



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA.

College of International Studies
Department of International and Area Studies

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Dear esteemed leaders:

I write with regard to the regulation of Indigenous farming practices in Palawan and, in particular, within the jurisdiction of Puerto Princesa City. It has come to my attention that a meeting will be held 17 February 2016 to discuss current policies regarding swidden agriculture (*kaingin* or *uma*). I would like to take this opportunity to share my perspective on the social and ecological significance of *uma* for consideration in your deliberations.

Before I continue, I would like to emphasize that I write to you with great respect for your respective offices and for the challenges you face in your efforts to promote sustainable development. My concern for Palawan is informed by my academic training in environmental anthropology and by more than two years of residence in Palawan, where I have held a Fulbright fellowship and conducted research for my doctoral dissertation. I have dedicated much of my adult life to learning Philippine languages and to understanding contemporary debates over conservation and development in the region. My perspective is that of an outsider who is deeply committed to Palawan's social and environmental wellbeing. I write to you in the spirit of respectful but heartfelt concern and without any intention to criticize or lecture you.

That said, I would like to express my support for those who are calling for an end to the prohibitive regulation of Indigenous swidden in Puerto Princesa. Indigenous swidden is often invoked as a scapegoat for deforestation and erosion. In reality, however, *uma* is a vital part of the lush, biodiverse landscape for which Palawan is renown. Here are a few facts that I have learned about swidden through my studies of the scientific literature and of the practice itself:

- *Uma* does not result in deforestation, but rather in a forest mosaic, in which the variation in the maturity of trees and other plants supports a higher density of biodiversity than is possible in a more homogenous forest.
- Nor does *uma* result in erosion or depletion of the soil. As required by Indigenous laws and customs, swidden fields are sited carefully and allowed to fallow or "rest" for long periods of time after harvest such that the forest regenerates before the land is cleared again, thereby protecting the soil from erosion and serving as a source of nutrients for future swidden plots. This cycle of clearing and regeneration enables the sustainability of the practice without the use of chemical inputs.

- *Uma* has long been the foundation of livelihood and food security for Indigenous Peoples in Palawan. It is not a “backward” practice in need of modernization, but rather a sophisticated adaptation to a tropical forest ecosystem. Indigenous Batak, Palawan, and Tagbanua employ a remarkable repertoire of knowledge and skill when they practice swidden. In fact, *uma* is not so much a practice, but a socioecological system of knowledge, beliefs, and practices that is an integral part of Palawan’s terrestrial ecosystems.
- *Uma* is central to Indigenous society, including the worldviews and ritual practices that give order and meaning to everyday life. Indigenous Peoples in Palawan, like all peoples, have agency and experience change, but until today many of them consider *uma* a central part of their identity and culture.
- Livelihood practices adopted as alternatives to *uma*, such as intensive exploitation of NTFPs, commodity-crop plantations, or wet rice paddies, often result in permanent transformations of the landscape that are not compatible with healthy forests or diverse wildlife.

In light of these facts, I would like to reiterate that Indigenous swidden is an integral part of the rich forest ecosystems for which Palawan is internationally renown. *Uma* is not a threat to conservation, but rather a key part of a socially equitable and ecologically sound conservation approach. Banning *uma* (or restricting it in ways that are not based on Indigenous laws and customs) does not protect the forest or promote the modernization of Indigenous livelihoods. Rather, such policies accelerate processes of social change that marginalize Indigenous farmers and push them further toward dependence on market-oriented livelihoods, which are less likely to provide food security and more likely to result in environmental degradation. *Uma*, moreover, is part of the economic and cultural rights that are protected by the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act and other national laws.

My views, then, align with those that have been shared with you by many Palawan-based individuals and organizations whose work involves Indigenous rights and livelihoods. I join these parties in proposing a reconsideration of policies concerning Indigenous swidden in Puerto Princesa and other municipalities. *Uma* must be an element of Palawan’s socially equitable and ecologically sound future; let us not treat it as a relic of the past.

Respectfully,



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