

THE GROWTH OF PHILIPPINE ENVIRONMENTALISM



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One of the interesting features of Philippine politics in the 1990s is the emergence of a vibrant and growing environmental movement. In recent times, the disparate groups within this new social movement have been active in national and local campaigns to reverse the vicious cycle of ecological destruction engulfing the Philippines. In recognition, however, of the particular Third World setting in which they operate, Filipino environmental advocates have sought to link the fight for environmental protection with the effort to democratize access to natural resources.

In conventional explanations for ecological deterioration in the Philippines, it is fashionable to blame the poor for degrading the environment. For example, poor swidden farmers are commonly cited as the primary culprits in deforestation while poor fishermen are accused of overfishing in the coastal areas. Nevertheless, these claims are usually made without looking into why rural landlessness has pushed more and more farmers into upland areas which are even then already logged over by timber concessionaires. The complicity of small fishermen in overfishing is, likewise, easily deduced without assessing the role of commercial fishing trawlers, which haul and export tons of fish and coral to the world market, in depleting marine resources.

There is no question that poverty has, indeed, contributed to the despoilation of the natural ecosystem. However, this should be placed within a policy context where the state, historically, has privileged the granting of mining, logging, fishing, and agricultural plantation rights over the public domain to big companies at the expense of local communities whose peripheral control over resources

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forces them to over-exploit the already marginal open access areas. Ironically, it is the local communities whose livelihood and environment are most often threatened by resource depletion. Environmental groups have asserted that the environmental issue in the Philippines is, more than anything else, an equity issue. In this regard, the 'recovery of the environment' by small local communities from gigantic private commercial interests is seen by the environmental movement as a major step in the application of new development agenda which emphasize community-based models of resource management.

The state as a caretaker of the public domain and provider of access to natural resources, nevertheless, still determines the boundaries by which resources could be used either in a sustainable or unsustainable manner. Thus, the nexus of interactions and transactions between the state, on the one hand, and politicians, private business interests, environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities, on the other, would have to be taken into account in any thoughtful assessment of the trajectory of environmental politics in the Philippines.

State and Natural Resources

The Philippine state's power to distribute rights to utilize natural resources for economic purposes is based on its legal and historical ownership over all lands and resources within the public domain. The Philippine Constitution, for instance, provides that "all lands of the public domain, waters, minerals, coal, petroleum, and other mineral oils, all forces of potential energy, fisheries, forests or timber, wildlife, flora and fauna, and other natural resources, are owned by the State. With the exception of agricultural lands, all other natural resources shall not be alienated. The exploration, development, and utilization of natural resources shall be under the full control and supervision of the State."¹

At present, the Philippine state claims ownership of more than 62 percent of the total land area of the country, most of which are forest zones.² Under the

¹Article XII, Section 2, 1987 Philippine Constitution.

²Owen Lynch Jr. and Kirk Talbott, "Legal Responses to the Philippine Deforestation Crises," *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, Vol. 20 No. 3 (Spring 1988), p. 682.

principle of sovereignty, it is well within the power of the state to declare ownership over lands of public domain. Corollary to this, titles of land ownership could emanate only from the state. This becomes problematic, however, within the context of a post-colonial state which, upon its creation, incorporated into its 'national' boundaries diverse indigenous peoples and their communal lands which were never effectively placed under colonial administration.³ The 'untitled' and 'unregistered' ancestral domain and common property resources of the indigenous people, therefore, became public domain under state ownership and disposition.

In the 1970s, the Martial Law administration of Ferdinand Marcos forcefully invoked the state's right to harness the lands occupied by indigenous communities in the name of development. In a very real sense, the indigenous peoples were placed in a vulnerable position of becoming 'development refugees' in their own land.⁴ With World Bank funding, the state-owned National Power Corporation (NPC) started construction work to build four dams along the Chico river in the Cordillera mountain ranges of Northern Luzon in the late 1970s. The number of Kalinga and Bontoc tribal people from six towns in the Mountain Province and four towns in Kalinga-Apayao projected to be dislocated by the project was pegged at 100,000.

