

## **Empowering Young Successors in the Management of Biodiversity and Traditional Landscapes: The Case of the Earth Ambassadors of the University of the Philippines Open University**

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**ABSTRACT** - The paper discussed the concept, the eventual organization, goals, activities, challenges and strategies, as well as the future plans of the Earth Ambassadors of the Faculty of Management and Development Studies (FMDS), University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), Los Banos, Laguna, Philippines. Additionally, it gave insight on how this project will help in addressing the lack of interest and concern in natural resources management, biodiversity conservation, environmental advocacy and community education among the youth. Moreover, it will enhance resiliency and sustainability of socio-ecological and production landscapes.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The past decade saw the massive degradation of various ecosystem types and landscapes, not only in the Philippines but in, the entire globe. The rich biodiversity has been threatened. The ideal mega diverse ecosystem before is now one of the worst biodiversity hotspots. Incidentally, biodiversity is always associated with society's culture. Subsequently, an erosion of cultural identities of people is now happening. And worse, as a further consequence, the so-called socio-ecological production landscapes or the satoyama and satoyama-like landscapes have collapsed.

Cognizant of this scenario, the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) through its Faculty of Management and Development Studies (FMDS)

organized the UPOU Earth Ambassadors. It is a project that aims to train a core group of selected elementary students to promote awareness about sustainable development, biodiversity conservation and management of natural ecosystems and traditional socio-ecological landscapes.

The young and innocent elementary students were chosen for this project, as they are yet free of biases. Hence, it would be easier to inculcate and nurture the values of nature conservation in them. The project started with three elementary schools adjacent to the location of the UPOU in Laguna, namely, The Learning Place of Los Banos, Sto. Domingo Elementary School of Bay, and Dayap Elementary School of Calauan.

Very recently, socio-ecological

production landscapes were given due attention when the International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative (IPSI) was approved by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in the 2010 meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP), more popularly known as COP10, held in Nagoya, Japan. UPOU became a member of IPSI network in November 2011 in a meeting of the IPSI Secretariat in Montreal, Canada.

This paper's aim is to discuss the goals, diverse activities, challenges and future plans of the UPOU Earth Ambassadors Program.

## **METHODS**

This paper documented and analyzed the activities of the UPOU Earth Ambassadors Program.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **The Goals of the UPOU Earth Ambassadors**

The ultimate goal of this project is to sustain socio-ecological production landscapes and satoyama and satoyama like landscapes which house the eroding culture of societies. In doing so, biodiversity will also be enhanced, nurtured and conserved.

At a very young age, elementary students shall promote and advocate for environmentalism in their respective schools and communities. The UPOU Earth Ambassadors shall help promote awareness in their schools, and in their communities, the importance of sustainable environmental and natural resources management.

Through capacity building and other advocacy approaches, the children shall be empowered to be responsible stewards of the environment.

Likewise, this project shall become a venue for the experts in ecology, environmental management and various disciplines to share their time and expertise with young children. Through this simple effort, UPOU hopes that these children will grow up to become responsible citizens of the Philippines and the world.

### **Some Activities of the UPOU Earth Ambassadors**

The UPOU Earth Ambassadors undertook some activities to better capacitate them in this big challenging work of environmental rehabilitation and nature conservation. These were:

1. Film showing and storytelling. Staff of FMDS, in collaboration with Philippine KOICA Fellows Association, Inc (PHILKOFA) and Yakap Kalikasan Tungo Sa Kaunlaran Ng Pilipinas, Inc. (Yakap Kalikasan), went on school caravan (Fig. 1). They promoted among



Figure 1. The UPOU Earth Ambassadors during the school caravan.

elementary school children, in the three adopted schools, the importance of conserving biodiversity and the underlying

threats to our planet's bioresources.

During the activity, the film, *Planet: Philippines* was shown. They also conducted storytelling session (Fig.2).



Figure 2. Storytelling session.

2. Guided workshop and discussions. After the film showing and storytelling, the students were engaged through singing, trivias and other interactive activities (Fig. 3). Then, they



Figure 3. Students were engaged in games and trivias.

underwent small group discussions and guided workshops to enhance critical thinking and creativity (Figs.4-7).

3. A walk to the forest. The UPOU Earth Ambassadors, in project collaboration with Yakap Kalikasan and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, had a guided walk and eco-camp at the Mount Makiling, a forest reserve managed by the



Figure 4. Students actively participated in small group discussion.



Figure 5. Creativity of students discovered during the workshop.



Figure 6. A workshop output from a group of students.



Figure 7. Presentation of group output from the workshop.

University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB) (Fig. 8). This activity aimed to expose the young minds to the serene beauty and simple life of organisms in this complex ecosystem. Students appreciated



Figure 8. The UPOU Earth Ambassadors in the Mt. Makiling forest reserve.

this activity. It silently taught them the love of nature, the love of simple living, the love of give and take relationship, the affinity and love for biodiversity, landscape protection, environmental rehabilitation and cultural preservation.

