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COMMENTARY

Reforestation often useless

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Unless reforestation is done properly, it is a waste of money. There is, however, a model that works. It should be implemented using four stages.

Let us assess how reforestation has fared in the Philippines. In an Inquirer article by Jhesset Enano published last March 20, she wrote: “The forest cover in the Philippines has been reduced to less than 10 percent of the original due to widespread logging and other threats to forest ecosystems.” This should be addressed in two ways: first, enforce the laws to protect the forest and, second, plant to get back our forest cover. We discuss here the latter approach.

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A 2020 Commission on Audit report revealed that the National Greening Program (NGP) spent billions of pesos planting trees for reforestation. From 2011 to 2019, the NGP missed 88 percent of its target of increasing forest cover by 1.5 million hectares as it achieved only 177,441 ha. The easy explanation is to blame poor forest law enforcement which wiped out replanting gains. However, the inconvenient truth is that the planting system was wrong in the first place. Dr. Josefino Comiso of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said: “When you plant trees, you make sure that these grow up, and not die in the process.”

When I served as the private sector secretary general of a joint legislative-executive-private task force on the national water road map, I got access to official records that showed the NGP had planted millions of trees with billions of pesos. But when I asked NGP how many trees survived, they could not tell me. This was because they were asked to record only planting, and not survival. Enano reports: “Scientists raised the need to monitor the seedlings being planted under the NGP to ensure their growth and survival.” It is common knowledge that a majority of the trees planted did not survive.

Under former Environment Secretary Gina Lopez and current Secretary Roy Cimatu, this report on survival was put into place. It is to Cimatu's credit that he has made a significant change with NGP. Instead of the NGP planting trees, a very large part of the NGP now plants grass: namely, bamboo.

With a very small budget to take care of nurturing trees, which are easily overcome by cogon and die, bamboo overcomes cogon. It does not need fertilizer and grows without much care. But before we say "then just plant bamboo," we must ensure that we use a bamboo system that works.

Such an effective system is used by Fr. Benigno Beltran, SVD (0998-9892935). This can be seen at the upper Marikina River Basin in Rizal. Beltran says: "The denuded forest there has resulted in recurring flash floods, which has caused loss of lives and massive damage to property and infrastructure." Consequently, he developed a bamboo system with four stages.

First, do the extension work to equip local communities with the required knowledge and skills to implement plant material production and utilize bamboo for economic activities. Second, establish community nurseries for sustainable quality planting stocks. Third, reforest denuded areas and plant along the riverbanks, which also serves as a plantation for the production of bamboo poles and shoots. Fourth, develop a sustainable community-based bamboo industry intended for niche markets.

Two points must be made. The first is provided by multiawarded Alberto Malvar, developer of Mt. Purro Nature Reserve. He says, "You must begin by knowing and understanding the people who live there. Together with them, develop a plan that they will own and commit to." Second, bamboo should be demand-driven. It is crucial that the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) plays a coordinating lead role in this initiative, with the Department of Agriculture (DA) giving it priority as a high-value crop.

We are in desperate need of reforestation. To prevent much of this reforestation from becoming useless, it is imperative to consider the four-stage bamboo system that Father Beltran has developed. INQ

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