The Chico Dam Project was typical of the large hydroelectric projects in the Third World which were supported by the World Bank particularly in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Oblivious to their environmental costs, the World Bank, as pointed out by Bruce Rich of the Environmental Defense Fund, financed during the period 1979-1983 the construction of hydroelectric dams that resulted in the involuntary resettlement of at least 400,000 people in four continents. The making of the Tucuruí Dam in Brazil, in particular, led to the flooding of 216,000 hectares of forest land.⁵

The tenacious resistance of the Kalinga and Bontoc people to the Chico Dam Project, however, pressured the World Bank to abandon the project in the early 1980s, thus preventing the centuries-old rice terraces and villages of the Cordilleras from ending up as another environmental casualty. By the late 1980s,

³There are some 72 ethno-linguistic groups of indigenous people in the Philippines living mostly in the uplands. See James Anderson, "A Role for Indigenous People in the Philippine Democracy," in Dolores Flamiano and Donald Goertzen (eds.), *Critical Decade* (Berkeley: Philippine Resource Center, 1990), pp. 152-157.

⁴The term 'development refugees' was used by G. Peter Penz. See his article "Development Refugees and Distributive Justice: Indigenous Peoples, Land and the Developmentalist State," *Public Affairs Quarterly*, Vol.6 No. 1 (January 1992), pp. 105-131.

⁵Quoted in Susan George, *Fate Worse Than Debt* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), pp. 156-157.

this setback, among others, has influenced the World Bank in consciously hiring environmental advisers to evaluate its projects.⁶

Vanishing Tribes

The success of the anti-dam movement in the Cordilleras proved to be functional in heightening the struggle against authoritarian rule.⁷ A re-reading of the Kalinga and Bontoc protest action might, however, efface the story that the opposition exhibited against the dam project, rather than being conceived in terms of an anti-regime struggle was, more than anything else, a defense of everyday forms of living that treat nature with reverence against developmental forces which sought to destroy it. Indeed, the Chico movement became one of the early symbols of protest against big dam construction in Asia that puts local ecosystems in peril.⁸

The indigenous peoples' fight against ecologically-destructive development incursion, while crystallizing the growth of the environmental movement, has, at the same time, focused attention on the environmental soundness and sustainability of indigenous systems of resource management which have hitherto been dismissed as primitive by the industrial establishment. Former Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Undersecretary Celso Roque has gone as far as saying that the roots of Filipino environmentalism, in fact, lie in the indigenous systems.⁹

Nevertheless, through the long haul, indigenous tribes have been far less successful in resisting encroachment on their ancestral lands by settlers and the state. During the Martial Law period, Cellophil Resources Corporation, owned by Marcos crony Herminio Disini, received a timber license and proceeded to ravage the forests and build a paper and plastic plant right at the heart of Tinguian land in Abra. In Palawan, Batak land was overrun by a combination

⁶See Pat Aufderheide and Bruce Rich, "Environmental Reform and the Multilateral Banks," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (Spring 1988), pp. 301-321.

⁷The face of the Kalinga leader Macli-ing Dulag, for instance, appeared side-by-side with other slain oppositionists Senator Benigno Aquino Jr., Dr. Remberto de la Paz, Edgar Jopson, and Dr. Juan Escandor, in standard mural paintings which were paraded around during the huge and frenzied rallies organized by the broad anti-Marcos movement of the early 1980s.

⁸According to Lawrence Surendra, both in the Silent Valley movement in India and in the case of a movement against big dam construction in Thailand, reference was made by the local people to the Chico movement. See his article "Emerging Trends in Ecological and Environmental Movements in South and Southeast Asia," in Rajeshwari (ed.), *Protest Movements in South and Southeast Asia* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1987), p. 218.

⁹Celso Roque, "Filipino Environmentalism: An Approach to Natural Resources Management," Appendix to Policy Paper No. 26, Forestry Development Center, University of the Philippines, Los Banos, 1988.

of lowland settlements and road construction.¹⁰ The Aetas of Zambales, on the other hand, had been forced deeper into the mountain interiors by loggers and settlers until the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in 1991 virtually rendered them homeless. In early 1992, the state-owned Philippine National Oil Company resumed construction of a geothermal plant in 450 hectares of land in Mount Apo in Davao del Sur amidst protestations from Lumads who inhabit the place.

