to protect the forests and mountains from unbridled exploitation. It is only networking in furtherance of closer coordination and optimal use of limited resources that needs maintenance. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these actions is not consistent or desirable. There are many instances that the actions are simply ignored or, at worst, violently repelled by the local and, sometimes, national authorities despite existence of laws or policies favoring the mountains and the forests.

It is opportune at this time to bring the issue of the Philippine forests and mountains to this international gathering for, in most cases, the interests that push the Filipino authorities and business to unwittingly damage the forests and mountains come from developed countries.

Perhaps it is timely to seek the intervention of this global forum in our country and bring the issue to your countrymen not to invest in the exploitation of our forests and mountains unless actual care is integrated in these endeavors. Maybe what is needed is to educate the business community and government to insist on the observance of policies enunciated by international environmental groups and organizations and their local counterparts – which seek to protect the environment for the next generations. This conference could make the difference by taking this challenge without let-up.

*** The author is the current Director of Training and Education of the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC), based in Bangkok, Thailand. She is also a founding Director of the Center for Disaster Preparedness (CDP) in the Philippines.**

