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‘Reimagine, recreate, restore’ environment for future generations

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Every year, on June 5, the Philippines joins other member-countries of the United Nations in the observance of World Environment Day. The month of June is also observed as Philippine Environment Month. This year’s celebration expands further into the launching of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), “a global mission to revive billions of hectares, from forests to farmlands, from the top of mountains to the depth of the sea.”

The theme of this year’s observance is: Reimagine. Recreate. Restore.

As the world goes into the second year of a raging pandemic, there is greater impetus to focus on how to stem the tide of environmental degradation. “Healing from the pandemic is linked to healing the planet.”

On a sharper focus, two issues emerge on top of the Philippines' environment agenda: First, attainment of enhanced disaster resilience; and second, enforcing accountability on those responsible for damaging the country's ecosystems.

The poor and the very poor Filipinos bear the brunt of natural disasters. The Philippines is one of the climate-vulnerable countries that suffer the consequences of global warming even while contributing only a minuscule fraction of carbon emissions. Climate justice is the country's advocacy that is shared by other member-countries of the Climate Vulnerable Forum.

The Philippines chaired the Climate Vulnerable Forum at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris (COP21) during which a historic breakthrough was achieved in terms of holding countries accountable for achieving carbon neutrality and low-carbon development.

There is need to mitigate the impact of natural disasters on those living at the bottom of the pyramid who are extremely vulnerable. Beyond immediate assistance to assure food on the table and home rebuilding, they need to be supported with stronger social protection safety nets.

The second concern is the widespread destruction of the country's vital ecosystems. The United States paid \$1.97 million (around P87 million) in 2015, two years after the USS Guardian, a minesweeper, ran aground on the Tubbataha Reef, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, damaging more than 2,245 square meters of coral reef.

This precedent is being invoked by the Advocates of Science and Technology for the People (AGHAM), an organization of scientists and environment exponents in relation to their claim that "China's island-building and clam poaching activities in the West Philippine Sea have resulted in extensive reef destruction." The group estimates that the Philippines is "losing P1.3 trillion a year" after multiplying the extent of destruction and assigning a value of \$350,000 per hectare. The amount of damages could be raised to P1.92 trillion, the group claims, if benchmarked against the amount paid by the US for the damage to Tubbataha Reef.

Beyond these two priority concerns, more Filipinos must become keenly aware that their country is endowed with so much natural wealth and beauty. From the mountains to the forests and from the plains to the seas, there are vast areas that must be safeguarded and preserved for the benefit of future generations.

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