

The Ayta of Zambales: Restoring Biodiversity and Rebuilding Lives after Mt. Pinatubo's Eruption

SGP Grantees: Kapatiran-Kaunlaran Foundation, Inc. with Samahan ng mga Ayta sa Banawen (1995)
Samahan ng mga Katutubo sa Poonbato (1998)
Location: near Mt. Pinatubo, Zambales province, Luzon, Philippines
Ecosystem Type: tropical forest, agro-ecosystems
Biodiversity Significance: Global 200 Ecoregion 27 (Philippines Moist Forests)
Key Themes: ecosystem restoration, sustainable agriculture, indigenous people, land rights
SGP Contribution: \$38,016 (1995), \$31,781 (1998)

Background

The Ayta people were among the first to inhabit the Philippine islands, and have lived in the region surrounding Mt. Pinatubo for thousands of years. Their world changed radically in June of 1991, when Mt. Pinatubo exploded dramatically in the second-largest volcanic eruption of the 20th century. Tens of thousands of Ayta were displaced by this natural disaster when ash and lahars, or volcanic mudflows, covered their homes and destroyed the forests, rivers, and fields that had supported their livelihoods. The Ayta were forced into evacuation centers, and many have been re-located throughout the country. However, the Ayta of Banawen and Poonbato were among those who have been able to return. Through the help of SGP and a wide range of other non-governmental and community organizations, they have begun to restore the ecosystem and rebuild their lives. They have even inspired other indigenous groups by establishing the first "ancestral domain claim" in the Philippines, made possible in 1997 by the passage of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act.

Project Implementation

Shortly after the Pinatubo eruption, Kapatiran-Kaunlaran Foundation, Inc. (KKFI), among other NGOs, worked closely with the Ayta people to help them find ways to return to their ancestral land, rebuild homes, and restore the soil to grow crops. In 1995, the GEF Small Grants Programme funded a project that was jointly implemented by KKFI and the people's organization, Samahan ng mga Ayta sa Banawen (SABA). Given the immediate need for food security, one major focus of the project was on food production in a sustainable manner. Working together, SABA and KKFI blended indigenous knowledge with modern techniques to restore productivity to this area, transformed by the eruption. Intercropping, terracing, contour farming, and staggered planting were among the strategies employed. Forest restoration activities included planting endemic tree species, and recruiting forest guards to protect any remaining stands of forest from encroachment. Finally, SABA and KKFI assessed and delineated 3,000 hectares of ancestral terrain, and in 1999, the Ayta received the first Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC) granted to an indigenous people in the Philippines. Since the completion of this project, SABA has supported another Ayta community in Poonbato to undertake similar biodiversity restoration efforts. This community organization, Samahan ng mga Katutubo sa Poonbato, Inc. (SKPI), received a grant from SGP in 1998 to establish a community nursery and plant indigenous tree seedlings to help restore a watershed area, and to introduce sustainable agricultural and livestock methods.

Results and Partnerships

Both projects have produced results in terms of biodiversity and livelihood improvements. In Banawen, the cropland and forest restoration has started to induce the return of some birds and other wildlife. For the Ayta, the establishment of their ancestral domain brought a greater sense of security, and has encouraged them to take even greater care of their lands. For example, they have made agreements that farm areas must be completely cleared before any ritual burnings take place in order to avoid accidental damage to forests. In addition, alternative livelihoods generated by the introduction of diverse crops have discouraged the practice of harvesting grasses from hillsides, which had previously contributed to soil erosion. These successes have been the product of collaboration between the Ayta and a number of NGOs, government assistance and international support. They have led to the preparation of a proposal for a medium-sized GEF project to expand these efforts to work with the Aytas to restore biodiversity in Zambales.

