Reviving Laguna de Bae (2)

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AUGUST 1995–President Ramos came to UPLB to convince those gathered of the need to resuscitate Southeast Asia's largest inland lake, Laguna de Bae.

He exhorted local officials and LLDA executives to prevent: 1) industrial establishments numbering 1,500 from using the Lake as a dump for their unprocessed effluents, including mercury, lead, cadmium, organic ; 2) basin communities numbering 9 million people with average family annual income of P35,000 to P116,000 from using the lake as depository of wastes.

My backyard in Los Banos ends where Laguna de Bae begins. Up-road are about 20 houses most of which dumped their plastic garbage bags and loaded wheelbarrows at the edge of the Lake. Teaching environmental management at UPLB, I gathered the nerve to remind them not to use the Lake as garbage. One answered curtly, "Matagal na kami dyan nagtatapon ng basura." Like, you are new here, don't interfere with our ways.

As president of the Rotary Club of Los Baños Maquiling, I shared meager income with its continuing project to build sewer tanks (costing P6,000 each) that connect up to four lake shore shanties, to lessen waste-borne pathogens in the Lake.

At around that time, the filtration equipment was not functioning at the Gokongwei textile factory so dye effluent was dumped into the lake unfiltered. Seven government agents arranged to visit the factory. Sekyu: "I cannot open the gate without the owner's permission." In another country where authorities are respected, the PNP with us would have known the team's rights, would have cut the gate lock open. But not in the Philippines. One security guard got us (DENR, LLDA, Malacanang, PNP, UPLB, DOH, City Hall) to fail at our mission; and sent away.

Agriculture farmlands, flower nurseries, chemical laboratories dump toxic chemicals, fertilizer and pesticide residues into the Lake. Poultry and piggery operations carry high organic matter which pollute and enhance eutrophication, Red Tide, destruction of useful planktons. These organic matters decompose, dissolving oxygen, causing accumulation of hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, and other obnoxious and toxic gases that cause black water and fishkills in the Lake.

The extensive deforestation up Makiling mountain accelerates erosion and increased sediment loads downstream, resulting in higher water turbidity, lower primary productivity, slower fish growth and reproduction, and sediment build-up in the Lake bottom.

On the subject of legal and illegal fishpens discussed at that forum attended by President Ramos 22 years ago, the then LLDA general manager, Alejandro Santiago, enumerated his LLDA Master Plan to the President:

"After a 3-year phaseout period, there will be a 2-year rest period without fishpens and with opportunity to rehabilitate the Lake. Thereafter, bonafide cooperatives will be allowed to set up fishpens, not to exceed 10,000 hectares, the maximum sustainable production for the fishpens and open waters."

That was 22 years ago, August 1995.

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