

## **The Future of the Environment and the Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines under the Duterte Administration**

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### **Abstract**

There is an inseparable relationship between the indigenous peoples and their environment. The indigenous peoples are living in areas rich in biodiversity. However, the environment with its biodiversity in the Philippines has been destroyed and devastated because the past leaders of the Philippine government have allowed the entry of companies and corporations to plunder the environment and its biodiversity. This paper argues that the present government under the Duterte administration is doing a better job compared to the past leadership in protecting the environment because it has the political will to stop companies and corporation to ransack and destroy the environment. However, it also argues that while the Duterte administration has the political will to stop the business activities and transactions of companies and corporations that are detrimental to the well-being of the environment, the present administration also lacks solid ethical grounding in its environmental advocacy. While political will is important - indeed, the first requisite to solve the widespread environmental problem of the country - it cannot be sustained if there is no clear and solid ethical foundation as to why this must be done. The paper goes on to argue that any environment advocacies in the Philippines, especially in Mindanao must learn from the

land ethic of Aldo Leopold and the indigenous peoples' knowledge and belief systems.

**Keywords:** Philippine Environment, Duterte Administration, Land Ethics, Aldo Leopold, Indigenous Knowledge and Belief Systems

## **Introduction**

It is an accepted fact that man cannot live without the environment and its bio-diversity. In fact, man is so dependent to land and water and cannot survive without these elements. Water and air are elements that can be found in what is collectively called as land or environment. Without environment, there is no life. If the Bible is indeed true in its being "an inspired Word of God", this might be the reason why in the book of Genesis, God created first the environment with all its contents including the animals before He created human beings so that when they come, they will have all that they need. When the first human beings were born, they have lived in paradise and they have everything that they needed. But accordingly, God commanded them to take control of the rest of the creation. But human beings became greedy, got wild and wanted to possess and own the earth. Thus, problems have occurred since then and until today. In fact, the world's biological diversity and mineral resources are imperiled.<sup>1</sup> When the environment and biodiversity are destroyed, this will result to more complex problems such as food and other environmental threats.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of problem is more evident in third world countries all over the world. In Asia, the close link between human well-being and healthy ecosystems has been demonstrated over the last decades or so by the devastating natural calamities which resulted to plenty of diseases.<sup>3</sup> The Philippines has been a witness

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<sup>1</sup> David Dudgeon, et al., "Freshwater Biodiversity: Importance, Threats, Status and Conservation Challenges," in *Biological Review*, Vol. 81, Issue 2, May 2006.

<sup>2</sup> David Pimentel, "Soil Erosion: A Food and Environmental Threat," in *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 8, Issue 1, February 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Navjot S. Sodhi and Barry W. Brook, *Southeast Asian Biodiversity Crisis*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2006.

of many climate-change related disasters such as typhoons, earthquakes, flashfloods and landslides which resulted human deaths and accidents as well agricultural and property devastations for the last ten years.<sup>4</sup> The most vulnerable groups in the Philippines that are always adversely affected during disasters and calamities are the poor and the indigenous peoples. While many livelihood projects and other development aids from many agencies and institutions have enabled indigenous peoples to adapt and survive to changing circumstances, erosion of the rich natural resources found in their territories and penetration of multi-national corporations in partnership with national and local officials with vested interests of their rich biodiversity and resources have been the great price of all these development assistance and projects.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the indigenous peoples remain poor and their communities were further devastated.

### **Biodiversity and Climate Change Challenges and the Indigenous Peoples**

Most areas with exceptionally rich but jeopardized biodiversity and mineral resources are present in the mountains usually inhabited by the indigenous peoples. But the apparent conflict between protection and management of biodiversity and development of rural communities has fueled long-standing debates between conservation advocates who are most likely *ecocentrics* and the social scientists and development workers who are mostly *anthropocentrics*. While the protagonists and the antagonists of biodiversity conservation as well as rural development continue to look for better argument to compel those at the other camps or while these two groups try to look for a common ground and have a “win-win” solution, intense pressures from logging and mining companies are very much

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<sup>4</sup> Graciao Yumul, Jr. et al., Extreme Weather Events and Related Disasters in the Philippines, 2004–08: A sign of what climate change will mean? *Wiley Online Library*, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Wallbott, “Indigenous Peoples in UN REDD+ Negotiations ‘Importing Power’ and Lobbying for Rights through Discursive Interplay Management,” in *Ecology and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Mar 2014.

evident in these communities. <sup>6</sup> Even attempts to advance agricultural frontiers have been used to justify the intensified exploration of the mountains mostly occupied by the Indigenous peoples.<sup>7</sup>

