

**Column for Manila Bulletin  
MANNY VILLAR  
September 28, 2011**

## **Of Trees and Forest**

### **Water Hyacinths: Scourge to Blessing (Second of two parts)**

MANILA, Philippines — The people of Mindanao have been suffering for three months now from the scourge of water hyacinths.

Since last June, thousands of families were affected when water hyacinths blocked rivers during heavy rains that caused waters to spill into towns in Mindanao. And just last Thursday, September 22, according to news on the Internet, “about 30,000 families in 13 towns in Maguindanao were displaced by floods caused by water hyacinths in rivers.”

Right after the first floods in June, the Villar Foundation sent teams to Cotabato and Davao to share their experience and knowledge in coping with the water hyacinth problem, based on the foundation’s “Sagip Ilog” Program in Las Piñas.

“Sagip Ilog,” launched in 2002, is actually an integrated program on water management that includes not only cleaning up the river but also creating livelihood opportunities from such activity, especially for the marginalized stakeholders —many of whom live near river banks. The program is a partnership among the local government unit (LGU), the residents and Villar Foundation.

Residents harvest the water hyacinths from the river and dry the stalks, which become the raw materials for producing baskets, trays, slippers, and other functional and ornamental items. This activity has become the means of livelihood for more than 100 families in Las Piñas.

The team sent to Mindanao last June taught the residents there how to make slippers from the plants. The foundation provided the soles for the slippers to get them started.

The slippers would later be distributed among the residents as part of the foundation’s calamity assistance program. And so they can feel the fruits of their labor, and probably inspire them to work on water lily products.

The residents are encouraged to find a market for their products in their own communities instead of transporting them to distant markets like Manila which would have entailed additional costs.

Training sessions have been conducted in Cotabato City, Midsayap, and Davao City. The foundation is also sending trainers to Jolo, Sulu, Lanao del Norte, and Marawi City.

In Las Piñas, the water hyacinth livelihood project has been so successful that residents now have to buy the plants from the neighboring cities of Taguig and Muntinlupa.

I would like to point out that the livelihood project is just a component of “Sagip Ilog.” In the Las Piñas-Zapote River, the program started with the dredging of the river to make it deeper. Tons of garbage, which had accumulated over the years in the river, were removed from the bottom. The dredging immediately resulted in increased flow of the water and reduction of backflow, which caused flooding.

Cleaning up the river also requires changing people's attitude from indifference to environmental consciousness. To achieve this, all the members of the community had to be involved, from local officials to teachers and civic leaders. River watch teams were formed to keep people from throwing trash into the river. And the river bank was also strengthened by planting bamboo, which in turn created another livelihood opportunity for residents, just as the water hyacinths did for them.

These are just the basic components of "Sagip Ilog," and my reason for bringing them up is to show that it is one program that can be implemented nationwide. What has been happening in many towns and cities in Mindanao makes it urgent.

The program has shown that cleaning up rivers and waterways need not be expensive. What is more important is that implementing "Sagip Ilog" should be through a partnership among the stakeholders. And what makes this program an attractive solution to the water hyacinth (and flooding) problem is its multiplier effect, the livelihood opportunities it creates.

The livelihood opportunities means the residents get direct benefits from participating in the pro-environment venture, which adds to the program's sustainability.

In essence, "Sagip Ilog" not only cleans and saves rivers; but it also improves the quality of life of our people!

(For feedback: [mbv\\_secretariat@yahoo.com](mailto:mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com))

**LINK:**

<http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/335805/water-hyacinthsscource-blessing-second-two-parts>