

City of Puerto Princesa (Philippines)

PISTA Y ANG KAGEBAN - *Making peace with nature... and ourselves*

(City Profile)

Puerto Princesa City is located in the Palawan Island of the Philippines. Its land area is 2,419.82 square kilometers; its population, about 130,000 people.

The City of Puerto Princesa has undergone serious deforestation caused by indiscriminate logging practices and inappropriate technologies such as slash-and-burn farming.



*The programs of Puerto Princesa City Government on the protection and conservation of its remaining terrestrial and marine resources, through the eradication of destructive methods of fishing and farming, have already been put in place since 1992 through the **Bantay Puerto (Puerto Princesa Watch)** Program, and it has been most effective in its functions. Under this Program, the **Pista Y Ang Kagueban or Feast of the Forest** - a unique annual festivity characterized by massive planting of forest trees in a fiesta atmosphere - has succeeded in reforesting the mountains of Irawan which is the city's source of water.*

To capitalize on the people's penchant for merry-making, the Pista Y Ang Kagueban was instituted to rehabilitate the denuded area of the city's forest lands.

For nine straight years, Puerto Princesans have run a program that has emphasized one of the best events their city has to offer - *Pista Y Ang Kagueban*. This innovative program showcases the excellence that is thriving in this community. While local government initiatives are essential proofs of the city's drive to claim its rightful title as the Philippine's last ecological frontier, the success of its people empowerment programs affirm the bright prospects of the devolution of governance. It likewise strengthens the belief that only through active community participation can sustainable development be achieved.

In 1991, the *Pista Y Ang Kageban* was conceptualized by the Development Communication, Training and Community Mobilization Department under the Palawan Integrated Area Development Project Office (PIADPO) now Palawan Council for Sustainable Development Staff (PCSDS). More popularly known as the DEVCOM Group, their objective was to make people fully and widely aware of environmental protection and



conservation issues through the creative use of the different media. They envisioned PISTA as “something big, action-oriented and challenging” not only for the older folks but also for the children and the youth. When the plans were finalized, a massive information and education drive ensued while government and private entities were mobilized for logistical support. The “*bayanihan*” spirit soon soared high and what most people thought was so hard to put together, came out easy and enjoyable establishing a great outdoor activity for the whole family. The voluntary massive tree-planting was also a significant step towards solving the problem of water supply shortage. The Irawan Watershed Area, site of this annual activity, is the main source of potable water for the city residents. But most of all, PISTA has inculcated in the minds of the people the true meaning of conservation and has set forth a new generation of pro-active environmentalists.

The United Nations declared June as the environmental month. Coincidentally, on June 30, 1991, the first *Pista Y Ang Kageban* was born. It was totally a different environmental program with a lot of support both from the government and the private sector. About 2,500 volunteers from all walks of life initially participated in the planting of trees. The succeeding years catapulted this event to something that was and will continuously be viewed by all social institutions as a shared responsibility, a direct involvement of the local community, and a strict enforcement of the environmental laws.

In 1993, a few months after Mr. Edward S. Hagedorn took over as the new local chief executive of Puerto Princesa City, he adopted and further strengthened the PISTA making

it the centerpiece of his administration’s environmental rehabilitation program. The Information and Education Campaign (IEC) was intensified covering all the city’s 66 barangays while linkages with the different sectors of the community was established for maximum participation. The City Environment and Natural Resources Office handled the technical preparations like: nursery establishment; site preparation; tree-planting activity; and the protection and maintenance of the trees. Arrangements for transportation, security, recreation and other activities were likewise given full support by





the city government in cooperation with other government agencies, private groups and individuals.

On the day of the festival, a drum and lyre band awakens residents at 3:00 am, beckoning them to military trucks stationed at the park to transport participants to and from the planting site. In 1997, over 30,000 citizens participated. The first half of the morning is dedicated to the planting, under the supervision of ENRO. The reminder of the day is set aside for a picnic and entertainment. The combination of tree planting followed by the entertainment and fun activities creates a festive atmosphere for the day.

Truly, Mayor Hagedorn, noted as an assertive, erudite leader and an environmentalist in his own way made a great impact on the community when he personally led the tree-planting activity. His exemplary effort on environmental protection and PISTA's ingenuity brought new hope for future generations to enjoy the bounties as well as the beauty of nature. There may had been birth pains but our leaders had provided the direction vis a vis the necessary support, and the people, the inspiration.

As of the latest update, some 1.3 million trees have already been planted all over the city. About 400,000 seedlings have been distributed and planted in the different barangays, while an estimated 900,000 trees have already been planted in the watershed area of Irawan covering 135.5 hectares with an 80% survival rate. Though last year's typhoon Norming struck the city and severely affected the trees planted between 1993 – 1995 (with a 20 – 30% mortality figure), intensified rehabilitation and maintenance efforts by the city nursery personnel has done a lot to revive and save the trees.

The tree planting activity which highlights every PISTA celebration consists of four major elements, namely: nursery establishment; on site preparation; actual tree planting; and, protection to attain maximum survival rate. Nursery establishment includes soil potting in plastic bags, seeds gathering and propagation, and care for the seedlings until its plantable stage. Site preparation includes not only the clearing of the area and digging of holes where the seedlings will be planted but also the construction of access roads and trails for the participants. Tree planting covers such activities as delivery of seedlings to the planting site, the actual planting, and inspection by field personnel. Finally, the young plants are periodically visited by Plant Propagators and Forest Rangers and given the proper care and protection until maturity.

For this year's activity, it has been agreed upon that another watershed area within the city be considered as



the planting site in as much as the Irawan Watershed has already been widely reforested. The seedlings are now being prepared in the different watershed project sites of the City ENRO in Busngol- Sta. Lourdes, Manalo/Maruyugon, Binduyan, and Bahile.

Local cultural and environmental groups together with guest artists are again expected to express their love for Mother Nature through their God-given talents. The concert in the forest has become a most awaited event especially by the young ones as well as the young-at-heart. Scouts and other great adventure seekers will be setting camp days earlier and enjoy closer encounters with nature. These activities make tree-planting in particular and environmental protection in general, one big fun. Aside from the local leaders and residents, officials from the national government and other personalities have continually expressed their desire to become part of this annual celebration.

(Following is a poem to praise the PISTA sent by a City officer)

PISTA is a fitting tribute to Mother Nature – for continuously nourishing the children of the earth.

PISTA is a celebration of life, of fun and thanksgiving. A constant reminder of our individual responsibility to care for each other.

PISTA then, has ceased to become just an ordinary program. For Puerto Princesans, it is a way of life.

Long live the forests! Long live Mother Earth! Long live Pista Y Ang Kageban!

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