The unhampered degradation of the upland environment over the years has certainly pushed diverse indigenous groups closer into the category of vanishing tribes. In this light, the ecological project in a multi-ethnic setting like the Philippines goes beyond the effort to sustain biodiversity through the protection of endangered plant and animal species by defending, as well, cultural diversity which is severely threatened by forces eroding the environment and lifestyles of indigenous communities. Elsewhere in the Third World, alliances between indigenous peoples and NGOs are being forged to preserve indigenous cultures and ecosystems. In Malaysia, the Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the Consumers Association of Penang helped the Penan people in erecting timber blockades to stop logging in Sarawak.¹¹ Meanwhile, in a meeting held in Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon, international NGOs recognized and supported the claim of a coalition of Amazonian tribes to own and manage their ancestral lands.¹² In the Philippines, environmental NGOs are supporting tribal groups in their effort to maintain the integrity of their ecosystem and are, in fact, pushing for the adoption by the state of indigenous resource-use practices. In a document, entitled *Kabuuan: Spirituality and Development, Environment and the Integrity of Creation*, prepared by Filipino NGOs led by the Green

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¹⁰James Eder, "Economic Change and the Demise of Curing Ceremonies Among the Batak of Palawan," in Susan Russel and Clark Cunningham (eds.), *Changing Lives, Changing Rites* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1989), p. 87.

¹¹Thijs de la Court, *Beyond Brundtland: Green Development in the 1990s* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1990), p. 55.

¹²Bruce Byers, "Ecoregions, State Sovereignty and Conflict," *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, Vol. 22 No. 1 (1991), p. 73.

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Forum and the Earth Savers for the 1992 NGO Global Forum in Brazil, such indigenous systems as shifting cultivation exercised by the Hanunoo Mangyans, the communal protection and shared water rights of the Kalinga tribes, and the reverence of the T'bolis for the soil were cited as key practices in conserving nature.¹³

Environmental NGOs

Martial Law contributed much to the proliferation of NGOs in the Philippines in the 1970s and the 1980s. Within the context of authoritarian rule, government functioned less as an

institution encouraging political participation and delivering basic services and operated more as a machinery controlling the population and enriching power holders. Under such conditions, NGOs became alternative avenues for engaging in participatory processes and for implementing livelihood projects.

During the Martial Law period, environmental groups and coalitions were organized to protest state-sponsored, foreign-funded and pollution-causing development projects like the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant, the Kawasaki Sintering Plant in Cagayan de Oro, the Copper Smelter Plant in Batangas, and the Cellophil Plastic Factory in Abra. Early on, Filipino environmentalists learned that environmental protection was not compatible with authoritarian-technocratic forms of development.

The initial attempt to coordinate the efforts of environmental organizations was made when the First Philippine Environmental Congress was convened in 1979. One of the highlights of this congress was the passage of a "Declaration of Environmental Concern" which unequivocally stated that "at the root of environmental problems are social, economic and political systems imposed upon this nation which allow greed and exploitation to predominate over a proper respect for the well-being of present and future generations."¹⁴ The participating groups then decided to solidify their ranks through the creation of a coalition called the Philippine Federation for Environmental Concerns (PFEC).

¹³*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, February 22, 1992.

¹⁴Delfin Ganapin Jr., "Strategic Assessment of NGOs in Community Forestry and Environment," in Antonio Quizon and Rhoda Reyes (eds.), *Strategic Assessment of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Philippines* (Metro Manila: ANGOC, 1989), p. 91.

At its inception, therefore, the PFEC's environmentalism clearly exhibited a commitment to the politics of transformation and redistribution. Delfin Ganapin, Jr. who served as the PFEC Chairman was recruited to become Assistant Secretary in the DENR during the latter half of the Aquino administration's term.

