

Headline: Reforest now

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The past few weeks have seen disastrous flooding in parts of Mindanao due to rains brought by the northeast monsoon. Of course, along with the floods came damage to infrastructure and crops which, in the Caraga region alone, amounted to P254 million. What is unusual and worrisome is that typhoons and heavy monsoonal rains are now hitting Mindanao when in the past these phenomena occurred more frequently in the Visayas and Luzon.

These events indicate that climate change is really upon us—i.e., causing disasters that are more frequent and intense. And, as in Russian roulette, we are on tenterhooks wondering who will be hit next. The impact of the floods has alarmed President Duterte to the point of declaring a need to dredge the rivers in the four major river basins of the country and to impose a total log ban nationwide. Dredging and flood control infrastructures such as the ongoing public works projects are necessary, but they should be complemented with vegetative measures.

An example of a cheap parallel move needed to substantially minimize flooding all over the country was demonstrated recently in the Mount Magdiwata watershed in Agusan del Sur, as reported by the Inquirer. Amid the flooding occurring in northern Mindanao, the fully forested mountains of the watershed were able to prevent flooding in the lowland area. The Inquirer report noted that in other parts of the Agusan river basin, such as those below the Pantaran mountain range, much flooding was observed because this highland that is supposed to retard the flow of the water toward the lowlands has been denuded by rampant illegal logging and the practice of kaingin.

Thus, simultaneous with costly engineering interventions, the government should initiate posthaste a single-minded move to reforest the denuded mountains as an effective but cheap vegetative solution. And a good time to start reforesting is during the coming hot, dry season when the uplands are not as slippery as during the hot, wet season. This should also make it easier for community members to participate in the planting drive.

People should know that reforestation does not only prevent floods but also has myriad benefits: It allows the regulated flow of groundwater to the lowlands; protects soil erosion and the concomitant siltation of rivers; prevents landslides and other forms of mass wasting; moderates the local climate; creates biodiversity that also stabilizes the oxygen and carbon dioxide cycle of the ecosystem; provides forest products that can be harvested; and, of course, prevents the loss of lives and property.

And whatever is left of the virgin forests should be strictly preserved as they may contain potential compounds that could cure our dreaded diseases.

When the Spaniards first came to our shores, more than 90 percent of the archipelago was still forested. Today, an optimistic estimate is that only 24 percent forest cover is left. For starters, there is one simple thing President Duterte and Environment Secretary Gina Lopez should impose with an iron fist: immediate multispecies reforestation of lands with slopes of over 50 percent ($>27^\circ$) and their strict maintenance as protection forest, as required by the Revised Forestry Code. They should demarcate these and assign more forest guards and “forest czars” to police each subwatershed within local government units.

How I long for those days when Col. Victor Corpus served as forest czar in our eastern highlands of Panay, and tree cutting was completely stopped! A telltale sign then was the beautiful greening of mountain ridges and the disappearance of firewood sellers along the road. Whence comes such another?

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