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Dr. Andres B. Masipiqueña
1954–2010

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Obituary

Dr. Andres B. Masipiqueña 1954–2010

From his desk on the campus of Isabela State University in Cabagan, Andy Masipiqueña could see the forested mountains of the Sierra Madre. To newly-arrived Dutch students he would point to the *kaingin* (swiddens) and tell them to forget whatever they had written in their research proposals. He urged them first to go to the forest and listen to the farmers burning their fields and to the loggers hauling their wood. He cautioned the newcomers against misplaced idealism and false promises. Then he would laugh and turn around to send a text message, thereby ending the formal introduction to the Philippines. For most Dutch students, eager to discuss their theoretical research questions and conceptual frameworks, it was an intimidating first encounter. Often they took it as indifference or skepticism. What they failed to see was a committed scientist who was searching for answers in a rapidly changing society.

Born in Bohol to a poor family on 4 March 1954, Andy excelled at school and earned a scholarship at the University of the Philippines. He chose to study forestry in Los Baños: the outdoor life and heavy machinery appealed to him. After graduating in 1978 he accepted the offer to teach at the newly established School of Forestry in Isabela Province at what was then the Cagayan Valley Institute of Technology (CVIT). Logging was booming in the northern Sierra Madre and the new industry needed a skilled labor force. Andy would recall melancholically those early years in Cabagan when a group of young, idealistic, long-haired faculty members gradually built up a school into a college.

He earned his Ph.D. degree in 1993 with a thesis on the difficulties in the implementation of the integrated social forestry program. He found it

hard to understand how such a well-intentioned program, designed by the best foresters in the country, could fail so miserably. It made him lose his belief in blueprint solutions for the intertwined problems of environmental degradation and poverty. He was left with questions and uncertainties.

In 1995 he became the coordinator of the Cagayan Valley Program on Environment and Development, the academic partnership of Isabela State University and Leiden University. In this capacity he supervised the fieldwork of more than 200 Dutch and Filipino graduate students in the northern Sierra Madre on a range of environmental problems: from forest fragmentation to grassland fires, from slash-and-burn farming to the extinction of the Philippine crocodile. He facilitated their research activities by tapping his large professional network: a text message to one of his friends or classmates would open doors or secure a research permit. He had little patience for foreign students who would start telling him how to manage the natural resources of the northern Sierra Madre. But when students would return to the campus with experiences from the field he would listen carefully, and occasionally ask a question.

The role of program coordinator suited him well: the different priorities and demands of the two academic partners gave him freedom to maneuver. He successfully found a middle ground between the “high science” of a Dutch research institution and the need for “extension projects” of a state university in one of the poorest provinces in the Philippines. This unlikely marriage was best expressed in the conferences that Andy organized to disseminate the scientific outputs of the joint program. International scientists would sit next to members of the Sangguniang Bayan (municipal council), and theoretical contributions on the global commons would be followed by an outline of the community-based resource management plan of Barangay Sapinit.

Inevitably his position and in-depth knowledge brought him to the forefront of the environmental movement in the Cagayan Valley. He was, to his despair, an often-asked participant in committees, panels, debates, and reviews. But he felt uncomfortable in this arena and preferred to sit in the back and listen quietly. People sometimes misinterpreted his attitude as disinterest. In fact Andy simply did not believe he had all the answers. In the polarized debate on mining between government officials and civil society groups, for example, Andy refused to take sides. His remark that current small-scale mining practices in Nueva Vizcaya had detrimental environmental effects and urgently needed to be regulated was lost in the shouting



Dr. Andres B. Masipiqueña, 2002

Photo courtesy of Jan van der Ploeg

match between advocates and opponents of mining. Their certainties only raised more questions in Andy's head.

His scientific independence was seldom valued. As a member of the protected area management board of the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park he was not, to the chagrin of conservationists, opposed to the construction of a road through the protected area. He understood the needs of isolated communities along the Pacific coast. But when a proposal was forwarded to construct a road from Ilagan to Palanan, Andy cited the law and stressed that the management board did not have the authority to decide on this issue. In Andy's view there were no certain truths, no magic bullets, no environmental villains or green heroes. He was frustrated by the extensive logging in the protected area, concerned about the poverty it caused, and infuriated by the corruption in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. His advocacy led to the creation of the anti-illegal logging taskforce of Isabela Province and the confiscation of more than 1.8 million board feet of illegal timber. At the same time, he maintained good contacts with politicians and government officials he knew were profiting from the illegal extraction of timber. This balancing act was characteristic of Andy:

he was difficult to label, unpredictable, but always loyal to his friends, colleagues, and students.

In 2009, after twenty years, Leiden University ended its financial support to the Cagayan Valley Program on Environment and Development. Andy was exasperated by how the scientific and societal merits of the joint program were simply ignored, and frustrated by the irrationality of terminating a program that largely generated its own funding. He worked hard, too hard perhaps, to ensure that Isabela State University would institutionalize the research program, although it would mean losing his autonomy and freedom. He was stressed and tired. On 17 January 2010, during his regular weekend mountain-biking tour in the grasslands around the campus he collapsed. He died on his way to the hospital. Andy is survived by his wife, Mercy; his two sons, Irvin and Jason; and his grandson, Ethan.

From his empty desk one can still see the burning kaingin on the slopes of the Sierra Madre mountain range. What remains is his legacy of scientific inquiry: independent, unprejudiced, and uncertain, but in the end deeply committed to a better future for people and nature in the Philippines.

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