Unlike the PFEC, the Haribon Foundation for the Conservation of Natural Resources has more traditional beginnings. It was founded in 1972 as a bird-watching club. Under the helm of its president Celso Roque, Haribon became a formal conservation foundation involved in environmental research and advocacy in 1983. Haribon also began to assume a specifically social-oriented type of environmentalism, not differing from that of the PFEC, as evidenced by Roque's pronouncement that "poverty and the distorted distributional aspects of the political economy have grave ecological consequences" in Third World countries.¹⁵

Under the presidency of Maximo Kalaw, Jr., Haribon Foundation, together with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the DENR, signed in 1988 the first debt-for-nature accord in the Philippines.¹⁶ The debt-for-nature swap was packaged by the WWF which bought \$2 million of Philippine debt from a foreign creditor for the discounted amount of \$1 million. The WWF then sold the \$1 million debt papers to the Central Bank, which thereafter released the peso equivalent of \$2 million to finance conservation projects in Palawan, including those at St. Paul National Park and El Nido Marine Sanctuary. Haribon administered the funds in coordination with the DENR.¹⁷ Likewise, in 1988, Haribon launched the Save Palawan campaign which petitioned the state to ban the trade in timber and wildlife in Palawan.

In 1989, Haribon Foundation led the formation of the Green Forum, a national coalition of NGOs which

“[P]overty and the distorted distributional aspects of the political economy have grave ecological consequences’ in Third World countries.”

¹⁵Quoted in James Rush, *The Last Tree* (New York: The Asia Society, 1991), p. 79.

¹⁶Initially proposed in 1984 by Thomas Lovejoy of the Swiss-based World Wildlife Fund, the debt-for-nature swap involves the sale by creditor banks of debt at a discount in the secondary market. Western NGOs, in turn, purchase a portion of the discounted debt and then arrange to write off or forgive the debt in exchange for the debtor nation's commitment to allocate local currency for ecological preservation programs. See John Cartwright, "Conserving Nature, Decreasing Debt," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 11 No. 2. (April 1989), p. 123.

¹⁷*Manila Bulletin*, October 24, 1990.

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aims to promote the principles of sustainable development, social equity, and grassroots democracy. Green Forum is an attempt to link on a broad scale the disparate elements within the Philippine environmental movement, from large environmental NGOs like Haribon and development-oriented NGOs with environmental programs like the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM), to small local NGOs immersed in urban poor, peasant, fisherfolk, and tribal communities.¹⁸ Kalaw of Haribon became the chairperson of the environmental coalition. In late 1991, a big move to influence mainstream politics was made by Green Forum when it launched the Earthvote Philippines

Project. It was intended to develop a critical mass of green voters who will make choices in the 1992 elections on the basis of the candidates' positions on environmental issues. Green Forum's publication and distribution of a *Voter's Guide to Sustainable Development* provided the criteria for rating the presidential, senatorial, and congressional candidates on 15 key issues ranging from pollution and logging to foreign debt and foreign military presence.¹⁹

Nevertheless, there are still environmental NGOs which have remained independent from Green forum. One of them is the small but unintimidated *Lingkod Tao Kalikasan*. Founded in 1986, the NGO, under the leadership of Sr. Aida Velasquez, helped local fishermen in Marinduque in securing a DENR order in 1988 to stop Marcopper Corporation from dumping its mine tailings into the Calancao Bay. However, this turned out to be a short-lived victory as the decision was soon overruled by the Office of the President.²⁰ What seems to be worthy of underscoring here, however, is the fact that Sr. Aida typifies the growing number of church people espousing environmental activism.

The Church and Environmental Activism

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¹⁸Rush, *op cit.*, p. 81.

¹⁹Eric Caruncho, “Nature Casts Its Ballot,” *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, September 29, 1991.