To be able to entice the indigenous peoples to give up their lands, mining companies in partnership with the government have created their slogan, “there is life in mining”. This slogan was used by the companies and their cohorts to advertise responsible mining and to convince the people that they want to promote life, value the environment and the community. But for indigenous peoples who have been marginalized because of all these destructive practices, mining often leads to the loss of their cultural identity, livelihood and survival as distinct people through the loss of their lands.<sup>8</sup> The environmental apathy of many corporations and businessmen has resulted not only to the destruction of the environment as an immediate and tangible effect but also to climate change as a secondary and not so visible effect. There is the eminent threat of the impact of climate change to indigenous peoples who are living in abject poverty and yet it is not yet well documented and accepted that indigenous peoples can also offer viable alternatives in addressing its adverse impacts.<sup>9</sup> These indigenous knowledge and practices of the IPs in combating climate change has not yet been properly utilized by agencies and institutions working on climate change mitigation because they are still banking on with the “scientific” way of doing it as espoused by the Western development models. It has to be emphasized that indigenous peoples have contributed the least to climate change because of their love for the environment. Climate change is mainly caused by Western development models characterized by unsustainable production and consumption,

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Larson, et al., “Land Tenure and REDD+: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” in *Global Environmental Change*, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Marina Wetzlmaier, *Cultural Impacts of Mining in Indigenous Peoples’ Ancestral Domains in the Philippines*. ASEAS, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Larson, et al., “Land Tenure and REDD+: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” in *Global Environmental Change*, 2013.

extreme individualism, increasing concentration of wealth and power in the privileged few.<sup>10</sup>

The indigenous peoples are so attached to their lands which they considered sacred. Since they depend on these lands for their economic and cultural survival, they have developed practices to preserve their lands and to protect them from the greedy outsiders who want to steal their land and destroy its rich biodiversity.<sup>11</sup> In addition, they also developed practices to cope with and adapt to the effects of climate change. These practices, though not “scientific” as compared to those coming from the Western experts, cannot be underestimated because these practices have allowed them to survive as distinct peoples over millennia.<sup>12</sup> Thus, government and institutions working on measures on how to adapt and manage the impacts of climate change must learn from these indigenous ways of the IPs. They should be invited during discussion and discourses about climate change impacts and their mitigation so that their voices will be heard, and their indigenous practices will be considered.

### **Environmental Protection and Human Rights Violation**

While the inseparable relationship between the indigenous peoples and their land has been recognized and documented for the past century, there has been less attention given to the fact that this intimate connection does not stop industries and corporations, in collusion with the national and local governments, from destroying their land and its rich natural resources.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Linda Wallbott, “Indigenous Peoples in UN REDD+ Negotiations ‘Importing Power’ and Lobbying for Rights through Discursive Interplay Management,” in *Ecology and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Mar 2014.

<sup>11</sup> See Karl Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep Their Homeland*. Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Wallbott, Indigenous Peoples in UN REDD+ Negotiations “Importing Power” and Lobbying for Rights through Discursive Interplay Management, *Ecology and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Mar 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Muir and Annie Booth, An environmental justice analysis of caribou recovery planning, protection of an Indigenous culture, and coal mining development in northeast British Columbia, Canada, in *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, August 2012.

The Philippines is said to host one of the world's biggest deposits of mineral resources especially of gold and copper but these minerals are under threat from mining activities.<sup>14</sup> Mineral reserves are estimated at about 7.1 billion tons of 13 known metallic and 51 billion tons of 29 nonmetallic minerals, many of which are located in areas of rich biodiversity and within ancestral domains of indigenous peoples.<sup>15</sup> However, with the enactment of the Mining Act of 1995 (Republic Act 7942), the Philippines liberalized its mining policy and opened both public and private lands, including protected areas, to foreign investments which resulted to the gradual decrease of these mineral resources to multi-national companies.<sup>16</sup>

The past governments have aggravated the situation by their promotion of mining as a priority industry in the country through a policy shift from tolerance to aggressive promotion of large-scale mining which resulted to opening of 32 mining projects from 2004-2011 and the filing of more than 2,000 applications for mining contracts and exploration permits.<sup>17</sup> However, it is important to remember that despite this aggressive promotion of the mining industry, investments stayed below the government's initial target and the mining industry only accounted for about one percent of the annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>18</sup> In June 2012, President Benigno Aquino III signed a long-awaited executive order (E.O. 79) which aimed at increasing revenues from mining to at least 5 percent.<sup>19</sup>

As expected, the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines welcomed the order with so much hope that it would provide a

