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Noted artists lead tree-planting feast in Puerto Princesa

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Inquirer

Posted date: June 25, 2007

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY-- They began before sunrise. Drove of students, government employees, tourists and ordinary folk, hauled in by garbage trucks sanitized for the occasion, descended Saturday on the rain-drenched forest floor of Mt. Irawan.

The event marked the 15th year of the city's annual tree-planting extravaganza that has become both a tourist attraction and a novelty in environmental governance.

By daybreak, the crisp mountain air of the Irawan hillside was filled with the aroma of freshly cooked rice porridge prepared for the volunteers and with the drone of live ethnic music by the local band Sinika.

By the end of the day, an estimated 40,000 seedlings of mahogany, acacia mangium and local tree species had been planted in a 17-hectare site on the edges of the Irawan forest.

Bencab, other artists

National Artist Ben "Bencab" Cabrera led this year's roster of local and international volunteers in the Pista Y Ang Kagueban's (Feast of the Forest) celebration.

Joining Cabrera were Gus Albor, Virgilio "Pandy" Aviado, Elmer Borlongan, Antipas Delotavo, Julie Lluch (all recipients of the Cultural Center of the Philippines' 13 Artists Award), and Mark Valenzuela (a maverick artist from Dumaguete City).

Also sharing top billing was the recently crowned Ms Philippines--Earth Jean Harn.

Cabrera, along with another National Artist Napoleon Abueva and company, in a recent meeting with Puerto Princesa City Mayor Edward Hagedorn, agreed to produce artworks out of this year's Kagueban celebration.

Proceeds from the sale of the artworks will go to a kitty that will be used to manage the Irawan watershed, a critical source of potable water for the burgeoning capital of Palawan.

Abueva sculpture

Abueva was slated to join the trip to Puerto Princesa but begged off at the last minute because something came up. He instead donated one of his finished works to the project.

"We're helping the city government raise some funds through our works to sustain events such as this," Cabrera told the Philippine Daily Inquirer, as he worked on a charcoal sketch of an indigenous Tagbanua tribesman.

Aviado said he and the other artists could not say how much money the group was going to make from the artworks that were done at the Irawan watershed. However, orders from patrons for some of the paintings had already been received.

An acrylic by social realist Borlongan, who teamed up with artist Plet Bolipata, was sold to a patron even before it was finished.

City museum

Hagedorn said some of the artworks would be put on display at the City Museum.

The mayor said the funds to be raised from the sale of the artworks would be jointly administered by the city government and Conservation International, a nongovernment organization, which partnered with the city government for the event, along with Smart Communications Inc.

Puerto Princesa-based artist and patron Dinggot Prieto said the participation of Cabrera and company in this year's Pista Y Ang Kagueban "signified an important event in bringing the artistic community closer to the realities of forest conservation."

Bringing art to masses

"It's a welcome development for us local artists. This visit by Bencab and others is almost like being given a drop of ice cold sweet water in the desert. Especially in a place like Palawan, our exposure to senior artists is very limited. It sort of brings art closer to the

masses. It takes away the elitism and the imperialism of Manila as the marketplace for the arts," Prieto said.

She said the city government initiative should serve as a model for other local government units in crafting their respective conservation and cultural development programs.

"Local governments need to come up with meaningful cultural development plans and I know that artists like Bencab and others are just too willing to help," Prieto said.

Recognition

Hagedorn's tree-planting program has received local and international recognition and, among other environment-related projects, has earned for the city a reputation for sound environmental management.

The evidence of its success is the significant increase in Puerto Princesa's forest cover based on satellite images, according to city planning officials.

Over the past 15 years, more than 1.2 million trees have been planted under the program "with a very high survival rate of 80 percent," said Roger Daquer, city environment and natural resources officer.

Part of the program is a year-round initiative "to ensure a good survival rate by taking care of the plants as they grow and become more adapted to the soil," Daquer said.

Deforestation reversed

The program has "completely reversed the trend that began in 1992 when we started in office," Hagedorn said. The forest cover, he said, was down to 50 percent from 75 percent and "our forests were being destroyed at a fast rate of around 10 hectares per day because of illegal logging and similar activities."

A total of 60,000 seedlings were prepared for the event on Saturday.

The number of volunteers who take part in the event steadily increases every year and ranges from 20,000 to 30,000 participants.

The last 100 years have seen the consistent decline of the country's forest cover "that only 3 percent of the original forest cover now remains," Conservation International said.

It placed the average national deforestation rate at 2 percent a year.

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