

What Our Forests Mean to Us

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Of the many gifts that Nature has blessed our country, the forests constitute among the most valuable to us. But like some of the most precious things in life—like the love of a mother and the air we breathe in—many of us take for granted the many good things our forests give us. The cool shade of trees, the refreshing breeze from the tree-covered hills, the water from the faucet, the firewood to cook our food, all these and more are directly or indirectly gifts from the forests.

So much have we taken all these as a matter of course that many of us give little thought at all to our forests. Worse than this, there are even some among us who not only fail to appreciate these blessings but have even viewed our forests as something to be done away with. To some, the forest is still something of jungle that has to be cleared as quickly as possible to give way to agriculture, forgetting the fact that were it not for it agriculture itself would not be possible. To some of us, the forests are nothing but a place that shelters wild animals, again forgetting the fact that the birds that feed on the harmful insects which beset our crops find sanctuary in our forests.

It is high time that we see our forests in their proper light, being very valuable to us and they being our common property, well may we ask questions about this precious property of ours. As part-owners of this property, we should know, for instance, how extensive our forests are, how much are they worth, what are they giving us now, what we are doing to safeguard them, how long can they serve us and many other questions you and I have a right to ask.

We have still extensive forests. Approximately 17 million hectares or 59% of our total land area are still covered with them. Not only have we these wide forest lands but also practically all of them are public property. This is unlike the condition in some other countries where most of the forest lands have been allowed to pass through private ownership. This public ownership of our forest is significant in that we, the people, through our government can readily adopt and execute a policy designed to promote the best development of the forests.

Just to give you an idea of how well Nature has lavished us with her gift, let us cite some figures. In standing timber, our forests contain an estimated 464 billion board feet. This means that the per capita share of each of our 19 million population is at least 24,000 board feet of timber. The value of this standing timber is fairly staggering. All in all, it is worth 58 billion pesos. In other words, each of us has at stake in the forests in the amount of ₱3,000. Were this timber to be cut all at once, it would yield us in direct taxes alone (forest charges) more than two (2) billion pesos, meaning that this tax alone could meet the budgetary needs of our national government for at least eight years. You will see therefore how much in terms of money our forest are worth and how imperative it is for us to give them more than passing thought.

But there are other things in the forests which cannot be measured in terms of pesos and centavos. The forests act as a huge reservoir which feeds the springs that give us water for drinking, for irrigation, for water power. The millions of trees in our

mountains with their network of roots hold the soil in place and keep the farms and lowlands from being covered with stones and gravel. Beautiful plants and beneficial wild life make the forests their homes. All these we cannot evaluate in terms of money.

Our forest is a very unique kind of property in that it grows. Trees keep on growing and you will readily see that if we keep our yearly harvest of timber to what the forests can replace by their growth, we can make them last indefinitely.

To take care of this exceptionally valuable wealth, we have the Bureau of Forestry. This government entity has a nation-wide network of forest stations and provincial forestry offices. It is this Bureau which takes charge of the protection, conservation and development of our forest resources. It segregates the non-forest lands from the forest areas, it issues licenses for the privilege of cutting and removing forest products, it patrols the forest lands, it reforests our strategic cogonal areas and it undertakes many other activities intended to make our forests more usefull to us.

For the purpose of making lumber available to us, a thriving lumber industry has developed. As of June 30, 1950 there were 455 sawmills throughout the country capable of producing everyday 2,925,200 board feet of lumber. To cut the timber from the forest, the Bureau of Forestry has issued 19 license agreements and 1,562 ordinary timber licenses, covering 2,441,547 hectares of forest lands and a capitalization of 49.40 million pesos. The lumber and allied industries are a good field for the investment of capital. At present its total capitalization amounts to no less than 84 million pesos. It furnishes employment to no less than 100,000 workers on whom 500,000 persons depend for their living. The total value of forest products brought to the trades, such as lumber and timber, firewood, rattan, gums, beeswax, etc. amounts to ₱100,000,000 annually. Just now we can supply all the timber we need for our local use and are

thus in a position to export some to other countries. The export last year amounted to 65,758,733 board feet valued at ₱9,413,916.37, most of which went to the United States. This export is but 6.6 per cent of timber and lumber handled, and is bound to increase. It would mean more dollar revenues to us.