**4. Tree planting.** Planting of native or indigenous plant species was done quite frequently in the schools of the UPOU earth Ambassadors and in the UPOU Campus as well (Fig. 9). Using the native species as plant materials inculcated in them the urgency to plant the adapted and non-invasive species, which are safe for the ecosystem and the entire landscape, and would stabilize the environment, as well as enhance its resiliency and sustainability.



Figure 9. The UPOU Earth Ambassadors in their tree planting activity.<sup>5</sup>

Blogging for the environment. The students were also encouraged to visit blogs related to environment and greening. They were requested to visit especially the Kamalayang Kalikasan Blog, organized and maintained by the FMDS, which record all the activities of the UPOU earth Ambassadors (Fig. 10). This blog is the online presence of the Earth Ambassadors. Initially, there will be one blog wherein all the UPOU Earth Ambassadors can send in their postings. Eventually, each school can maintain their own blogs once they have been trained how to do so. UPOU will schedule a blogging time in UPOU campus for the students with no Internet connections at home or in schools.



Figure 10. The Kamalayang Kalikasan Blog.

### Challenges and Strategies

The project staff members of the UPOU Earth Ambassadors were confronted with a number of challenges. However, these were addressed well after discussions and consultations.

**1. Time management and participation of UPOU Earth Ambassadors and teacher in charge on official time.** We encountered this problem many times at the early stage of the project. The students have their own class schedules. Likewise, the teachers have their own class schedules. They teach in other

sections and grade levels where the UPOU Earth Ambassadors were not even their students. So it was indeed difficult to synchronize dedicated time for the UPOU Earth Ambassadors' activities.

After much deliberation among project staff, we came up with the strategy of crafting a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with partner schools to make everything official. So UPOU entered into a MOA with the Sto. Domingo Elementary School, the Dayap Elementary school and The Learning Place in February 2011. Adapting this partnership strategy solved not only the official time concern, but it cemented better our relationship with the host schools of the UPOU Earth Ambassadors.

*2. Co-sponsorship of the activities.* In small-scale activities requiring smaller budget, UPOU normally funds the activity thru FMDS. However, for bigger activities requiring higher budget, we collaborate with other local, national and international organizations to support the activity. An example of a big activity was the Walk to the Forest done in collaboration with Yakap Kalikasan and FAO. These collaborators provided food and transportation budget for the UPOU Earth Ambassadors.

*3. Enhancing natural science background among teachers of UPOU Earth Ambassadors.* The neither experts of natural sciences or environmental sciences. To guide their students well in our absence, they have to be equipped with basic knowhow in the areas of natural, environmental and earth sciences. As a strategy, UPOU

conducts training courses and workshops for the teachers of the UPOU Earth Ambassadors. The elementary school teachers are updated with the latest trends in environmental science and biodiversity conservation useful in sustaining socio-ecological and production landscapes.

## **Future Plans**

This early, the UPOU Earth Ambassadors project has various dreams and hopes as next steps.

*1. Expanding the membership of UPOU Earth Ambassadors.* We plan to follow through the UPOU Earth Ambassadors as they graduate in the elementary level. We will sustain their empowerment and capability building up to their secondary and even tertiary levels. If this will not be done, the work started in them will just amount to nothing. We even plan to expand the number of elementary schools as well. This necessitates training of more trainers and organizers, as well as tapping more collaborators and funding partners.

*2. Assisting ambassadors in organizing activities in their communities.* We really have to work hand in hand with the UPOU Earth Ambassadors in infecting and mobilizing their respective communities. The first step in this task is indeed quite difficult. Hence, the need for the project staff to assist them. As they go on, we presume, they can handle everything smoothly.

*3. Providing regular venue for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary discussion, training and forum among teachers, organizers*

and co- sponsors. These activities will facilitate effective communication, knowledge sharing, and problem solving.

*4. Sustain and strengthen partnership with local, national, regional and international organizations (e.g., IPSI) in co-sponsoring activities of the UPOU Earth Ambassadors.*

**Nature scholarships** can be given to the UPOU Earth Ambassadors for their secondary and tertiary studies, and for their teachers who will undertake graduate studies on environmental science and biodiversity conservation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The UPOU Earth Ambassador project is indeed cognizant of the role of UPOU as a Public Service University. According to UPOU's Chancellor, Rd. Grace Javier Alfonso, *UPOU acts as a change agent and produces change agents for national development. As a Public Service University, it aims to develop leaders as well as arm both leaders and constituents with critical thinking skills in all fields, including that of environmental concerns. What better way to accomplish this role through empowering the children as young as they are to be responsible stewards of the environment?*

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