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<sup>14</sup> Marina Wetzlmaier, *Cultural Impacts of Mining in Indigenous Peoples' Ancestral Domains in the Philippines*. ASEAS, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> See Alyansa Tigil Mina's Position Paper on the continued adoption of the Aquino government of the revitalization of the Philippine mineral industry policy. Quezon City, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See Alyansa Tigil Mina, *A legacy of disasters. The Mining Situation in the Philippines – 2011*. Quezon City, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> See ABS-CBN Report by Willard Cheng Entitled PNoy's mining EO welcomed, criticized last July 9, 2012.

consistent and stable business environment attractive for both foreign and local investors.<sup>20</sup> However, environmental activists and some leaders of the indigenous peoples protested for not being consulted and raised their suspicion that E.O. 79 would serve business interests of the investors and some politicians but not the indigenous and local people living in the area.<sup>21</sup> Amidst criticisms from other sectors, the past governments of the republic have given their full support for these industries by putting up enabling mechanism such as dams and other infrastructure projects that have continually diminished the extent of indigenous peoples' ancestral domains.<sup>22</sup>

As a result of this environmental apathy of the government, environmental activists have consolidated their efforts to raise consciousness among the public and help the indigenous peoples resist the coming of companies to their territories without clear and transparent process of getting their consent. But the military as the arm wing of the funding agencies and the government, in an attempt to counteract the growing resistance of the indigenous peoples in the upland areas as a result of extractive development being implanted in their territories, also intensified their offensive against indigenous communities and accused them of supporters of the New People's Army (NPAs) who had been actively operating in the mountains.

I personally witnessed this kind of scenario in my fieldworks and engagements with the IPs especially in Agusan del Sur and the Caraga Region. Since the year 2000 until 2015, I was very active in many environment and peace movements and gathering especially involving the indigenous peoples. In 2014, I participated in a huge peace and development rally initiated by many tribal chieftains in Agusan del Sur and other parts of the

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<sup>20</sup> See Philippine Daily Inquirer Article of Riza Olchondra entitled Chamber of Mines applauds Aquino policy: Signal to all investors. July 10, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> See ABS-CBN Report by Willard Cheng on PNoy's mining EO welcomed, criticized last July 9, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> See Karl Gaspar, *The Lumad's Struggle in the Face of Globalization*. Alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao, Davao City, 2000. See also Karl Gaspar's *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep Their Homeland*. Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011.

Caraga Region. I found out that peace and human rights violations issues are strongly connected with the issues of extractive industries operating in ancestral domains of the indigenous peoples.

It is very clear that all these attacks against indigenous peoples and their assertion of their rights to self-determination have a direct connection to their lands which are rich in natural and mineral deposits. But we need to be reminded that depriving indigenous peoples the right to self-determination of their ancestral lands will mean not only the complete loss of their identity but also their source of life as distinct peoples.<sup>23</sup> For the IPs their land is their life. Their land is more than a mere source of their livelihood, but it is the very reason of their identity and survival. In addition, for the indigenous peoples in the Philippines, their land and everything connected to it were of divine origin. Hence, it was sacred. Being sacred, it was not subject to ownership, sale, purchase, or lease.<sup>24</sup>

### **Indigenous Knowledge and Resource Management**

Using their indigenous knowledge and belief systems, indigenous peoples can offer alternative solutions to environmental problems that conventional methods have failed to solve.<sup>25</sup> The concept of resources management and preservation is not anymore new to the indigenous peoples in the Philippines. It is a principle that their ancestors inculcated in them. Thus, they have managed to sustain and kept their fragile ecosystem despite the many plunders that have been done.<sup>26</sup> This could be the reason that the International Institute for Sustainable Development recognized the vital contribution of the indigenous

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<sup>23</sup> See Karl Gaspar, *The Lumad's Struggle in the Face of Globalization*. Alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao, Davao City, 2000. See also Karl Gaspar's *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep Their Homeland*. Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> See Karl Gaspar, *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep Their Homeland*. Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> See Indigenous Perspectives. *Bequeathing Indigenous Knowledge*. Volume 5. No. 2, TEBTEBBA Foundations, Baguio City, Philippines, December 2002.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



peoples in the area of environmental protection, management of biological diversity, adopting and mitigating the impact of climate change, as well as indigenous practices for sustainable development.<sup>27</sup>