Now what steps have we taken to see to it that we shall always have adequate forest lands for our needs in the times to come? Fortunately for us, the Bureau of Forestry is by law given priority over the choice of what lands to keep for forest purposes. Every year this Bureau undertakes land classification and certifies to the Bureau of Lands such areas which are not needed for forest purposes. For instance, last year it certified to the said Bureau 29,400 hectares as alienable and disposable and these are the areas which the Bureau of Lands disposes to the public in the form of homesteads, sales and leases. All in all the Bureau of Forestry has certified about ten million hectares of land as alienable and disposable.

The Bureau of Forestry has also established a system of special reservations consisting of forest reserves, national parks, communal forests, etc. These are areas set aside for definite forest uses. So far there have been so set aside 101 forest reserves with an aggregate area of 1,169,615 hectares, 33 national parks covering 226,142 hectares and 1,864 parcels of communal forests covering 254,337 hectares. The forest reserves are to provide timber, for watershed protection, for erosion control and for a variety of other uses; the national parks consist of historic places and scenic forests to afford our people recreational and educational facilities; the communal forests to give those of our people who cannot buy timber opportunities to get it free of charge. From the communal forests the residents of the municipalities for whom they are reserved may secure free timber and minor forest products for their personal need. A total of 825

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may get from them the maximum benefits without impairing in the least their ability to give more of these benefits. Other countries are doing it and we are well on our way to doing it ourselves.

One of the pressing problems which is giving great concern to the Bureau of Forestry at present is the rapid exhaustion of our valuable species, like **MOLAVE**, **AKLE** and **TINDALO**, which, because of their superior qualities, are mostly cut and used for high class furniture and cabinet work and for high quality house panelling. To remedy their complete exhaustion, the Bureau of Forestry has looked into our forests for other trees in sufficient quantity, which at present are not utilized, or if at all, only to a limited extent. One very good example is the **DAO**. A few years ago, this tree was not utilized by our people, but through the aid of the Bureau of Forestry it is now in great demand and it commands a high price for furniture making and panelling.

The Government is interested not only in raising, managing and harvesting the forest crop in a business-like way, but is also concerned with the proper and economical use of the crop harvested. To illustrate again, let us take the principal forest crop—**WOOD**. From the sawmills, wood comes out in the form of lumber. This lumber becomes the object of a series of studies. Its drying properties must be determined so that when put into any kind of use, it would maintain itself well in shape. It is one of the tasks of the Bureau of Forestry to find how strong a particular species of wood is, and the best place it would fit in any use it is intended for. To protect the wood from the elements, from the ravages of insects and decay organism, the Bureau of Forestry investigates the best and at the same time the least expensive preservatives for it. In all these lines of activities, some fundamentals of research have already been made although more could have been

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municipalities are provided with communal forests. Permits for the taking of timber and forest products may be secured from the municipal mayors. During the past year the Bureau of Forestry also issued 9,344 private gratuitous permits authorizing the cutting of 152,076 cubic meters of first group timber to be used for the construction of private homes, and 78 gratuitous permits authorizing the 79,200 cubic meters to be used in the construction of public works projects, especially of bridges and school houses.

One of the greatest dangers to the permanency of our forests is illegal *kaiñgin* making. Some of the thoughtlessness of our people clear forest lands without permit and regardless of the topographical and economic condition of the land. After a couple of years, the harvest of crops in such clearings dwindle and they move to a fresh forest tract. In this manner have come the vast *cogonales* aggregating over 5,000,000 hectares which at present are mostly of no economic value to us. At great expense the strategic areas of these *cogonales*, especially those along destructive watersheds, are now being reforested by the Bureau of Forestry. Had our people exercised some foresight we would now be saved the expense and task of reforestation work. It should be said that even now, despite the vigilance of the Bureau of Forestry, destruction of the forest lands still goes on in some sections of our country. It is imperative therefore that our people should understand the folly of wasting our forest lands, not only for the valuable timber simply burned in *kaiñgins* but also for the expensiveness of the task of bringing back cover to such lands.

accomplished if necessary facilities for the task were available. Work along the field of **FOREST RESEARCH** in the Philippines is also equally handicapped by the lack of *full time personnel* besides having no adequate facilities. (Cf. pp. 27-28).