

BUILDING A NATION THROUGH ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND PROTECTION

A friend of mine sent me an e-mail message with an attachment not too long ago. The covering message read, "Metro-Manila... do you remember then?". When I clicked open the attached document, I was amused to find that it was a compilation of photographs spanning the period from the late 60's to the late 80's of parts of what was then the Municipality of Makati, areas in Manila such as Luneta, Rizal Park, Quiapo, Escolta, the Pasig River, and certain portions of EDSA when it was still referred to as Highway 54.

What struck me most was the simplicity of it all. The wide open spaces, tree lined streets, uncongested and traffic free roads, clean surroundings and thoroughfares that were uncluttered, spick and span. One could almost smell the fresh air just by looking at those pictures. They roused a feeling of order, discipline and concern for nature.

After going through all the photographs, I closed the message and stared out the window in my room. From where I was, EDSA was visible with its ever present line of vehicles, weaving in and out of the lanes. Astride the snaking length of the MRT Railway Line, buses incessantly spewing exhaust fumes were clearly jostling for space on the road as were just about most of the other automobiles. The skyline looked grey and cloudy despite a sun-filled sky. That scene was an obvious contrast of what the e-mail pictures had captured long ago. Briefly stated - chaos substituting harmony.

The condition that the Metropolis is in nowadays is clear proof of how our nation has fallen behind in terms of respect for nature and care for the environment. You don't need to go very far to see how we have abused this small corner of the earth by polluting it through neglect and patent disregard for nearly every warning that is given about the need to protect the environment. Thus, garbage is thrown all around thereby clogging drainage systems and dirtying rivers, depressed areas with residents euphemistically referred to as informal settlers pock mark the landscape, trees continue to be cut down indiscriminately to make way for new urban development, open spaces that should be filled with trees and plants are sacrificed for another shopping mall, motor vehicle owners seem unconcerned about the need to comply with pollution control/emission standards and ignore traffic regulations just as nearly as the law enforcers are eager to accept "facilitation fees" to look the other way. All of this is just what is obvious. The list could go on without end. Now, try and imagine what that looks like on a broader scale in other places over the country and you'll realize just how fragmented we are as a people in much the same way that the mass of islands form an archipelago that

What has all this got to do with nation building? The answer lies in simply equating environmental consciousness with discipline.

If discipline in a nation manifests itself by people adhering to order, then what we need is to ensure that everybody follows the law, falls in line (all too often, quite literally) and stays there. In the context of the environment, this means that we should all do more than express how we are concerned about it. It requires that we become aware of environmental rules and regulations, abide by them, and not simply

keep them in our store of knowledge. Furthermore, it entails that we endlessly prod the agencies of government tasked with implementing these environmental laws, rules and regulations to enforce them without reservation or prejudice.

As a lawyer, one's responsibility is not to find ways to exploit loopholes in the law to protect our clients, but rather to educate them about how and why the environment is important. In so doing, the reasons for the law should be explained with the environment in mind. The attitude should not be one where you pull punches to get a client off the hook when it is clear that there is a violation of environmental standards. Instead, there should be an earnest effort to guide that client toward compliance, even suffer the penalties as a consequence. With that done, a fresh start on the right track can begin for the erstwhile violator.

As simple individuals, we have to do our own share, however small. Thus, it shouldn't be too much to ask to dispose of garbage properly, turn off lights when not in use, conserve water by reducing the flow from the tap, report service leaks, maybe just watch out for the tree along the road before some ecological dimwit cuts it down. Tell him off! See what happens.