Indigenous knowledge and practices on resource management has been reaffirmed in the Johannesburg Declaration approved at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002.<sup>28</sup> However, the indigenous practices of environmental protection have been threatened for extinction in the face of many voracious and extractive business industries mostly multinational companies operating in the indigenous territories under the blessings of the past governments of the country. Shortly after that World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, the then President Arroyo, in an attempt to satisfy the clamor of that summit, immediately ordered the DENR to put a stop of mining activities in the different rich biodiversity mountains in the Philippines. Ironically, however, after the implementation of this stealthy memorandum, the forests around the Sierra Madre mountain province bordering Quezon and Aurora provinces cascaded burying towns and human lives in mud, boulders and logs. Despite this tragic event, in just about one year or less, large scale corporate logging and mining industries once again had resumed their operation as if they have amnesia of what had happened to the Philippines and the Filipino people because of the tragedy. What's more maddening is the fact that after all those disasters, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) reinstated cancelled logging and mining permits and lifted not only a face-saving logging ban in the country but also logging moratorium in place for the past decades in protected biodiversity-rich forestlands throughout the country.

The mining revitalization policy of the Arroyo administration has resulted to revitalization of injustices to the indigenous territories and ancestral domains. Since as aggressively as the government pursued mining investors around the globe, multi-

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<sup>27</sup> See *International Institute for Sustainable Development*, Winnipeg, 1992.

<sup>28</sup> See Indigenous Perspectives. *Bequeathing Indigenous Knowledge*. Volume 5. No. 2, TEBTEBBA Foundations, Baguio City, Philippines, December 2002.

national mining companies with strings of environmental crimes to the Filipino people, especially to the poor and the indigenous folks greedily eyed the Philippines to be the venue where they profit from all their business transactions at the expense of the indigenous peoples.<sup>29</sup>

As a result of this environmental plunder done by big corporations and companies operating in the indigenous territories, the forests are almost wiped out. Wastelands evolved out of mining areas. Agricultural lands were laced with poisonous chemicals and so there was food shortage. Corporate overexploitation of aquatic resources has been snuffing the life out of coastal populations and the country's rich coastal and marine biodiversity. Water is commodified and privatized beyond social requirements for human survival. A vicious cycle of the problems of air and water pollution, garbage, congestion, housing, unemployment, and a dearth of health and other social services manifest deeper problems to many Filipinos, especially the indigenous peoples.<sup>30</sup> Why has this been happening in the Philippines? Why has this happening in Mindanao? This happened because leaders lacked not only expertise as well as political will, they also lacked leadership and management skills to engage the people especially those who are at the margins to participate in the discourse on environmental issues. They failed to engage the local people because the leaders as well as the institutions suffer from what Professor Maboloc calls 'democratic and moral deficits'.<sup>31</sup>

It is very clear that environmental problems cannot be separated from the socio-political and economic problems of the Philippines. Therefore, to resolve this problem, there is a need to approach the environmental issues in its social dimensions and this can only be done through political actions that emancipate the people from unjust structures in society as well as learning

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<sup>29</sup> Marina Wetzlmaier. *Cultural Impacts of Mining in Indigenous Peoples' Ancestral Domains in the Philippines*. ASEAS, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> See Christopher Ryan Maboloc. "On the Ethical and Democratic Deficits of Environmental Pragmatism," in *Journal of Human Values*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 107-114.

from the indigenous peoples' traditional skills and knowledge in taking care and protecting their ancestral domains.<sup>32</sup>

### **Environmental challenges of the Indigenous Peoples in Mindanao**

Mindanao is a land rich with cultural diversity both the *lumads* who did not embrace Islam as their Religion and those *lumads* who embraced Islam as their religion. These non-Islamized indigenous tribes (*lumads*) were further broken into smaller groups depending on where the tribe is located in the island. Mostly, they are living in the forested areas of Mindanao and for so long they embraced a strong conviction that the survival of their people depends on the health of their ecosystem.<sup>33</sup> There is also a general consensus that indigenous peoples in Mindanao will be called *lumads*. It is the *Binisaya* word for indigenous which excludes the Visayan settlers who have already called themselves Mindanawons, or people from Mindanao.<sup>34</sup>

The *Manobos*, a large major ethno-linguistic group in Mindanao, are present in Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur and Bukidnon. The *Matigsalug* and *Umayamnon* communities in Bukidnon and the *Tigwahanon* in Agusan del Sur and Bukidnon are sometimes considered to be sub-groups of the Manobo identified according to their location. The *Matigsalug* refers to the people along the River Salug, the *Tigwahanon* along the River Tigwa and Tigwa-salug valley, and the *Umayamnon* along the watershed of the Umayam River. The community of the *Banwaons* has a small population and their Ancestral Domain is located in the municipality of San Luis in Agusan del Sur. They can trace back their roots to the larger *Higaonon* group. According to their elders, their community was formed when under Apo Anggowaning, in the early 1800s. The *Talaandig* community along the Pantaron Range is said to have come from the *Banwaons*. They separated during the time of Apo Kanangaan

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<sup>32</sup> See Indigenous Perspectives. *Bequeathing Indigenous Knowledge*. Volume 5. No. 2, TEBTEBBA Foundations, Baguio City, Philippines, December 2002.

