



VICTOR O. RAMOS
Former DENR Secretary



From 1995 to 1998, Victor “Vic” O. Ramos, popularly referred to as VOR by colleagues and staff, served the Philippine government as Secretary of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Under his term, major policies and legislation in relation to community forestry management, protected areas management systems and ancestral domain recognition were enacted. A major element in these laws and policies was the involvement and participation of communities, local governments, and other stakeholders in the resource areas in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of resource management plans.

VOR grew up in northern Pangasinan, knowing the agricultural lands and hills up to the Cordillera that nurtured within him a love of the land and the sense of space. His early impressions of mountains and forests related to two things: water and communities.

In his family, they were taught very early that they were blessed with the abundance of water because of the trees. And if the trees are gone, they have to worry because the water will also be gone. At about age five, his concept of paradise was the flowing water in his grandfather’s farm. That’s why he knew he would retire there, as it is one of the few places of his generation that remains in good condition. It’s not as pure as it was during his grandfather’s time, but it is still flowing from below.

Searching for a man on a horse



Young boys enjoy the afternoon playing at the foot of the Caraballo Mountains.

"I've always associated forests with people who were happy...I have never seen, until I came to DENR, and never expected that forests would just be there as trees without people."

When he was in grade school, the rivers were always full and were deep enough for diving. In Ilokano, this characteristic is called "litnok" and as young boys, the only way to learn to swim was to be thrown in the deep river and learn to float. The 30-minute recess in grade school was an opportunity to run into the river beside the school and go for a dip.

The second one is the community relation. "I've always associated forests with people who were happy. . . I have never seen, until I came to DENR, and never expected that forests would just be there as trees without people."

When his father was appointed mayor of their town after the Second World War, he was always approached by upland communities to help them claim war damages for their destroyed drains. He accompanied his father and helped in typing up documents. Even after his father's term as mayor and he became a notary public, the young Vic would go with his father and visit these communities in the uplands. This memory triggered his interest to rejoin the government through the DENR.

"I want to be a manager in charge of operations, but I don't know anything about the environment." His forte is running operations and managing people and that's how he got to be in the DENR. As Undersecretary first, and then DENR Secretary from 1995-1998, he was given a briefing about the upland poor and he thought "this is an opportunity of a lifetime to do something."

As DENR Undersecretary, his first crisis was a call from the district foresters in Negros Oriental. Two kaingineros were caught and jailed and it "was shocking for me that people living in the forest community are now being jailed." They were released.

During this time he came to understand the upland development initiatives and was so amazed at how organized they were. Money does not go through DENR, but is given directly to communities. The Community and Environment Natural Resource Office or CENRO,



The water is reduced due to hydro and irrigation projects and what remains of life in the river is gleaned for supper.

along with the regional office, always requested to review the results of experiences enabling more beneficial policy changes.

“With a flow like this, in one year’s time we were very advanced. We were able to develop breakthroughs like allowing women to have their own papers, where previously only the husbands were provided...It was a very efficient factory for reform.” He realized then that the DENR had that capacity to do these reforms because it had scientific data. There were also the experiences at the community level, and the levels in the bureaucracy evaluating with the eye of developing a policy. The DENR thus was very systematically cleaning up during all of these reforms.

“I must say I served my happiest years visiting these forest communities, seeing things grow, seeing people working together.” And by the time the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA) came in, the policy on community forestry was already established. “Our thinking on all these policies already were very much set, so we had the conviction

to push it quickly. We were lucky that we had a good set of leaders at that time with open minds. And in our bureaucracy and also in the old political system, we always look for a signal from the President and what are his biases. With this the most major objections would be set aside. So now when I listen to all the problems as a result of those advances and reforms all behind them, it made me think how we got to set reforms so easily and so quickly.”

However in the succeeding administrations, the political will was lost. “But we still have a good number of people who believe, so it’s just a question of leadership, I think.”

Now that Vic is returning to the land he knew in his youth and providing advice to government and non-government initiatives, local and international, he realizes that the primary experiences subliminally create an impact on the decisions he made and actions he took as a bureaucrat. What he connected with, the sense of place he developed, these were what guided and continue to guide him.



Along with his wife Marinella, VOR maintains a large nursery for planting out across the province.

Vic was asked where young people today can obtain that sense of connectivity, how to develop the appreciation of open air activities for children, for example, beyond the water spouts and water parks.

