



## THINK PIECE

## The Philippine Environment: Epicenter of Wealth, Beauty and Destruction

*By Ricky Avanceña, Communications Director, Ecological Society of the Philippines*

**Abstract:**

Despite the great natural bounty possessed by the Philippines, the island nation's environment is at grave risk from pollution, depletion and climate change impacts. Will pleas from spiritual leaders make an impact in time to curb the nation's environmental destruction?

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# The Philippine Environment: Epicenter of Wealth, Beauty and Destruction

By Ricky Avanceña, Communications Director, Ecological Society of the Philippines

The Philippines has been truly blessed. Surrounding its 7500+ islands are the oceans and seas where the richest most biodiverse marine environments thrive, creating virtual factories of fish and aquatic resources. "The Philippines is located within the coral triangle, at the center of the highest marine diversity. Its vast, rich and diverse coastal and marine resources are composed of coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangrove and beach forests, fisheries, invertebrates, seaweeds, marine mammals and many others." Carpenter and Springer (2005) noted, "that there is a higher concentration of species per unit area in the Philippines than anywhere in Indonesia and Wallacea, that the Philippines is the center of marine shore fish diversity in the world, and that there should be special focus on marine conservation efforts due to its being an epicenter of biodiversity and evolution."

Our land has fertile plains embraced by majestic mountain ranges with tropical forests teeming with all sorts of unbelievable life forms. The diverse flora includes 8,000 species of flowering plants, 1,000 kinds of ferns, and 800 species of orchids. Common mammals include the wild hog, deer, wild carabao, monkey, civet cat, and various rodents." If you weren't a believer in a divine being, a Creator, master planner or whatever you wish to call God, seeing the beauty and bounty of the natural resources in the Philippines would make a convert of anyone. But that was then. Today the state of the environment both marine and forest would not make one believe in God but in the devil, because it sure is like hell. Easily 70% of first growth forest is gone, and whatever is left is going fast. Reforestation efforts of invasive single species can never recreate the fragile co-dependent ecosystems that exist in virgin forests. The Philippines is facing environmental issues that must be addressed in order to prevent its destruction for future generations.

The Philippines' coral colonies are being destroyed and if not addressed, the planet will feel the ecological impact. Antonio M. Claparols, President of the Ecological Society of the Philippines, reported on the destruction of the South China Seas coral colonies by China in 2016. In his organization's Facebook page on July 11, 2018, he described the wanton destruction of a marine environment which produces fish not only for Southeast Asia but for the entire world. As a result of the Philippines' early awareness of the beauty and wealth of our marine resources, we have managed to preserve some of our inter-island coral colonies. Some 60% were destroyed by the dynamite and cyanide used by small fishermen to catch fish; these fishermen were unaware that as they destroyed the coral they were destroying the breeding ground and home of the fish. They had to go farther and farther out to sea to catch fish, and with the unscrupulous trawling and massive overfishing operations of big fishery canning and manufacturing enterprises, fish once plentiful and abundant have become scarce. A country surrounded on all sides by oceans and seas, the Philippines is experiencing one of the highest rates of hunger and malnutrition not only in Asia but in the world. That is the interdependence between man and the environment. However it is not enough to say, we will take care of the marine environment. Because massive deforestation in the mountains and hills cause erosion, and with the rain causes siltation, and where does the silt end up? The ocean where it is a deadly killer of corals. There lies the environmental linkage and interdependency.

Our oceans are also facing environmental destruction as a result of the disgusting amount of waste that ends up there. Experts say that as soon as 2025 there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean. And where does all this plastic waste come from? The Philippines is one of the top five

contributors of plastic waste in the ocean, most of it coming from its rivers which flow through the urban cities into the sea, into the sea into the oceans of the world. The Pasig River, which runs through all the major towns and cities of Metropolitan Manila before ending up in Manila Bay, is one of the ten rivers in the world that contribute the most waste. These five countries contribute 60% of total plastic waste in the world. The other countries like China and Indonesia are huge countries with massive populations. For a small country like ours, it is just plain sick how irresponsible we are.

Ironically, on paper the Philippines has the best environmental protection laws in the world. Sadly, these laws are often not enforced. As a 2013 policy paper on Philippine solid waste practices<sup>1</sup> states, “Human activities contribute significantly in waste management. Recognizing the effects of improper management, garbage crisis can be prevented by practicing waste characterization and segregation at source, proper collection and transfer, recycling, and composting as mandated by the law.” For our forests there is a total ban on logging, and open pit and strip mining is not allowed by executive order. For marine resources our Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998 expressly bans aquatic pollution. On climate change, President Duterte, despite initially opposing the Paris Agreement, has reversed his position and in doing so, recognized of the many dangers posed to the Philippines, and many other vulnerable nations, from the impacts of climate change. Many of the countries which have emitted the least carbon are going to bear the brunt of climate change impacts. That is why the Philippines and other nations formed the Climate Vulnerable Forum for “cooperation on tackling climate change and transitioning to 100 percent renewable energy.”<sup>2</sup>

