

Crying out for survival

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The students are on the streets, waving banners, banging drums, singing, chanting, and calling for an end to the causes driving climate change that is wrecking the planet. They see the global warming caused by huge amounts of CO₂ and methane gases heating up the environment and causing the melting of the ice cap on a gigantic scale never seen before. They want to close coal-fired power plants and Governments to install renewable wind and solar power farms and geothermal generators to provide the electricity we need.

They are the voice of the planet; they are its feelings and its cry for help. The planet is, in many ways, dying and the human species, its magnificent creation, is a vengeful child killing its parent by savage greed. The warmer atmosphere is evaporating more water from the oceans, causing more frequent powerful rainstorms as never before.

I saw the negative and damaging impact of climate change on the lives of ordinary Filipino people when I went to visit the *Aeta* indigenous farmers (indigenous people who live in scattered, isolated mountainous parts of the island of Luzon, the Philippines) in our *Preda Fair Trade Mango Project*. They live on the mountains of Zambales and they were once forest dwellers, hunters and gatherers. They survived for 30,000 years, anthropologists say.

They are an amazing people with a culture and customs that would put many a Western community to shame. They have more gender equality: women as tribal leaders, men that carry the children on their backs, a plant based medical practice that has kept them alive for thousands of years. They are under threat from climate change. They have lost their rain forests and the climate will never revert again to be a balanced harmonious influence for growth if we do not stop the warming. The greed of the ruling elite families with international corporations devastated the rain forests by cutting and exporting logs to rebuild Europe and Japan after the Second World War.

Only three percent of forest cover is left in isolated areas around the nation. The bare hills were stripped of their topsoil by the increased rainfall and the brown earth was eroded and washed into the sea. This soil covered the coral and the smaller fish died out and the bigger fish migrated to deeper waters. Coastal fisher families were catching less and in the deeper waters foreign fishing fleets raided the Philippine seas as the Chinese do today. Only rough grass and bushes grow on the bare mountains. The climate

has changed as a result. The rice harvest that should feed millions of people has been lost in recent years. Prices have risen through corruption and mismanagement.

Rural poverty has increased and the poor have abandoned the land and the shores and migrated, like refugees, to the slums of the big cities. There they live in squalor, a once proud self-sufficient people, reduced to barely surviving. They squat in the shadows of the rich that live in luxurious condominiums. They eat 'pagpag' (Pagpag is a term given to left-over food, meat picked from garbage and dumps, which is then washed, cooked and sold to poor communities) to survive.

But the *Aetas* have not become refugees in their own country. They have struggled to survive by continuing to adapt to climate change by planting and growing their own root crops and vegetables in a natural and organic way. They produce fair trade organic mangos, the only such group to do so internationally certified by Naturland. They live in poor villages but eat and produce healthy, nutritious naturally grown food.

Susan, an *Aeta* village chief, explains how they experience climate change. She tells of the unexpected rainstorms that destroy the mango blossoms. There have been no mango fruits for three years in their mountains. Landslides scar the hills, rivers are polluted, chickens die, children cry and sickness is more frequent.

We are destroying our own habitat and eliminating our role as the planet's self-awareness. When we are at war with the earth, we are at war with ourselves. When we hurt the planet earth, we hurt ourselves for we are one with it. We humans have evolved from its soil, its chemistry, and its life forms. The earth is our mother that gave us life and we are its consciousness. Through us, the planet and the universe reflects and contemplates its own self because we are its brain, the thinking being and the planet is conscious and self-aware through us.

Every one of us has to redeem the failures of the human race that is destroying ourselves and the earth. We must cry out and take to the streets in peaceful non-violent protest and claim our rights as belonging to a clean healthy planet of which we are an intimate part.

*Edited version - Columban Fr Shay Cullen SSC has been a missionary in the Philippines since 1969 and is the founder of *PREDA (People's Recovery, Empowerment Development Assistance Foundation)*
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