<sup>33</sup> See Karl Gaspar's *The Lumad's Struggle in the Face of Globalization*. Alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao. Davao City, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

when boundaries were set, and they delineated their territory from the *Banwaons* and *Manobos*. They also instituted their own laws and policies. Many of their leaders were known *baganis* (warriors) as their territory was constantly threatened by outsiders and foreign colonizers. They were called, “*Talaandig*” because they live on the slopes of the mountains. The indigenous peoples in Mindanao continue to practice their indigenous knowledge and belief systems.

Over the years, however, the cultural heritage of these groups along with their ancestral domains has been slowly eroded due to several government policies in favor of the advancement of national interests. Most of them also rely on subsistence farming as their source of food. They used forest products for their household needs like barks of trees as walls of their houses and plants for medicine and spices. Their daily needs are very dependent on their environment. What is ironic is that the conservation programs especially of the past governments were more often if not always, entailed taking over the control of forests from indigenous who are supposed to be more knowledgeable in managing and preserving their environment because their life and survival are intertwined with their environment since time immemorial. Conservation models of the past governments had restricted habitation and activities of the IPs in these forest homes and disregarded their forest resource management practices that have ensured their sustainability as well their forestland.<sup>35</sup> The conflict between the programs and projects by the past governments and the indigenous communities was made more complicated and filled with tension with the constant intrusion of mining and logging, both legal and illegal, thus, marginalizing an already marginalized IPs.<sup>36</sup>

Most often, if not always, these poor yet peace-loving indigenous people would rather avoid conflict than assert their

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<sup>35</sup> See Indigenous Perspectives. *Bequeathing Indigenous Knowledge*. Volume 5. No. 2, TEBTEBBA Foundations, Baguio City, Philippines, December 2002.

<sup>36</sup> See Karl Gaspar, *The Lumad's Struggle in the Face of Globalization*. Alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao, Davao City, 2000. See also Karl Gaspar's *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep Their Homeland*. Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011.

ways and therefore would choose to go farther into the upland areas, away from destruction and in turn, become more marginalized.<sup>37</sup> Due to pressures and influences from the outside, and for them to survive economically, some indigenous peoples adopted modern farming system and planted abaca, falcatta trees, rubber, palm oil and banana. Some of them also engaged in small-scale logging ventures especially in the province of Agusan del Sur.

However, there are some indigenous groups who are upholding their traditional farming practices and environmental conservation models. They faced the on-going threat of modernization and its models of development and conservation that are being championed by the government and other development partners who only see their slash and burn farming methods and not the totality of their practices that ensure the survival of both forest and forest-dwellers. Among the indigenous peoples who are asserting their indigenous ways are the *Manobos* of Bukidnon, many of whom dwell within the Mount Kitanglad Natural Park.<sup>38</sup> I visited their communities many times and I am always amazed with how they lived their lives amidst the pressures of modernity. When you visit them, you will experience all their sacred rituals. But their assertion of their right to self-determination continues because neglect, discrimination and deprivation of their rights to utilize and conserve their natural resources are still prevalent despite the law that clearly declares Mount Kitanglad as their ancestral home

### **Environmental Advocacy of the Duterte Administration**

In this paper I argue that the Duterte administration is doing a better job in terms of protecting the Philippine environment compared to the previous administrations especially those of Benigno Aquino III and Gloria-Macapagal Arroyo. It was said that

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<sup>37</sup> See Karl Gaspar, *The Lumad's Struggle in the Face of Globalization*. Alternate Forum for Research in Mindanao, Davao City, 2000. See also Karl Gaspar's *Manobo Dreams in Arakan: A People's Struggle to Keep Their Homeland*. Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> See International Institute for Environment and development (iied) Report on the Growing Forest Partnership Initiative.