²⁰James Goodno, *The Philippines: Land of Broken Promises* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1991), p. 283.

generations." With this kind of awareness, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) signed on January 1988 a Pastoral letter entitled "What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land" that decried the damage done to the forests, rivers, and corals which it attributed to "human greed and the relentless drive of our plunder economy." The bishops, at the same time, lauded the efforts of the local people of Bukidnon and Zamboanga del Sur who "defended what remains of their forest with their own bodies." In the face of the rampant assault on the environment, the pastoral letter urged the people to "avoid a fatalistic attitude" and to instead "organize around local ecological issues."²¹

The Protestant churches, on the other hand, through the active leadership of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) launched in mid-1992 a Comprehensive Ecology and Environmental Protection Program which involves the training, education, and advocacy of environmental issues for its members. The program, which will run until 1994, consists of 682 week-long seminars to be participated in by 25 parishioners per session. The grassroots trainees are then expected to replicate these workshops in their respective communities. According to the NCCP Secretary General Feliciano Carino, the community leaders will be commissioned to prepare policy papers to internalize the church option for the poor and to relate church teachings with environmental conservation.²²

The Philippine churches' support for environmental activism signifies the preference for a church serving as a community of interpretation and action. From the perspective of political theology, the churches function as communities of interpretation in which issues of justice and conceptions of goodness are publicly discussed.²³ The social justice orientation of the Church in the Philippines was especially developed in response to the human rights violations committed under the martial law regime. During this time, many priests and church workers suffered state repression for their social activism.²⁴ At present, it appears that in place of human rights activism, the new environmental activism by the Church has become the new magnet attracting dangers to its practitioners in the field because of the threat they pose to established interests.²⁵

²¹Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?" in Abdon, Ma. Josol (ed.), *Responses to the Signs of the Times* (Cebu: Redemptorist Publications, 1991), pp. 306-320.

²²*Philippine Daily Globe*, April 18, 1992.

²³Francis Schussler Fiorenza, "The Church as a Community of Interpretation: Political Theology Between Discourse Ethics and Hermeneutical Reconstruction," in Don Browning and Francis Schussler Fiorenza (eds.), *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), p. 87.

²⁴See Robert Youngblood, *Marcos Against the Church* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

²⁵In Mindanao, numerous instances of priests, nuns, and church workers, in the forefront of anti-logging campaign being subjected to violent reprisals have been reported. For example,

Community Action

Church social activism in the grassroots level is expressed through the organization of basic christian communities (BCCs). Just like the *comunidades eclesiais de base* of Latin America, the BCCs are informed of the theological notion of liberation from poverty and oppression.²⁶ With their emphasis on collective reflections on the sources of social deprivation, the BCCs began to see the effects of environmental destruction on their means of livelihood. In Bukidnon, the BCCs became active in the campaign to ban logging in their province. According to Bishop Gaudencio Rosales of Malaybalay, Bukidnon, long before the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) came out with the pastoral letter on the environment in 1988, the local people had already seen "the connection between the loss of their livelihood and the denudation of the forests."²⁷ Subsequently, the local communities decided to fight for the forests because it meant saving their lives.

The first major community action in the campaign to declare a total logging ban in Bukidnon occurred in 1987, when the people of San Fernando barricaded the roads descending from the mountains in order to prevent the trucks carrying timber to proceed in the direction leading to the ports in Cagayan de Oro. A court injunction was issued ordering the lifting of the barricades. The local people, however, refused to heed the order. The barricades were then forcibly dismantled and a number of people were arrested. The anti-logging movement, however, persisted until the directive for a total logging ban in Bukidnon was made by the DENR in 1990.

Another instance of community action combined with NGO support mechanisms and the use of mobilization strategies occurred in Oriental Mindoro. In November 1986, the logging ban in the upland areas south of Calapan was revoked, enabling the Oriental Wood Processing Company to secure a timber license covering 38,000 hectares of forest land that run into the ancestral domain of the Mangyan communities. The Mangyans sought the assistance of a provincial NGO, the Task Force on Mangyan Rights and Welfare based in the provincial capital of Calapan. A publicity campaign was launched and protest

Fr. Nerlito Satur, a Roman Catholic priest who was a staunch advocate for a total logging ban in Bukidnon and was instrumental in apprehending illegally-cut logs in July 1991 was killed 3 months later. Fr. Marjo Estroba, a parish priest in Agusan del Sur who was also active in resisting illegal logging in his province was killed in 1988. On the other hand, Fr. Bernardo Amorosa, parish priest of Malabog, Davao del Norte, received death threats for spearheading a campaign to put an end to illegal logging in his parish.

