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Seacology

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We met last week with Duane Silverstein, executive director of a globally-recognized conservation group, Seacology, over a lovely dinner hosted by businesswoman Doris Magsaysay Ho. Our party of 15 learned that Silverstein once headed the Goldman Environmental Prize, dubbed the “Nobel Prize of the Environment” by National Geographic and news media around the world – plus being an avid diver and former comedy writer for celebrity Joan Rivers. But more importantly, we were told of Seacology’s amazing, trail-blazing conservation projects with island communities around the world.

Silverstein is indefatigable, the epitome of the advocate-doer who believes in actual grassroots intervention and community-engagement, not in “endless meetings with large staff and long bureaucratic delays.” Seacology is one of the few international organizations with a lean staff – a total of ten – running over a hundred projects in several countries in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean.

What does Seacology do? How did it start? Its story is one of serendipity. A simple chance encounter or event, a good thing that led to more and bigger opportunities, with exponential benefits reaped over time. Silverstein told us that one of the world’s leading ethno-botanists, Dr. Paul Cox, was studying the pristine rainforests of Samoa in 1989 when logging equipment was brought to the remote village of Falealupo.

Cox found out that the government of Samoa told the village of Falealupo that they had to build a better school or else all the teachers would be removed. With a per capita income of less than 100 dollars a year, the village had no choice but to sell the logging rights to their rainforest to build the school and ensure the education of their children. At that instant, Dr. Cox said, “If we raise the money and build you the school, would you sign an agreement protecting the 30,000 acre rainforest forever?”

The village chiefs agreed, Seacology was formed, the money was raised from philanthropic donations, the school was built, and now a 30,000-acre rainforest is conserved in perpetuity. Soon after, an elevated rainforest canopy walkway was constructed for eco-tourism, raising more money now for the village than it would have received for cutting down their rainforest.

Projects in Fiji and Indonesia followed, such as building community centers and water delivery systems in exchange for the establishment of large no-fishing marine reserves to give reefs a chance to replenish. In other areas, villagers are offered alternative methods of fishing instead of using dynamite and cyanide on their reefs. In Palau and Papua New Guinea, Seacology deployed demarcation buoys and trained rangers to turn “paper parks” into effective marine reserves.

In the Philippines, Seacology has 16 projects to date in communities in Cebu, Palawan, Bohol, Samar, and Lake Sebu in Mindanao. The latter, for example, was granted a micro-hydro generator for an upland barangay which previously did not have electricity; in exchange, the village is protecting 6,178 acres of watershed around Lake Sebu. Or in Murcia, Negros Occidental, Seacology funded a hydraulic ram pump water system – the sort of indigenous or appropriate and earth-friendly technology that won the Magsaysay award last year — in exchange for commitments from three barangays to enforce regulations in a 10,000 hectare forest reserve which is still experiencing slash-and-burn farming, indiscriminate hunting and illegal logging.

What philosophy undergirds Seacology’s work and mission? Silverstein is emphatic: “Over the last four hundred years most of the world’s plant and animal extinctions have taken place on islands, with coral reefs and marine ecosystems have been particularly vulnerable.” The health of our reefs, the habitat of our fisheries and main sources of protein, is dependent on the health of our forests. When a forest is clear-cut, erosion chokes the reefs, and when the reefs are destroyed, a great deal of marine biodiversity is lost. This is Seacology’s mantra of interdependence that guides its operations.

But beyond dole-outs or government-driven programs for conservation, environmental protection and livelihood generation, Seacology's model is not only novel, but also roundly effective. Seacology spends over 80 percent for direct programs, and only 11 percent for administration and six percent for fundraising. A renowned marine biologist, Dr John McCosker, effuses: "More than any conservation group Seacology gets more output; they are not giving money away, they're not making grants, they're making deals with communities to be fully involved."

There is more than a lesson or two here for what is called the principle of "subsidiarity." When communities take ownership of their projects and see an honest-to-goodness exchange for their efforts and commitment, results abound and benefits multiply – with or without government help. And for philanthropic support, to see how much exponential and real impact to islanders' lives there is, even for modest donations.

For an archipelago like the Philippines, we could do well to take private-public partnerships to the more meaningful level of these kinds of grassroots interventions. Like the original village in Samoa, we can never fully know the vast potential the nexus of environment, social participation, and outside linkages carries.

Until we do as Seacology does (www.seacology.org). As its motto declares, "changing the world ... one island at a time."

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