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Rethinking reforestation: Countering native tree narratives in the Philippines

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Abstract

During the last centuries, Philippine forests have been heavily transformed as most of the old-growth forests of the archipelago have been cut down by Spanish, American, and, subsequently, Philippine authorities. In the last decade, the question of how to reforest the Philippine forest landscapes has become more relevant for many people in rural areas who are vulnerable to climate change and intensifying extreme weather events.

After experimenting with different native and exotic tree species while focusing on easy and fast growth during the U.S. colonisation, most Philippine reforestation projects in the 20th and 21st centuries have relied on a small diversity of exotic tree species. In contrast, the over 3.600 native tree species have not only been neglected but have also been described throughout my research by the exact opposite attributes: slow-growing and complex. Such generalisations can be analysed as environmental narratives showing how environmental knowledge and social/political order are mutually dependent. As these environmental narratives are still prevalent and, thus, continuously shape reforestation efforts, more and more voices from scientists and civil society started questioning the government’s approach by asking: “Is the gov’t reforestation programme planting the right trees?”

Based on my ethnographic material of eleven months of fieldwork in which I interviewed environmental authorities, scientists, and civil society groups, I will show how reforestation discourses and practices have been shaped by environmental narratives that are linked to colonial forest management and specific resource perspectives. At the same time, I highlight different strategies of scientists and civil society groups advocating for native trees, for example by promoting agroecology. To make the Philippine forest landscape more sustainable and resilient, it is crucial to understand the strategies of informal networks of scientists and civil society groups that are already contributing to the transformation of the Philippines’ future forests.

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