²⁶See Julma Neo, *Towards a Liberating Formation of Christian Communities* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1988); and W.E. Hewitt, "The Roman Catholic Church and Environmental Politics in Brazil," in *Journal of Developing Areas*, Vol. 26 No. 2 (January 1992), pp. 239-258.

²⁷*Manila Chronicle*, February 26, 1992.

actions were held in Calapan. The campaign bore fruit as the logging license of the Oriental Wood Processing Company was suspended in February 1987.²⁸ As a new social movement, the efficacy of the environmental movement appears to be its emphasis on community action and its being firmly rooted in a specific topography.²⁹

Weak State, Ravaged Environment

The impetus for the growth of the environmental movement in the Philippines has been the state's inability to defend the environment. At the root of this intrinsic incapacity of the state to pursue its 'constitutional' mandate to provide a healthy ecology for its citizenry is the fact that its institutions are captive to private interests whose goals do not necessarily coincide with visions of sustainable development. Given the presence of a privatized state, access to state-mediated resources often end up in the hands of a few.³⁰

The weakness of the state is further revealed in the fact that it has not only failed to redistribute private agricultural land in the interest of land reform, but it has also continued with its practice of leasing out thousands of hectares of public lands to giant fruit companies whose multitudes of small farmers have remained landless. The benefits from large-scale mining, logging, and fishing by big private companies in the public domain, on the other hand, have not only been widely dispersed but have even worsened the livelihood prospects of local communities because of the degradation of the environment. Hence, the environmental movement is pushing for a shift from a state-directed, private company-controlled management of natural resources toward a community-based model of resource utilization. According to Sixto Roxas, a Macapagal administration technocrat in the 1960s who has become a green activist in the 1990s,

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²⁸Lynch and Talbott, "Legal Responses to the Philippine Deforestation Crises," pp. 703-704.

²⁹Anita Giri, "Understanding Contemporary Social Movements," *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 17 No. 1 (1992), p. 41.

³⁰See Paul Hutchcroft, "Oligarchs and Cronies in the Philippine State: The Politics of Patrimonial Plunder," *World Politics*, Vol. 43 No. 3 (April 1991), pp. 414-450.

an alternative development strategy should be based on a community-founded analytical paradigm as opposed to the enterprise-founded market model.³¹

Conclusion

Philippine environmentalism has developed in such a way that the fight for environmental protection is closely interlinked with the effort to redirect resource access patterns toward more equitable lines. In the search for ecological balance and sustainability, the environmental movement is promoting the adoption of community-based schemes in natural resource management.

Interestingly, the passage of the Local Government Code in 1991 has immensely contributed to the creation of a more favorable policy context for the pursuit of environmental protection programs at the community level. The Code provides for the devolution of certain environmental functions to local government units, as well as the provision of mechanisms such as local development councils where environmental and natural resource committees could be created. These would allow for greater NGO and community participation in the formulation and implementation of environmental programs in local zones. Nevertheless, the lack of political will and knowledge of local officials themselves regarding the salient provisions of the Code has prevented the establishment of environmental committees as components of local development councils in many towns and provinces. Ironically, the state, whose authority was precisely devolved to local governments, has to play a leading role in upgrading the capacity of local officials in environmental management through training seminars and workshops.

Like the local executives, the NGO community is also faced with the challenge of undertaking capacity-building measures in order to become an effective participant in the implementation of local environmental projects. In the past, environmental NGOs had been prominent for its advocacy and lobbying efforts. While these remain as vital functions of the green movement in the Philippines, the environmental NGOs in the light of the fresh challenges confronting them are expected to become technically efficient and organizationally effective partners of local communities and local governments in the implementation of community-based resource management programs.

³¹Sixto Roxás is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Green Forum and the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement. See his article "A Hands-On Agenda," *Manila Chronicle*, July 18-24, 1992.