

**Column for Manila Bulletin**  
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## **Of Trees and Forest**

### **Paradox of the Miracle Tree**

MANILA, Philippines --- A LOT of things are happening now involving the coconut, often called the miracle tree or tree of life because of its many uses, from cooking oil to food to medicine, as construction material and more recently, as healthy sugar and sports drink.

Coconut is one of our major export commodities. According to the Philippine Coconut Authority, exports of coconut oil and 38 other coconut products generated \$1.96 billion in 2011, up 29.28 percent from \$1.63 billion in 2010. Higher prices more than compensated for the 35 percent drop in export volume to 1.50 million metric tons in 2011 from 2.33 million metric tons in 2010.

Coconut oil accounted for the bulk or \$1.41 billion of export earnings last year, up from \$1.26 billion in 2010; followed by desiccated coconut (\$286.77 million, up 88 percent year-on-year), and coco chemicals (\$35.36 million, up 103 percent).

Coconut products, which are exported to about 100 countries, also include coconut water, virgin coconut oil, coco chips, coco jam, coco vinegar, frozen coco meat, liquid coconut milk, coconut milk powder, macapuno, coco liquor, handicraft, and baled coir, among others.

The United Coconut Association of the Philippines attributed the decline in export volume last year to lower production, which was in turn caused by bad weather and the stress suffered by coconut trees following strong production in previous years. For 2012, the industry group is projecting a 12.3% growth in terms of volume given a more favorable weather outlook for this year and the increasing interest in the foreign markets for coconut sugar and coconut water.

Exports of coconut sugar (produced from the sap of the coconut tree) zoomed by 92.78 percent to 70,000 kilos in 2011 from 36,310 kilos. This year, the PCA expects coco sap sugar exports to exceed 100,000 kilos.

PCA Administrator Euclides G. Forbes said the increase in coco sap sugar exports was driven by health concerns. Coco sap sugar is unique because it is recommended even for diabetics, so it can be a natural alternative to artificial sweeteners.

Forbes looks at diabetics, estimated by the World Health Organization at 346 million people as of 2011, as market for coco sap sugar. Right now, coco sap sugar is exported to 11 countries, including the United States, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Norway, Canada, Switzerland and countries in the Middle East. And what about coconut water, which we call buko juice? Once offered to tourists as a unique, natural local drink, it won US-based Health Magazine's "Healthiest Beverage Award" in 2008.

Time International reported on May 31, 2010, that coconut water, which had become a favorite drink among athletes, health-conscious people, including those who needed something to relieve hangovers, generated sales of \$50 million in 2009 in the US alone.

The international magazine reported that coconut water is marketed as a sports drink "because it contains electrolytes and minerals." A cup of coconut water, according to the report, contains 46 calories, less than 0.5 gram of fat, and a good source of fiber, magnesium, potassium, and vitamin C.

During his visit to the US in September last year, President Aquino, photographed holding buko juice in a foil box, announced plans by two American companies to set up plants in the Philippines to produce coconut water for the international markets. Even celebrated singer Madonna has reportedly invested in a company that produces coconut water.

So many exciting developments in the coconut sector and so many potential benefits amid brighter prospects, and yet we cannot ignore a glaring paradox. And this is that the poorest of Filipinos are those in the agriculture sector, and the poorest in agriculture are the coconut farmers and their families.

I like buko juice, and I am sure most Filipinos like buko juice, too. President Aquino's public statements focusing on this favorite natural drink should serve as a cue for the government to push for the development of yet another export product from the tree of life.

On the other hand, we should not forget that coconut oil, the primary export commodity from the coconut sector, is still suffering from the stigma of an "unhealthy oil" label.

While we undertake projects to develop the coconut water and coco sap sugar as export products, we should also do something to correct the misconceptions about coconut oil.

(To be continued)

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