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Headline: Healing nature by restoring the ecosystem

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The well-being of humanity depends on healthy ecosystems. However, decades of unrelenting economic growth at the expense of our natural resources have taken a toll on our environment.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, landmark reports from 2018-2019 presented us with a bleak outlook for 2020 and beyond. Continuing at its current rate, global warming is likely to reach 1.5 degrees Celsius between 2030 and 2050. If that isn't worrying enough, around one million species are on the brink of extinction unless action is taken to reduce the drivers of biodiversity loss.

In addition, plastic waste pollution has emerged as a pressing environmental threat. Scientists expect that by 2050, our oceans will contain more plastic than fish.

In the Philippines, global warming has caused frequent disasters that disproportionately affect vulnerable households. The ability of our natural ecosystems to protect at-risk communities is rapidly diminishing.

Over the years, the country has lost 10.9 million hectares of forest cover. Fish stocks are drastically overfished in almost all areas except Eastern Luzon, Palawan, and the Southern Sulu Sea. Reef conditions, an indicator of fish productivity, have similarly declined.

The Philippines ranks as the third largest contributor of marine plastics globally. The country's rivers and coastal and marine areas have suffered from marine litter, especially uncollected plastic waste.

Mangrove cover, which provides protection against storm surges and rising seas, is down from around 500,000 hectares to almost half this amount.

The combined impact of these threats has yet to be fully realized in an economic sense. But the Philippines may have already pushed resource usage beyond its limits, compromising long-term viability. Sadly, it's the small farmers, local fishermen, and vulnerable coastal and upland communities that are the most at risk of losing their livelihoods—and lives—as a consequence.

All is not lost, however, and change is taking place.

Different parts of society have come together to contribute to the repair of the country's ecosystems. A massive greening program launched by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources in 2011 aimed to plant 1.5 billion trees on 1.5 million hectares of degraded forest.

There are now 244 protected areas in the Philippines covering 7.8 million hectares. Marine protected areas are being incorporated into networks for more effective management. Strengthening wildlife protections have led to coordinated efforts among law enforcement agencies. Local communities and indigenous peoples are doing their part, with governments recognizing their effective contributions to conservation.

Innovative solutions to the plastics problem are beginning to pay off. There are growing efforts among the public to minimize plastics use. These are matched by government efforts to develop a National Action Plan on Marine Litter.

These efforts alone aren't just the right thing to do; they're also the economically smart thing to do. It is far more expensive to restore degraded forests than to protect existing ecosystems. Legislators should aim to make protection the priority over restoration. Moreover, communities must be incentivized to protect ecosystems through participation in the benefits derived from them.

Innovative financial mechanisms are needed to encourage investment in conservation. We need to understand nature programs as revenue opportunities rather than cost centers. Treating well-managed ecosystems as assets with value to the economy would go a long way.

Finally, we should look to encourage the application of technology and science-based approaches to restoration and environmental management. Continued investment in research can contribute to cost-effective solutions to our biggest challenges. Appropriate monitoring can provide better policies and approaches.

We call on everyone to support the global campaign for the healing of nature through the restoration of our ecosystems. We must do our part as responsible stewards of our planet before it's too late. It is, after all, the only planet we've got.

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