when Duterte assumed his office as the 16<sup>th</sup> president of the Philippine Republic, many environmental activists and advocates got excited for the promised change of leadership. Appointing Gina Lopez as the environment secretary was a bold message to the public that his administration is serious in addressing the environmental maladies besetting the country. Upon Gina Lopez's assumption to her administrative post, many people were euphoric and expectant that she can solve the lingering environmental problems because she was believed to have the heart of the environment and the people living in it. Many people were hopeful that she has the political will unlike the past officials in the DENR who compromised some of their roles in order to strike a balance between environment and economic development but in the end always favoring the needs and interests of the business community over the needs of the environment and the local community.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, peoples' belief and hope about Gina Lopez were true. Upon her short stint as the DENR secretary, Gina Lopez was able to order the cessation of operations to many mining companies that did not promote responsible mining activities.<sup>40</sup> She visited different mining sites and indigenous communities throughout the country to really gather their thoughts and sentiments. Her rather strong and not-so-calculated moves made some businessmen and owners of the mining companies (including some cabinet members of Duterte) angry toward her. However, she has created more space for the participation of different stakeholders both from the private and government sectors as well as the members of the different civil society and peoples' organizations. Under her watch, the main thrusts of the DENR were centered on institutional reform and environmental governance which highlighted community empowerment, rational minerals management, stronger biodiversity protection,

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<sup>39</sup> See Tony La Viña, "Environment and Climate Change: Duterte Owns the Problems Now," in Rappler.com, June 29, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> See Jonathan Mayuga, "Environmental Protection, Conservation Mark 'Change' Duterte Admin's First 6 Months," in *The Business Mirror*, January 2017.

proper ecological solid waste management and efficient and transformative climate-change policies.<sup>41</sup>

The first attempt of environmental protection and preservation of the Duterte administration has encountered major obstacle when the Commission on Appointment (CA) did not confirm the appointment of Gina Lopez as the DENR secretary. Again, many people (including myself) were frustrated and disappointed for losing such opportunity to really restore the ailing environment. Many of us would have wanted Duterte to intervene through the decision of the CA and let them change their decision or ignore the decision of the CA and through his strong political will, insist to put Gina Lopez as the DENR secretary. Of course, many of us are not really familiar with the political landscape of the country, thus our naïve sentiments and suggestions.

However, Duterte played his political game very well. He respected the decision of the CA for not confirming the appointment not only Gina Lopez but his other appointees especially those associated with the left leaning ideologies. To replace Gina Lopez, Duterte appointed, former Armed Forces chief Roy Cimatu to take over the department. This soft-spoken top brass in the military has proven to be not only technically competent to do his tasks but also socially and politically advanced in terms of negotiation. No wonder that under the stint of Secretary Cimatu, the order of closure of operation of Boracay Beach Resorts was implemented. It is true, that there had been grumbles already as to the abuses of the hotel and other business establishment owners in the Boracay, but it is only President Duterte who has the political will to really order the temporary closure of its operation for complete rehabilitation of the beautiful tourist destination of the country. Of course, in the closure as well as in the rehabilitation, secretary Cimatu has done enormous job. If the president of the Philippines is not Duterte,

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

the issue of Boracay would have died its natural death. But not when you have Duterte as president as he said, “not during my watch”. He has inherited these grave environmental problems from many decades of neglect and wrong decisions of past administrations. But instead of blaming the past administrations, President Duterte owns and faces the problem in the present and leads us away from environmental catastrophe through his strong and visionary government.<sup>42</sup>

In the third State of the Nation Address of President Rodrigo Duterte, he declared the protection of the environment as a top priority of his administration and issued a stern warning on mining industry for damaging the environment. “Do not destroy the environment or compromise our resources. Repair what you have mismanaged. Try to change management radically because this time, you will have restrictive policies—a prohibition of open-pit mining is one” and he urged the Senate to immediately pass the National Land Use Act.<sup>43</sup> Just recently, in an article by Genalyn Kabling published at Manila Bulletin last October 4, 2018, Duterte is contemplating the imposition of a total ban on mining in the country after the 2019 election and he is asking the support of the new members of the congress (hopefully his allies) to repeal Republic Act 7942 which is an “Act Instituting a New System of Mineral Resources Exploration, Development, Utilization and Conservation”.<sup>44</sup> For Duterte this law is the culprit of some of the environmental maladies that the country is experiencing. He further said in that article of Kabling that even if the government is earning 70 billion pesos a year in revenues from the mining industry, the amount is not enough to reverse the affected community. The President even lamented that open-pit

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<sup>42</sup> See Tony La Viña, “Environment and Climate Change: Duterte Owns the Problems Now,” in Rappler.com, June 29, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> See philstar.com. “Duterte declares environmental protection top priority, slam mining industry”, July 23, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> See Genalyn Kabling, “Duterte Eyes Total Mining Ban,” in *Manila Bulletin*, October 4, 2018.



mining operations have left huge holes in Mindanao and weakened the soil that leads to landslides.<sup>45</sup>

