

Communal Forest for the People

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One phase of the many public services of the Bureau of Forestry directly benefiting the people is the establishment and administration of communal forests in accordance with Section 1839 of the Revised Administrative Code. Communal forests are specific tracts of forests delimited and set aside by the Bureau of Forestry where bona fide residents of certain cities, municipalities and municipal districts can cut, gather and remove timber and minor forest products free of forest charges for their personal use. This is also referred to as the free use privilege.

In availing of this free use privilege in communal forests, residents in need of only second and lower groups timber and minor forest products should first apply for gratuitous permits from their respective mayors. It is called gratuitous permit because it is free of charge. First group timber, however, has to be procured under gratuitous licenses issued by the Bureau of Forestry. A nominal license fee of ₱5.00 is charged for each license granted. Residents of municipalities without communal forests can also avail of the same privilege. They have to secure a gratuitous license from the Bureau of Forestry. A license fee of ₱5.00 is charged for every license issued irrespective of the groups of timber and other minor forest products desired to be cut and removed.

There are presently 2,172 parcels of communal forests distributed among 809 cities, municipalities and municipal districts covering an aggregate area of 279,577 hectares. Many municipalities and municipal districts are still without communal forest. For some, the number of parcels established is insuffi-

cient. This is either due to the absence of adequate forests in their respective territorial jurisdictions, or whatever forests therein or in neighboring municipalities are not available, too far for economical use or located in inaccessible places. This may be attributed to lack of interest on the part of the local officials and of the people themselves, particularly in protecting and conserving not only the communal forests that have been established for them but also the other public forests in their municipalities. However, there is still room in some localities where communal forests can be established. The initiative should come from local officials and the residents. Requests for the purpose may be submitted to the Director of Forestry in the form of petitions or resolutions of municipal councils.

The Bureau of Forestry spends time and efforts with its limited funds and personnel in delimiting and establishing communal forests as a public service. Communal forests being as they are should deserve the protection and conservation by the municipal officials and the residents themselves not only for the use of the present generation but also for generations to come. It should be well to keep in mind the fact that forests are getting limited, mostly occupied by licensees, and fast receding to less inaccessible places.

Considering and realizing all these, and looking forward to the future, what can local officials and residents fortunate enough to have communal forests do to perpetuate the usefulness of these forests? *First*, each resident should consider himself as part owner and should not allow the unlawful use and

destruction of his communal forest. Any violation should be reported immediately to local officials whose duty should be to act promptly to stop any and all violations instead of merely reporting to the Bureau of Forestry. While the Bureau of Forestry is duty bound to act on such cases, still field officers are so few in number, considering their vast territorial jurisdiction that they cannot possibly devote much time for the protection of communal forests. It must be taken into account also that once a forest is destroyed it will entail very great amount of time and money to bring the forest back. Most municipalities are not in the position to appropriate funds for this purpose. *Second*, the local governments should, whenever possible, appropriate funds for the employment of communal forest guards to protect their communal forests. The idea is to prevent violation and destruction, bearing in mind the adage that "AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN A POUND OF CURE." If the employment of communal forest guards is not possible, a regular or even intermittent detail of policemen for the same purpose, particularly during the critical kaining season will prove of decided advantage. *Third*, last but not least, the municipal officials and residents should take the initiative to reforest blank or open spaces therein and plant trees where they are depleted. The national government has no fund for this work, that at its disposal being barely adequate to carry on work in existing reforestation projects. Thus, the planting or reforestation of communal forests depends on funds that can be appropriated by the municipal governments. In this work, however, the Bureau is ready to cooperate by furnishing technical help and furnishing planting materials whenever necessary and possible. In the absence of funds, or if these are inadequate, still something can be done to reforest and improve communal forests. Through self-help or community efforts and assistance, no doubt the same objective can be accomplished. This is being realized in many

municipalities through the initiative of active local officials and civic leaders having at heart the present and future welfare of the people. The "Arbor Week" (formerly "Arbor Day") and other days or weeks devoted to civic purposes are taken advantage of by doing mass planting of forest trees in the communal forests with the cooperation of civic conscious residents, school authorities, school children and students, boy and girl scouts and other civic organizations. If some municipalities could do this there seems to be no reason why others can not duplicate the same. It is for the common good and for posterity.

The existence of well protected and conserved communal forests is a boon to the people having them. Besides, the timber and other forest products that they provide directly for the people to meet their personal needs, they prevent erosion of the hillsides, conserve stream flow, ameliorate the climate and render such other benefits worthy of consideration and appreciation. To better enhance all these, communal forests as well as other forests in different localities should be conserved by wise use. This of course depends on the cooperation of all.

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