

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

### **Ending the scourge of Hyacinths (First of a series)**

MANILA, Philippines — “Sagip Ilog,” the massive rehabilitation of the Las Piñas-Zapote River, is one program that has received two prestigious international awards.

These are “Best Practices Award for its Outstanding Contribution Towards Improving the Living Environment” by the United Nations Humans Settlement Program and the Dubai International Award, and the OIKOS Foundation of Switzerland for Social Enterprise Best Practice.

Last March, my wife Cynthia and I travelled to Zaragoza, Spain, to receive the United Nations “Best Water Management Practices Award” in behalf of the Villar Foundation, our vehicle for corporate social responsibility activities and other advocacies.

The award, which we received during the celebration of World Water Day last March 22, is part of the United Nation’s efforts to fulfill international commitments made on water and water-related issues under the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2015 through recognition of outstanding best practices that can ensure the long term sustainable management of water resources and contribute to the achievement of internationally agreed goals and targets.

The 2011 awards focused on the topic “Urban Water Management,” which is the primary thrust of the “Sagip Ilog” program. It bested 38 other countries, which were judged based on the criteria of substantially contributing to the living environment on a sustainable basis, especially the living condition of the poorest and most disadvantaged groups, institutional frameworks, and the sustainable management of water.

I would like to think that the international recognition that we received through these awards is not only for the Villar Foundation and the “Sagip Ilog,” but also for all of us Filipinos. We all can do something to improve our environment and clean our surroundings because it is our common responsibility.

As my wife, former Congresswoman Cynthia A. Villar, said: “It is about time that we become serious to save or preserve our environment as nature catastrophe is happening everywhere and we cannot afford that many lives and properties will be destroyed.”

I join her call for the government, which has the capability and logistics, to spearhead the preservation of the environment, starting with the clean-up of rivers and creeks.

I also welcome the move by the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority to consider “Sagip Ilog” as one project that can be replicated in all cities and towns throughout the country.

One area where “Sagip Ilog” should be replicated with urgency is Central Mindanao, where heavy rains swelled the Rio Grande de Mindanao. The thick growth of water hyacinths, better known as water lilies, blocked the river’s current, resulting in floods that submerged 21 of the 36 towns in the province of Maguindanao alone. (Our efforts to help solve the water hyacinth problem in Mindanao’s rivers will be discussed in another column.)

In my view, “Sagip Ilog” is not so much as cleaning the river, not so much as solving the water hyacinth problem, because technologies are available to tackle the problem.

What makes it distinctive is its sustainability, which means it can be a permanent measure to prevent problems from recurring. This is because “Sagip Ilog” is a creative approach that allows different beneficial combinations. For instance, you don’t just clean up the river; you also create employment.

Sustainability will come from the people who are employed or who are given means of livelihood as part of the solution. And when you create jobs, you provide income, which in turn, helps improve the lives of the poor – and give them dignity.

“Sagip Ilog” is not limited to cleaning up waterways. It can be applied to waste management, too. Not only do you clean up the rivers but the streets as well.

In other words, “Sagip Ilog” is not just a chain of positive reactions. It is also a multi-spoke wheel of benefits. Nothing grandiose about it, but it is outstanding for its simplicity and pragmatism.

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**LINK:**

<http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/335050/ending-scourge-hyacinths-first-a-series>