“They need to be involved very early in life. Like, in biology class in grade school, we took long walks during Fridays and identified vegetation and trees that were endemic in the area, or talked about why the riverbed rose in one area, and not in another. Such realizations will always be remembered. If you miss them in grade school, catch them again upon graduation from the university, while still full of idealism and allow them do volunteer work in a certain service.”

While serving as president of the alumni of the fraternity he belongs to, their group imposed a new policy disallowing physical initiation, but brought new recruits to identified communities where they immersed themselves and assisted in developing livelihood systems. “If they start knowing the people and with a menu of possible things that people can adopt, the traditional physical initiation as a bonding force is replaced by something more edifying. Give them an experience that they will remember to go back to when they are given positions of responsibility.”

For the remaining forests in the Philippines, his perspective includes the country’s need to be self-sustaining in its wood demands. An earlier formulation was that the country needed 800,000 hectares of plantations to address the demand and utilize the remaining dipterocarps in existing concessions for phasing. The identified area was in the Agusan area in Mindanao, “but we misunderstood the problem of population density there.” Now, according to government sources, only 400,000 hectares can be identified for these plantations, which is half of what the



On the neighboring acacias is the egret roost with thousands of birds during the migratory season feeding across the Agno River wetlands.

country needs to be self-sustaining. And to sustain these forest plantations, the produce must go beyond logs and must target higher value products.

And for these decisions and actions, Philippine society needs someone in the DENR who is not interested in making money. “But we seek a leader that we will follow. We’re always looking for an inspiration, a man on a horse.” Major resource-related agreements end up on the President’s desk, and the DENR leadership must be able to navigate well the political and the social for the environmental and development interests of the country.



VICENTE JAYME Economist

Having been part of the country's economic management team in various capacities from the 1960s until the 1980s, Mr. Jayme's story on Philippine forests is one of competing situations and trade-offs. He held "a broad overview of the economics of the times."

On the one hand, we had a country with a huge foreign debt under great international pressure to pay off, with huge expectations from timber and mining companies who were viewed as assets to provide economic inputs to spur the growth. On the other hand is the need to utilize the country's forests as the country's exports to get the foreign exchange needed, and the resulting impact that led to the dramatic decline of Philippine forests during the 1960s until the 1980s.

Government used to finance a lot of timber companies to raise foreign exchange. There was also a strong demand for logs. While timber extraction was encouraged, there was also concern by government that timber companies should have forest management plans. Ideally, there should be a regulating program to restore over time the forests being cut and see that the environment is conserved in the uplands.

Mr. Jayme admitted that while this was talked about, implementation was not fully done. The greatest buyer of logs at that time was in Japan, and the arrangement was to procure equipment from Japan and the payment was in the volume of logs exported.



Mindanao was logged and so were parts of the Visayas, especially Leyte and Samar. There were a number of companies that had reforestation projects, but he was not aware of companies who were able to consistently do a tree cut-and-plant cycle, except perhaps for PICOP (a large timber concessionaire operating in Mindanao and which had re-stocking and replanting activities.

Questions begged to be asked.



Mr. Jayme in a meeting with government, and a plantation development company to review a proposed large-scale plantation in Mindanao

Was the trade-off a success? “To some extent, the trade-off allowed the economy to grow, and this was needed to feed a growing population,” Mr. Jayme recalls. In the economic and banking world, how were the calculations done whether forest destruction was more than offset by the cutting, the exporting, and the foreign exchange earnings that entered the Philippine economy?

“We worked with each company on what their program would be. There was a feasibility study for each company, how much their production would be and the replanting that needs to be done.” But Mr. Jayme realized that this was never balanced, as “production always outpaced the replanting.”

“Logging rights were also political allocations. There were legitimate ones who went through the process, there were those with political connections and those who illegally logged. There were groups backed by authorities or the military in the area and did the logging with impunity and with vessels waiting to haul.”



Many decades after logging, some residual forest in the gullies remain. Much of the land is covered in cogon with the occasional agriculture of 1-5 year cycle. As it is, major soil erosion continues and potential productivity is washed away.

Apart from the pressure to the economy brought about by the foreign debt, another problem he recalled was in areas where there were people living in poverty and in turn were following a slash-burn-clear-the-land cycle and starkly illustrated the great demand for livelihood.

In the history of logging during his time in government, we asked Mr. Jayme if this contributed to or fell into existing corrupting practices?

