

Leonardo L. Co's Botanical Root: It All Began at the PUH, University of the Philippines at Diliman

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“Leonard Co had a problem...” where the famous opening lines of an article written by Tom Abate for Bioscience in 1992 (see Abate 1992). This was about Leonardo's exploration of the Palanan Forests in which he was part of an international team of botanists. The results of this expedition led to the recognition of the Palanan Forest as the core of the Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park (NSMNP) which eventually led to its creation by congressional action as a Natural Park in April 2001 (Republic Act 9125).

The Palanan expedition was a baptism of fire for Leonardo that led to his recognition as one of the foremost Filipino botanists of recent times. He was responsible for bringing out plant specimens from Palanan, Isabela, so the rest of the world can study these specimens. He did this with very little resources and in perilous circumstances, including hitching rides with log smugglers on truck and in boat, just to get out of Palanan. His experiences and the expedition led to the recognition of Palanan's global importance. The NSMNP had been recommended as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and had been under review since 2006.

With the sudden and unexpected death of Leonardo in 2010, there was an outpouring of grief from the conservation community and the world of plant taxonomists as well. There was a deep sense of loss and the gradual realization about the significance of his untimely demise.

At the time of his death, he was accepted as a museum researcher at the Institute of Biology, College of Science, University of the Philippines Diliman (UPD), but was waiting for the processing of his appointment papers to be completed. Thus, he had to take on other jobs to support his family. This was the reason he was in Kananga, Leyte, doing the work he loved most: inside the forest looking

for sources of quality trees which would be used in a reforestation program. Prior to this, he was in Palanan, Isabela, over a four-month period doing a re-census of the 16-ha plot with the Center for Tropical Forest Science-Smithsonian Institution Research Institution (CTFS-STRI), the Diliman Science Research Foundation (DSRF) and the UP Biology. There was a few days interval between these two projects.

Ironically, despite his recognition as an international expert in plant taxonomy, a few in the mainstream of scientific community would still not consider Leonardo as one of them, since he did not have a Ph. D. title after his name. In fact, he was awarded his Bachelor of Science Degree in Botany from the UPD only in the summer of 2008, 36 years after he entered the university as a freshman in 1972. How he was eventually awarded his BS Botany degree is a story in itself. This is best expressed in the letter of support by the then Dean of the College of Science, Dr. Caesar A. Saloma, who wrote to the then President of the University, Dr. Emerlinda R. Roman, to grant Leonard a BS Botany degree even though he lacked a 3-unit course in Physics, to wit:

“...I am strongly recommending favourable action to the request of Mr. Leonardo L. Co (BS Botany, SN 72-00993) to be granted BS Botany degree by the University of the Philippines even though he lacks Physics 31 (3 units). Mr. Co already passed Physics 32 the second and last physics course requirement in the old BS Botany curriculum

Mr. Co is a Filipino biologist par excellence who is highly regarded by experts and colleagues in both the domestic and international science community. The Institute of Biology is unanimously endorsing the request. Similar endorsements have also been secured from National

¹Paper adapted from previous articles written by the author and published in various media.

Scientist Lourdes Cruz, University Professor Emeritus, and Academician Edgardo Gomez, and Academician Prescillano Zamora, among others...

My endorsement of the request of Mr. Co primarily stems from my own experience as an academic and researcher in the Philippines particularly in the University of the Philippines. As an academic administrator, I can also understand the concerns of my other CEB colleagues on the possible unintended consequences of allowing such an event to happen. My only consolation is that the case of Mr. Leonardo Co is very rare and that it happens only once in a hundred years (underscoring supplied)..."

The lack of a degree did not stop him from teaching. Leonardo always shared with people whatever he knew. His name will not be listed as the adviser of any Ph D or Master of Science degree graduate, yet I personally know of at least three recent Ph D graduates that he had mentored, since he could not be appointed a member of their graduate committees for lack of a formal qualification. He might not have had the formal appointment as a professor, but people considered him one because of their recognition of his scholarly outputs. He also served as the de facto curator of the University of the Philippines Jose Vera Santos Memorial Herbarium (PUH) and was active in exchanging specimens with the rest of world's herbaria, thus his collections can be found in the herbaria of Harvard University and University of Leiden, among others

Immediately after being awarded his BS Botany degree in May 2008, he was hired as a lecturer in plant taxonomy in June 2008. He was only able to teach as a lecturer at UP Biology for a semester as his commitments to do taxonomic and conservation work were unceasing and he did not want to give his students half-baked knowledge. The testimonials from the group of students he taught as a lecturer was overflowing during his wake.

Some people would consider Leonard brilliant, but they had reservations to consider him as a scientist before 2008, since he had no formal university degree then, yet this did not stop him from doing good quality research, as his publication outputs attest to (see A Short Biography of Leonardo L. Co, this issue).

One of the ways we often did to tease him and test him was to ask him a particular taxonomic problem and ask him the reference to this question. He would reply and provide the page number of the reference where the answer could be found. His swordplay with the living greats in plant taxonomy is legendary wherein he was able to argue with these icons and they could only nod in agreement and accept his analysis. I personally saw international delegates bringing him plant specimens for identification or species confirmation. He was highly

regarded by the international community. Many had expressed that his tragic death is a great loss also to the world of plant taxonomy.

One of Leonard's frustrations was his awareness of mediocre people who could not hold a candle to his broad encyclopedic knowledge and vast field experience, except that these people had a "Ph D" title after their names. Because of this, he was often bypassed in receiving academic recognition because of his then academic degree deficiency. Philippine society has not figured out a way to tap geniuses, like Leonard.

In 2006, the book, Forest Trees of Palanan, Philippines: A Study in Population Ecology, was published, which turned out to be his last publication as the senior author. This was a part of the book series of the CTFS-STRI. He was very proud of this achievement, as it was the first of its kind in the Philippines. The book was the sixth in the book series that CTFS-STRI had published, and this publication was warmly welcomed by the academe, government, non-government organization conservation groups and the private sector. As an active conservationist, another dream of Leonard was to mobilize multi-sectoral support for the conservation of the country's rich plant resources.

While Palanan in the Sierra Madre was where he did the most botanizing, Leonardo's second home was the PUH Herbarium. He often stayed overnight, spending countless hours sorting and identifying specimens and to commune with the late Elmer Merrill, foremost pioneer of Philippine modern botany. He also brought together a diverse group of people with a shared love for native plants into the Philippine Native Plant Conservation Society which was formally organized in 2008 and continues to operate to this day. Knowing the gap created by Leonardo's death, the Philippine Tropical Forest Conservation Foundation (www.ptfcf.org) has established a Leonardo L. Co Scholarship for MS and Ph D students, in the hope of producing the next Leonardo for the country. The Rain Forest Restoration Initiative (www.rainforestation.ph) has established also the Leonardo L. Co Best Native Tree Nursery Award in his honour.

Leonardo might have been gone for three years, but his memory and advocacies live on through the recognitions that continue to be bestowed upon him. But more importantly, he lives on in the students whom he had mentored and who are now continuing the important works in plant taxonomy in particular, and conserving the Philippine plant biodiversity in general. It will take decades before the shoes he left behind could be filled. He is sorely missed.

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