

Headline: Everybody's hour

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It is not too early to prepare for Earth Hour, which will be held on March 23 from 8:30 to 9:30 p.m.

In these times when the effects of climate change are manifesting themselves in increasingly destructive ways, Earth Hour stands out as a truly bright idea, melding environmental awareness with the simple act of turning off the lights for just an hour. It's an idea that Filipinos have taken to heart with proud force. For four straight years, the Philippines has led the world with the biggest number of local government units participating in the global gesture. Last year, a record-high 1,671 towns, cities and provinces took part, registering a reduction of 362 megawatts in power usage. For this, Earth Hour sponsor World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has given the Philippines the title of "Hero Country for Earth Hour."

It goes without saying that the Philippines intends to keep that distinction this year among the 152 participating countries.

First held in 2007, Earth Hour has grown from a citywide activity in Sydney, Australia, to a worldwide event held every March to cut power consumption and highlight the need to raise awareness of climate change and the dangers everyone faces.

The Philippines, which first participated in Earth Hour in 2008, ought to understand these dangers better than others. Even in a country inured to weather disturbances, the recent unseasonable storms have proven to be surprisingly strong. Typhoon "Pablo" in 2012 and Tropical Storm "Sendong" in 2010 killed thousands and wrought wide desolation, striking in that part of the year when typhoons had generally stopped coming, and hitting Mindanao the hardest. Freak weather has also been observed all over the country, with temperatures spiking and dipping in the most unexpected places.

As during times of need—for example, in the aftermath of typhoons—the Filipinos' inherent willingness to wade in and help others has been awakened by Earth Hour. "The [1986] Edsa revolution has shown how the Filipinos' strength and unity can change the course of history. Because we stand firm, we are able to set an example and be of positive influence to others," said WWF Philippines CEO Jose Ma. Lorenzo Tan. The Philippines' exuberant participation taps into its people's deep affinity with nature, which finds a public outlet in this movement.

Earth Hour has happily become a public-private partnership, with individual and corporate entities as well as government agencies taking part in the collective action.

Private corporations have early on pledged their cooperation: This year, Philips, LBC Foundation and Starbucks will join past participants Nestlé, SM Supermalls and the Yuchengco Group of Companies, among others. Their numbers will indicate just how strong the Philippine fight will be.

Perhaps the most inspiring development is how Earth Hour has become a national initiative. Last year in Baguio, the city government closed off a section of Session Road for the Earth Hour activities. In Davao, a parade featured fire dancers celebrating the shutdown. "We're extremely excited for the switch-off ceremonies," Earth Hour Philippines national director Gia Ibay said last year.

“Though the Visayas and Mindanao have always observed their own unique switch-off ceremonies, WWF has traditionally celebrated Earth Hour from Manila. To commemorate our country’s fifth Earth Hour, we thought it high time for WWF to observe the movement across the archipelago, which has always been what we’ve aimed for.”

Earth Hour executive director Andy Ridley himself attended the 2012 ceremony in Makati City. “For the first time in history, we have the power to connect behind a common purpose and the ability to create a network without national borders, based on the most influential voices and the smallest voices,” Ridley said. “The growth in social media, the world’s news media outlets and the digital revolution have allowed that to happen.”

The endeavor has continued to evolve, with this year’s observance—a new campaign called “I Will, If You Will”—becoming more digital and more interactive.

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Earth Hour continues to add new members to its movement, and as always, Filipinos can be counted on to add to the numbers. Mark the date. Remember that Earth Hour is everybody’s hour, and a chance to use people power for the planet.