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Headline: There's money in worms

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The phrase "Stop Global Warming, Start Global Worming" elicited much support at the recent Management Association of the Philippines-Agribusiness and Countryside Development Foundation forum chaired by Ramon Ilusorio. Advocating worm production programs is now being discussed as a possible joint undertaking by the MAP-ABCD, the Alyansa Agrikultura and the Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food.

One such program that requires low investment and posts high returns is being offered by couple Beth and Tony de Castro of Earthworm Sanctuary.

In a business, it is important to know not only the project itself but also the people behind it.

Tony moved to San Diego, California when he was 8-years-old. After a 17 years, he came back in 1987. He fell in love with his homeland, traveled to the Philippines several times thereafter on different assignments, and finally settled down here as country development officer of the US-based Conservation International. In 2003, he got into organic vegetable farming in Puerto Princesa, Palawan.

A year later, he read an article by Dr. Rafael Guerrero offering one kilo of the African earthworm for free to anyone interested in the propagation program, which was supported by the Technology Resource Center. Tony took the offer. The one kilo has now grown to 2,500 kilos, with Tony becoming the main proponent of earthworm production.

Beth has her own story to tell. In 1992, she was named one of the Ten Outstanding Women in the Nation's Service for promoting child welfare. Prior to that, she was serving the nation as an activist, imprisoned for three months because of her human rights work and later taught psychology at the University of the Philippines.

Beth used her expertise in child trauma to put up nine rehabilitation centers for children of martial law victims. This led to a Unicef job in Bangkok from 2006 to 2009. Upon her return, Beth got involved in organic gardening and earthworms.

Initially, she was repulsed by worms. Today, she believes that experience with worms can provide the link between children and God. She says she is not a religious person but when she sees the vacant lot beside her house transformed into a garden of colorful vegetables with butterflies and fireflies through increased soil fertility brought about by the worms, she feels a nearness to God and nature.

Worm production can combine nationalism and spirituality with money. Tony and Beth say that a farmer can start vermicomposting, the process where garbage is transformed into organic fertilizer by the worms, with only P15,000—P10,000 for 10 kilos of earthworms and P5,000 for hollow blocks, nets and tools.

After six months, 10 kilos of worms can produce 300 kilos of vermicompost. Assuming a farm gate selling price of P20 per kilo (retail price is now P35), a monthly revenue of P6,000 is earned. Less

monthly expenses of P2,500, monthly net income reaches P3,500. This means a yearly net return of P42,000 from an investment of P15,000 or a 280-percent ROI. Worms double every six months with a corresponding doubling of the vermicompost business. One can opt to sell the worms at P1,000 a kilo.

A higher financial and social ROI can be gotten if vermicomposting is used for organic agriculture. Compared to alternative chemical fertilizers, vermicompost is less expensive, improves rather than destroys soil fertility, increases the value of farm produce and provides healthier food for the consumers.

Beth and Tony offer a P3,500 training program package per cluster of up to three participants. This includes one kilo of African earthworms, two start-up bins, three training manuals and a personalized three-hour hands-on course with free follow-up advice. Reservations can be made through 9312617, 09228961996 and [email protected].

The program is held at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. every day, except Monday, at La Mesa Watershed Park.

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