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Protecting forests, conserving water



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[MTFI](#)

Angat Dam

Established through a United Nations General Assembly resolution on November 28, 2012, the 21st of March of each year has been declared as the International Day of Forests. Meanwhile, highlighting the importance of freshwater, the annual World Water Day is observed on March 22.

It is, hence, no surprise that both occasions are observed in March, when as the peak of the dry season in the Philippines, the water supply is an issue.

It also highlights the interconnectivity of forest and water which is essential to human survival.

Rich natural resources

The Philippines is blessed with vast forest cover and water resources. Of the 30 million hectares total land area, 15 million ha are classified as forestland.

Ironically, however, only around 7 million ha are covered with forest.

Likewise, the Philippines has abundant water resources. But water accessibility—or where and when they are needed remains a challenge.

Threatened resources

Massive deforestation and degradation particularly in some of the country's critical watersheds are strongly being felt in terms of water scarcity.

Aggravated by the impacts of climate change, water levels in natural or even man-made reservoirs go down faster than normal, especially during the dry season.

As demand for water grows, the country's groundwater resources are not spared. The demand for water inevitably grows along with population and rapid urbanization.

National Greening Program

Recognizing the need to rehabilitate the country's open, degraded and denuded forests to combat climate change, help reduce hunger and poverty, and consolidate all reforestation or greening efforts of the government, the private sector, academe and other institutions, then-President Benigno C. Aquino III signed Executive Order 26, series of 2011 to plant 1.5 billion trees in 1.5 million ha of lands of the public domain from 2011 to 2016.

On November 12, 2015, or a year before the National Greening Program (NGP) expired, Aquino signed Executive Order 193 to rehabilitate all the remaining unproductive, denuded and degraded forestlands estimated at 7.1 million hectares from 2016 to 2028.

Under the Duterte administration, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the lead implementing agency of the program, experienced huge budget cuts, compelling the agency to tap private-sector support to the massive tree-planting activities.

As of December 2020, around P49 billion has already been allotted for the program to cover the remaining unproductive, denuded and degraded forestlands nationwide.

Last year, the budget for the NGP was P3.158 billion. It was slashed down to P2.265 billion for this year.

Saving critical watersheds

Climate change and deforestation have an adverse effect on the country's watershed, particularly on the water quality of raw water at Angat Dam, said Roman Corpuz, manager at Watershed Management Division of Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS), in a pre-recorded video shown during the inauguration and opening of the Million Trees Nursery and Eco Learning Center in Quezon City on March 18,.

Corpuz cited an incident in November 2020, at the height of Typhoon Ulysses (international name Vamco), when water turbidity severely affected the operation of private water concessions.

The impact of water turbidity on water reservoirs, he said is severe that the operation of water treatment facilities resulted in slow and low production of clean and safe water during that time.

This pushed the MWSS to be committed to saving critical watersheds, according to new MWSS Chief Leonor "Bobby" Cleofas during the same event.

Cleofas noted the fact that the agency's Annual Million Tree Challenge (AMTC) aims to address the problem besetting not only the seven critical watersheds—namely Angat, La Mesa, Ipo, Kaliwa, Laguna Lake, Umiray and Upper Marikina—and now even Laguna de Bay, but also other degraded forests that need rehabilitation.

"The MWSS mandate is for us to be able to supply a sustainable water supply to the whole MWSS service area and provide sewerage and sanitation services. But equally

important is the protection of the watershed; making sure that we have a healthy watershed for us to have sustainable water,” she told the BusinessMirror.

Public-private partnership

In the Philippines, stories of public-private partnerships highlight the effort to protect and conserve forest and water.

Such is the case of water privatization—when the government and the private sector partnered to deliver safe drinking water to Metro Manila way back in 1997.

Then under the administration of President Fidel V. Ramos, the Philippines, through the MWSS privatized water services by engaging the services of Maynilad Water Services Inc. and Manila Water Corp.

In 2017, Reynaldo Velasco, former chairman and administrator of the MWSS, launched the AMTC, a reforestation program to plant a million trees every year for five years in seven critical watersheds.

He then issued the challenge to the MWSS water concessionaires and set the ambitious reforestation target.

Proponents of the AMTC were able to surpass the target by 200,000 trees, planting a total of 5.2 million trees by February 28 this year.

In the pre-recorded video, Velasco attributed the record-low water level at Angat in 2017 to the environmental degradation in the Angat watershed.

“When I took over sometime in 2017, I realized that there was already a lot of tree-cutting in the watershed. It is affecting the water level in Angat. We encountered one of the lowest in terms of the level of Angat to about 156 meters [above sea level]. The critical level is actually 180 meters,” he said.

Sustaining partnership for the environment

To sustain the gains of AMTC, the proponents of the project decided to establish the Million Trees Foundation Inc. (MTFI), the institution behind the establishment of the Million Trees Nursery and Eco Learning Center.

“We have gone far ahead. We now have an office made of two retrieve container vans with roof deck, a gift shop and the Yakal Coffee Shop,” Melandrew Velasco, the Executive Director of the MTFI shared.

“Most of the wood that we used to make the chairs, the benches, and tables, were all salvaged from the stockyard of the MWSS,” he said.

Velasco underscored the valuable help and support of the private sector in achieving the ambitious target of the AMTC and ensuring the sustainability of the endeavor beyond 2022.

“Now, we are targeting to plant 10 million more trees until 2030,” he said.

As for the 5-hectare government property where the Tree Nursery and Eco Learning Center now sits, Velasco said there is a plan to develop the area.

“We have bigger plans for the Center. This is just the first phase. Moving on, the next phase is to build a Watershed Academy Building and a Water Trail to make the small space a multi-purpose area that is open to the public, open to students and researchers where they can embrace not only planting trees but the reality of climate change, and also to love Mother Earth more,” he said.

“MTFI will be knocking on the doors of institutional partners, and we are confident that they will support the Million Trees Foundation,” he ended.

Business sustainability

Jeric Sevilla, communications head at Manila Water, the private water contractor of the MWSS in the East Zone of Metro Manila and a supporter of the MTFI, said in the video that it is vital for the company to protect the environment that sustains its business, especially against the backdrop of the worsening impact of climate change.

“Climate change is very important in terms of the impact we are feeling right now. Droughts are very common; rainfall patterns are some sort of distorted and our watersheds, which sustain the raw water supply, are very important for us to protect,” he said.

“There is only one way in which we are going to be able to reforest the watershed area and that is to plant more trees to ensure that there will be watersheds in the future,” he said.

For her part, Anette H. De Ocampo, senior assistant vice president and head of Corporate Affairs and Communication at Maynilad, said nowadays, especially during summer, we experience extreme heat which cause the dam level to go down faster than normal.

“Definitely, AMTC can help address the concern of climate change because tree-planting is the most effective way if not the only way to address deforestation. Also, AMTC is also able to reach out to the various stakeholders through its programs to the public and private sector,” she said in the video.

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