

Indigenous practices in the Cordilleras effective in curbing forest fires

Published by www.interaksyon.com, 18 April 2015

As summer is at its height, wild fires continuously threaten the Cordillera forests.

Fortunately, the indigenous communities have traditional systems of imposing sanctions on those implicated in forest fires, as a way of preserving these forests, which are considered part of their ancestral domain.

The regional office of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has already reported that several hectares of forests in the Mount Santo Tomas area in Tuba and Mount Pulag in Bokod, both towns in Benguet, had been destroyed due to uncontrolled forest fires.

In Mountain Province, the estimated impact of forest fires has yet to be released, according to the Provincial Environmental and Natural Resources Office (PENRO).

Over the past five years, the DENR-CAR reported that forest fires damaged 308.26 hectares per year.

The blame is typically thrown at villagers engaged in swidden farming or kaingin, who, during rainy season, plant the burned mountain sides with legumes, squash and other climbing vines.

But forest fires do not occur only in relation to kaingin.

Communities claim most of the fires were unintentional, but for intentional burning, indigenous practices are observed to control such fires usually experienced during summer, and this generally is to protect and conserve their forest resources.

If a villager caused the fire, intentionally or otherwise, he will be summoned by the elders to explain in one dap-ay session, lakay (elder) Tigan-o Dugao of Ankileng, Sagada, Mountain Province, said.

Dap-ay is an indigenous socio-political system where elders lead the discussion of community affairs.

The elders decide on the sanction, usually a fine, levied on the culprit, he said.

The punishment ranges from exacting a fine (usually, one pig) and other consequential performance of community service.

In Tigan-o's Ankileng village, the culprit is required to pay with one ogo (a mother pig that has given birth at least twice).

In the eastern Sagada barangay of Antadao, the fine is one pig, according to Kapitan Domling, dumap-ay (member) of dap-ay Antadao.

In nearby barangay Kilong, still in Eastern Sagada, the fine of the culprit is an eteng or piglet, said Kapon Gomgom-o, a former member of the Sangguniang Bayan of Sagada town and a

member of Kilong dap-ay.

He added that a piglet is also the fine for any member of a community who cut trees with which to make lumber, from their forests.

These leaders claimed that the system is effective. It is done through the communities' initiative and with their collective efforts.

Lakay Tigan-o explained that the fine will be used in a ritual called apoy. The community will declare ubaya (or tengaw in eastern Sagada) where the community members cannot leave during the duration of the ubaya.

"The lakay in the dap-ay will perform the apoy ritual and pray to their god Kabunian and their ancestors' spirits, who may have been affected by the fire, to pardon the culprit and finally to protect the community from harm," added lakay Tigan-o, who is a member of dap-ay Bokboken in Ankileng.

The fine or other sanctions imposed by the community through the dap-ay is considered grave so that the culprit will not repeat his act.

The elders reiterated that these indigenous practices should continue as it is participatory in nature, just and implementable as part of their traditional practice and community life.

It is their contribution to sustainable environment protection.