From all these different pronouncements by President Duterte one can really see a glimpse of hope for the protection and preservation of the Philippine environment and the people living within those communities with rich biodiversity, and they are mostly the indigenous peoples. What distinguishes Duterte from his predecessors notably Benigno Aquino III and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is his political will and genuine care for the environment and the indigenous peoples living in those communities with rich natural resources. Unlike his predecessors who issued executive orders for the exploration and eventual operations of mining companies, Duterte made an order of total ban or closure of some erring mining companies. While the previous administrations have been doing delaying tactics for the rehabilitation of Boracay, Duterte issued a closure of Boracay for rehabilitation and he might soon implement closure for rehabilitation purposes to all other tourist destinations of the country. This is precisely because Duterte has political will and is radical in his approach to solve the lingering problem of the environment. In an article written by Professor Maboloc entitled "Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte," Maboloc started his article by asking some questions like what makes Duterte a radical leader? Is he the paradigmatic persona who emerges at an important time in history to become a catalyst for genuine change or is he just another pragmatic politician? Then he said that Duterte's radical leadership can be seen immediately after a year in office when he has created several firestorms in the political scene.<sup>46</sup> Maboloc further said that 'building a society requires dismantling old habits' and more importantly, it is 'rectifying unjust systems and structures.' Duterte's strong policies and pronouncements against those who destroyed the environment can be seen as his way of

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> See Christopher Ryan Maboloc. "Situating the Mindanao Agenda in the Radical Politics of President Duterte," *IQRA: Journal of Al Qalam*. Volume 6 (2017): 3-24.

dismantling old habits which is necessary to create a totally democratic society.<sup>47</sup>

### **Aldo Leopold' Land Ethic and Indigenous Spirituality**

In this article, I also argue that while Duterte's strong political will is needed for the immediate solution of some environmental problems, it is still lacking in substance and grounding for it to be sustained and for the people in the ground to really embrace his advocacies wholeheartedly and not only because of fear of his wrath or punishment. The Duterte environment advocacy must be grounded with solid ethical basis. His administration should learn much from the environmental philosophy and deep ecology of Aldo Leopold and also from the indigenous knowledge and belief system or sometimes called as indigenous spirituality.

Any environmental advocacy of the present government must consider the inseparable relationship that the indigenous peoples have with their environment. Talking about the inseparable relationship between the indigenous peoples and their environment, Aldo Leopold, a person who pioneered the land ethic in the West even said that there is an inseparable relationship between the people (not only the indigenous peoples) and the land as well as all the elements (both the living and non-living) of the land because for him the land is a community where everybody belongs.<sup>48</sup> However, human beings abuse land because they regard it as a commodity that they own and possess. Aldo Leopold said that this kind of attitude is influenced by an Abrahamic concept of land.<sup>49</sup> What is this Abrahamic concept of land? It is a kind of mindset that we own the land and therefore we can exploit it in whatever ways that satisfy us. Catholic tradition that puts man as the center, the apex of creation and in fact, as the "co-creator" of God, can also be blamed for the misfortune of our environment. Because of this, man started to think that he owns the land and he can do

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> See Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford University Press, 1949.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

whatever he wants for the land. This kind of attitude is being exacerbated during the modern period because man now thinks that he is God and that he wants to force nature to reveal its secrets through his advancement in science and technology.

The environment and the indigenous peoples have suffered much because of too much anthropocentrism that penetrated not only the mindset of the economists and politicians but also the development workers, social scientists and other environmental advocates. I am not saying that we need to abandon our anthropocentric thinking because we also need to really factor in the needs of the people in any development projects and even advocacies. I even argue that any advocacy without anthropocentric grounding will not also prosper because people will not participate in such advocacy if they cannot also benefit from it. However, too much focus on anthropocentrism is also detrimental to the sustainability of the environment and in the long run, to the indigenous peoples since there is that inseparable relationship that exists between the indigenous peoples and their environment. When the environment and its resources will be depleted because they are too much used and abused just to gratify the insatiable appetites of the colonizers and the lowlanders, in the end, it is not only the environment that suffers but also the indigenous peoples who are inseparably living in the environment.

Aldo Leopold set forth his "land ethic," as a moral energy that will sustain human being's duty and obligation to the environment, to the biotic and non-biotic community. Aldo Leopold's land ethic is extremely relevant in today's society that is heavily influenced by anthropocentric mindset. For me, the environmental advocacy of Duterte's administration must be grounded with the land ethic of Aldo Leopold so that it will be more encompassing and sustainable. Ethics deal with what's right and wrong. Right and wrong can be seen and experienced mostly in the different relationships and transactions that we have in our fellow human being. Thus, Aldo Leopold cites the Ten Commandments as an example of a set of moral standards that help define rights and wrongs in