He said that cutting the forests and exporting logs to Japan was easily done. “Logging rights were also political allocations. There were legitimate ones who went through the process, there were those with political connections and those who illegally logged. There were groups backed by authorities or the military in the area and did the logging with impunity and with vessels waiting to haul.” Today, many of these companies no longer exist, and with lesser forest areas, the extent of logging is not as much as before.

Mr. Jayme was born and grew up in Manila and has no memories of Negros Occidental, where his family originated. The occasions where he recalled seeing forests were where he had to familiarize himself and gain further knowledge in the operations of wood-processing plants, where the logs were processed for plywood.

However, he recalls a memorable experience in terms of the environment. He was flying in a small plane to visit a concession area in Mindanao and he was “shocked to see the extent of the area cut. It was a wide area.” For him, this visual shock showed a reality that he needed to work with in reviewing forest management plans. At the same time, the corruption in the different agencies that worked with forests and where concessions were given to political allies was another reality.

For the next generation, the realities to be faced include the need to be concerned about increasing global warming, increasing emissions, the need to increase forest cover, and the need to be careful about what is bought and consumed in terms of the environmental impact. At present, he gets information from what he hears and reads. “The

environment is increasingly a factor in the economic development and the consciousness of people, and the more people are aware of the negative consequences to them and their family, the more they can respond better.”

There is still a problem in what the “big boys” are able to do and what they can get away with. The language of today is fair trade, but they “do anything but practice fair trade. We need to watch what the big boys are doing.”

But a lot still depends on the values of people who have a lot to say and who are positioned to influence. Sadly though, Mr. Jayme refers to “depreciated values” that need to be changed.

He recalled wealthy families and their lifestyles in the 1970s and 1980s, who never managed their wealth well. It was an easy come, easy go type of wealth where a trip to Las Vegas and losing US\$ 2 to 3 million was not uncommon to hear. “The spending was fabulous,” he said. Sustainability was still not yet a word understood and practiced. It is different now, but it is also very hard to explain to young people the simplicity of economic models in the 1960s and the 1970s, exploiting what can be exploited, and letting the money provide the growth.

Nowadays, Filipinos seem to value the close relationship between forests and water. In Manila, the efforts in securing the La Mesa watershed and the reforestation projects are getting into the media and the general public. Water in the La Mesa is something that concerns people and there appears to be a better understanding. Forestry science today is different than in the 1960s and is providing more options for people to undertake environmental management.

For the Philippines today, so much depends on the values that people hold and the leadership that dictates how things are.



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Positions held in government:

- Secretary of Public Works and Highways
- Secretary of Finance
- Presidential Coordinating Assistant for Agro-industrial Economic and Financial Affairs (in President Corazon Aquino's cabinet)

Principal membership in civic and people's organizations:

- Honorary Co-Chair, Bishops'-Businessmen's Conference for Human Development
- Director, Spirit of EDSA Foundation
- Chairman Emeritus, Peasant Fund Incorporated
- Founding Chair, Small Enterprises Research and Development Foundation of the Philippines
- Chair, Workers Fund Incorporated
- Adviser, Institute of Corporate Directors
- National Vice-Chair, National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL)
- Vice Chairperson, Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement
- Trustee and Chairman, Philippine Business for Social Progress
- Trustee and Chairman, Ramon Magsaysay Awards Foundation
- Past president, Philippine Chamber of Industries
- Past president, Management Association of the Philippines
- Past president, Philippine Economic Society

Key player in national financial institutions:

- President, Private Development Corporation of the Philippines
- President, Philippine National Bank
- Member, Central Bank Monetary Board
- Chairman, Land Bank of the Philippines
- Executive Director, Asian Development Bank
- Governor, Philippine Stock Exchange
- Founding Chair, Association of Development Finance Institutions in Asia and the Pacific
- Founding Chair, World Federation of Development Finance Institutions (with membership in South America, Africa, Middle East, Asia and the Pacific, North America, and Europe)

Honors and citations received:

- Gawad Ugnay for the private sector, from the National Social Action Council
- Republic Day Award as economist and for services rendered to the community ("A Man for Others"), from the Civic Assembly of Women in the Philippines
- Gintong Ama Award for business and industry (Outstanding Father of the Year), from the Gintong Magulang Foundation, National Father's Day Council
- Achievement award in recognition and appreciation of lifetime dedication and valuable contribution to the Federation of Free Workers
- Knighthood of Saint Sylvester granted by Pope John Paul II