While not always readily apparent, we cannot ignore that climate change is happening in the Philippines. As Alexandra Gamboa, former Deputy Legal Counsel of the CCC and current Manager of Government Initiatives in the Philippines for RARE, wrote on her FB page:

*The thing about climate change awareness is that we often don't think it would ever happen to us, or affect us directly, especially for slow onset events like salinization or, in this case, sea level rise. . . What is alarming to realize is that the effects of slow onset events are here and now, felt by us. Slow onset events have always been harder to justify and quantify compared to typhoons, heat waves or floods as the effects are cumulative and not readily seen or felt. That is until now. What's worse is that slow onset events, by reason of the word slow, are effects that are results of action from decades ago. If we see this sea level rise as a result of actions from years that weren't even as record breaking as those we have now, with behaviors that weren't as destructive as what we have now, what are we in for for the future? (July 15, 2018)*

Gamboa calls for Filipinos to step up their carbon footprint reduction game now. Her call for action includes concrete steps we can all take to lessen the destruction of our environment: lessen consumption, buy second hand, ride a bike, divest your fossil fuel shares, invest in renewable energy, jog outside instead of using the treadmill, eat less meat, etc.

Two enlightened leaders of major institutional religions practiced worldwide accept this reality. In 2015, Pope Francis I issued a papal encyclical entitled *Laudato Si: On the Care of our Common Home*. While there are many world leaders – including President Trump of the U.S. who has pulled America out of the Paris Climate agreement<sup>3</sup> – and scientists (usually on the payroll of big coal plants) who still deny the existence of climate change, the Pope was ahead of many not only to acknowledge the reality, but to call for urgent action. He truly lives up to his chosen name Francis, in memory of St. Francis of Assisi, today known as the Father of Ecology.

The second figure is the Dalai Lama, who tweeted on June 5 (2018) that:

*The world belongs to its seven billion inhabitants. In the past communities could flourish in*

*isolation but know we can't. This World Environment Day let's remember that we depend on each other and that to meet the challenge of climate change, we have to work together.*

In an earlier tweet, he said: "Because of our intelligence, we human beings are uniquely capable of not only creating problems, but of doing so in a large scale..." (June 1, 2018.)

In response to the challenges posed by environmental destruction resulting in climate change in the Philippines, ESP (The Ecological Society of the Philippines) has initiated the planting of mangroves in two areas in the Negros islands. This has been quite the fad lately and one often reads about companies sponsoring massive mangrove planting activities as part of what they call Corporate Social Responsibility – the catchphrase corporations use to show that they exist for more than just profit. In the past, when mangrove forests were plentiful, they protected the islands from erosion due to waves and tides, and provided breeding grounds and homes to fish and other aquatic life. These groves have been depleted due to their being cleared to create tourist-friendly beaches or developed as residential or commercial areas. But the main reason for the rapid disappearance of mangrove forests has been their being the most accessible source of cooking fuel. Due to the density of its wood and exposure to seawater, dried mangrove wood burns longer and generates intense heat. Bakers nationwide have long sworn by the use of mangrove to bake the Philippine staple bread 'pan de sal,' arguing that aside from the attributes mentioned, it adds a distinctive smokey flavor to the bread.

However, ESP is careful to replant mangroves only in places where forests had existed before but were depleted. Recent studies have shown that planting them where they did not exist affects biodiversity in the seas. By the same token, ESP is about to embark on the reforestation of an area that belongs to the Northeastern Sierra Madre Mountain ranges. This area comprises the Aurora Memorial National Park and belongs to what was once till the 1970s first growth tropical rainforest. The planting of invasive or single-species trees has also affected biodiversity in the forests. Before planting begins, however, a handbook is being created by foresters, based on studies and interviews with the indigenous people who have lived off the forests for hundreds if not thousands of years to catalogue what tree and plant life actually are endemic to the area.

A novel approach is being employed by RARE, an international NGO that emphasizes coastal restoration and resource conservation. Working with local people to find a balance between use and preserving natural resources, RARE encourages people to take pride in their natural environment and to feel a sense of accountability for how they use natural resources. When local attitudes flow from having pride in what has been given by nature, it follows logically that one must preserve it and be responsible.

We must all do what we can as the Dalai Lama has urged and help get the Creator out of the fix he has found himself in.

**Enrique Quezon Avanceña** is Communications Director of the Ecological Society of the Philippines. He is also a certified Climate Reality Leader trained by Al Gore, as well as an award-winning author whose work has received the Philippines' National Book

## NOTES

1. See "Ecological Solid Waste Management Act (2000): Environmental Protection Through Proper Solid Waste Practices," by Albert P. Aquino, Jamaica A.P. Deriquito, and Meliza A. Festejo. [http://ap.fttc.agnet.org/ap\\_db.php?id=153&print=1#\\_ftnref1](http://ap.fttc.agnet.org/ap_db.php?id=153&print=1#_ftnref1)
2. <https://thecvf.org/web/climate-vulnerable-forum/>
3. Tweeted June 1, 2018.