the context of a relationship between individuals.<sup>50</sup> Sadly, many people only consider their relationships with other human beings and not with the rest of the creation. Human beings have also their relationship with nature. However, prior to Leopold, there had never been any clear and written ethical paradigm guiding the relationship of human being to his or her environment. But when you consider the indigenous peoples' way of life especially in the Philippines and in Asia, it is very clear that they have a holistic relationship with all the elements found in their environment. While there were movements in the West about deep ecology, these were just movements and not clear ethical paradigm.<sup>51</sup> The land ethic of Leopold in the West and the indigenous peoples' spirituality and worldview especially in the East are the missing pieces that will complete the puzzle of the SONG that human beings have to sing to have healthy and productive lives. This SONG is about man's relationship with his Self, Others, Nature and God. In this four-fold relationship, man's relationship with nature is often neglected. Psychology and other human sciences have taught man how to relate with his self and others. Theology, spirituality and even Religion also taught man to nurture his relationship with God. But nothing about man's relationship with nature except when you study the life of St. Francis of Assisi and how he treated the rest of the creation as his brothers and sisters. But even then, this deep ecology that has started to sprout during those times was thwarted by the Church strong influence to focus our attention on the creation story and how man is put by God as the apex of creation. Aldo Leopold's land ethic tried to break through the barriers of apathy and neglect and it is producing a kind of sound that resonates with the indigenous spirituality. Indigenous peoples consider the environment as their market, their pharmacy, their school and even their Church. Thus, they showed so much reverence to the environment to the point that even when they cut trees for their housing needs, they have to ask the approval of "Magbabaya", "Apo Sandawa", "Manama" the so-called names of their deities through a series of ritual before they cut

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> George Sessions, "The Deep Ecology Movement: A Review," in *Environmental Review*, Vol 11, No. 2, 1987.

the trees. They even surveyed the signs and signals of their God's approval as reported to them by the sound of the bird "Alimokon" and other visible signs communicated to them by nature. They might sound weird and be judged as uncivilized in their approach, but they have thrived for thousands of years and hardly (if there is any), you can see any kind of danger brought to them by these practices. They only experienced harm and danger when the colonizers and lowlanders, armed with the Western concept of development imposed their hegemonic knowledge and practices to their communities. Why can't we learn from these so-called uncivilized people in our land? Why can't we allow them to also teach to us?

I think this is what Aldo Leopold also speaks in his *Land Ethic*. For Leopold, conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land and so we abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us but when we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.<sup>52</sup> This kind of ethic is more relevant in today's environment advocacy of the Duterte administration. After his strong political will, what should be the next thing that he must do is advance a very strong land ethic so that the people will really see the need to take care of the environment of which they are inseparably connected. Duterte, who has proven to have special love for the indigenous peoples when he is still the mayor of Davao City should also utilize the spirituality and way of life of these indigenous peoples as his model for his environmental advocacy. In this way he can also rectify some of his wrong moves this time by relocating the IPs from their ancestral domains and put them in an evacuation sites because of his anti-insurgency campaign. I think his strong political will is also needed to really convince these rebels to be in his side if they can see sincerely that he is genuine in his environmental advocacy and he is anchoring his advocacy to the indigenous knowledge and belief systems. Most of these rebels are really protecting the environment against the entry of voracious mining companies. They are also protecting the IPs against the

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<sup>52</sup> See Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford University Press, 1949.

entry of these businessmen that clearly destroys the life world of the IPs. If these rebels, IP leaders, environmental activists see that Duterte has this strong ethical paradigm in his environmental advocacy and is brave (as he has been portrayed) and genuine enough for this change, then his environmental advocacy will sustain.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have presented numerous studies that clearly emphasized that when we disconnect the indigenous peoples in the management and conservation of forests, mountains and natural resources, it can pose a threat to biodiversity and forest sustainability. These studies also stressed the importance of the indigenous knowledge of forest-dwellers and why their traditions should not be deemed as outdated, irrelevant, primitive and uncivilized because they are not properly educated into the mainstream educational system and the sophisticated Western educational paradigms. What the government needs to do is utilize these rich traditions and practices of the IPs that have been proven to have sustained them for thousands of years. Strong ethical paradigm is necessary to sustain an action or advocacy. The land ethic of Aldo Leopold is also another strong ethical paradigm coming from the West that Filipino people especially, the more sophisticated ones must also consider. They have to understand that this land ethic of Leopold is not different from the way of life of our indigenous brothers and sisters, especially in the hinterlands of Mindanao. President Duterte needs to consider these two models (Western and Eastern) to be more comprehensive and encompassing in his environmental advocacy in the country. Political will is good but it is still lacking. People must understand why we need to do protect the environment. They need to be properly educated why they need to factor in the environment in their development programs and projects.

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