

**PERCEPTIONS ON COMMON PROPERTY IN ECOSYSTEMS UNDER STRESS:
THE CASE OF THE MT. APO GEOTHERMAL PLANT**

by Alexander G. Flor and Felix Librero
UPLB Institute of Development Communication

INTRODUCTION

On January 23, 1993, President Fidel V. Ramos endorsed the continuance of the Mt. Apo Geothermal Plant amidst controversy and concern voiced by certain sectors. The facility, being built and managed by the Philippine National Oil Company, will be operational in 1994.

Prompted by the unrelenting power crisis, the President had little choice but to endorse the plant. The Mt. Apo Geothermal facility has been riddled with conflict for the past two years. Conflict between the PNOC and NGOs; between the local government unit and tribal groups; between DENR and the Church.

Conflict is oftentimes caused by differing perceptions. This paper discusses differing perceptions on common property in an ecosystem under stress. By differing perceptions, we refer to perceptions on the part of the stakeholders of this common property, Mt. Apo.

Mt. Apo is an ecosystem under stress. The geothermal facility being built near its apex has disturbed its equilibrium and, as some wildlife groups would have it, may threaten its biodiversity. There are other factors contributing to this stress. The communities living within Mt. Apo constitute a primary source. So are illegal loggers and kaingineros, the hikers and tourists, orchid collectors and game hunters who trek up its slopes regularly.

Mt. Apo could also be regarded as common property. It has been declared a national park and wildlife sanctuary, in other words, an integrated protected area system (IPAS). Individual ownership of tracts of land within the area is prohibited. The peak itself is held sacred by all indigenous tribes in the Southern Mindanao area. It is home to Apo Sandawa, the god of all alumahad tribes. In a sense, it is the common patrimony of the lumad and the non-lumad alike.

There is no doubt that the mountain is rich in resources. Apart from its abundance of flora and fauna (genetic resources), it is rich in mineral deposits. One could come across small gold panners and prospectors in the area. Mt. Apo, being volcanic, is also a source of geothermal energy, perhaps the single most abundant power resource in Mindanao.

It is within this context that the conflict situation has developed and thrived.

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

We have a saying in communication, "Meanings are in people, not in words" (Berlo, 1960). This is partly due to a principle that characterizes our cognitive process called selectivity (Fleming and Levie, 1978).

People tend to become selective in the stimuli that they are exposed to (selective exposure); in what they perceive (selective perception); and in what they remember (selective retention). Selectivity is often a function of worldview and values. Other terms for worldview is Weltstanshaung (primarily employed in the Germanic sociological tradition) and cosmology which Rifkin (1988) defines as the basic framework wherein we explain or interpret our existence. In other words, selectivity is broadly a function of culture.

Since every man is a culture bearer, no one is immune to selectivity. Hence no one can categorically claim that his experience (as determined by selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention) is more accurate than another's in the absolute sense.

Such selectivity often leads to the lack of mutual understanding between persons or groups of persons. Mutual understanding is the primary purpose of communication (Kincaid, 1979).

In the case of Mt. Apo, using "differing perceptions" as the referent of "selectivity" and "conflict" as the referent of "the lack of mutual understanding," we are able to forward the following propositions:

1. Differing perceptions on Mt. Apo as common property led to conflict among different sectors regarding its use as the site for a geothermal facility.
2. Differing perceptions were caused by conflicting worldviews and values.
3. Conflict may be resolved through dialogue (as the referent of communication).

DISCUSSION

Flor (1993) gives the following description of the environmental conflict in Mt. Apo:

The Philippine National Oil Company has identified Mt. Apo as an ideal site for a geothermal facility that would supply the power deficit of Mindanao and generate a surplus that could be diverted to the Visayas. However, the specific site

is within a national park, a protected area whose biodiversity of species may be affected. Furthermore, Mt. Apo is held sacred by most cultural minorities and indigenous peoples of Mindanao. Building a geothermal facility near its peak, the home of Apo Sandawa, is tantamount to desecrating the "Holy of Holies" in Judeo-Christian dogma. Most NGOs use this as the primary argument against the geothermal plant, which, with adequate safeguards, is probably one of the environmentally soundest power generating technologies available.

To complicate the matter, the economic center which will be mostly affected by the facility because of its proximity is Kidapawan. This town is largely populated by Christian migrants from Ilocos and Iloilo whose worldview approximates the boom town mentality of the U.S. Old West. The promise of economic well-being has enabled them to coopt the tribal council in the area.

The Catholic Church has joined the fray, putting the whole weight of its influence behind the tribal oppositors and NGOs. The Bishop of the Diocese of Kidapawan himself has rallied the faithful of Cotabato and Davao to oppose the facility.

PNOC, on its part, has endeavored to open channels of communication with the oppositors only to be accused of insincerity, manipulation of information or, worse, harassment.

Five differing perceptions on Mt. Apo are represented in the situation described above. These are:

The Environmentalist Point of View. This perception is shared by some NGOs, the Archdiocese of Kidapawan and some Regional DENR officials. Essentially, it sees the mountain primarily as a national park and wildlife sanctuary. Biodiversity will be severely threatened by the wastes of the geothermal plant. The facility would disturb the ecology within that area.

The Lumad Point of View. This perception is shared by the alumahad or natives, and supported by some NGOs and the Archdiocese of Kidapawan. The peak or crater of Mt. Apo is to some the "Holy of Holies." To others, Mt. Apo is the "mother" of all the mountains and hills surrounding it (Gloria, 1990). This is where Apo Sandawa or the panday in Bagobo folklore resides. Carving the mountainside and installing the geothermal equipment may be likened to destroying the church altar to the Christian. Mt. Apo should not be developed at the expense of threatening the way of life and religious beliefs of the alumahad.

The Resource Utilization Point of View. This is PNOC's perspective. All things considered, the mountain is the cheapest and cleanest source of energy that is available in Mindanao.

The Crisis Governance Point of View. It is presumed that this is the national government's perspective. The power crisis is the most pressing and longest running crisis of the decade. Something drastic should be done about it. Mt. Apo's geothermal resources can greatly help solve this crisis in Mindanao. If negative social and environmental consequences are expected, mitigating measures should be resorted to by the project developer. The facility may only be operated upon the fulfillment of certain conditionalities that would offset the anticipated negative social and environmental consequences.

The Economic Point of View. This perspective is shared by the LGUs and the Chamber of Commerce of Kidapawan. It forwards that Mt. Apo provides an opportunity for Kidapawan to prosper and become a boom town. It will attract investments and raise revenues through taxes. Mt. Apo can be developed as a center for eco-tourism.

Although these perceptions differ from one another, these are all quite valid given their specific contexts. The situation reminds us of the "Six Blind Men and the Elephant" who according to John Godfrey Saxe were all "partly in the right." Indeed, the elephant in this case, Mt. Apo, is all these: a national park, a sacred area, an efficient source of energy, a solution to the power crisis, and a provider of economic opportunity.

Theoretically, mutual understanding or conflict resolution may be achieved through communication or dialogue. Although there have been several attempts, these have not succeeded. Public hearings, for instance, have become venues for confrontation and grandstanding. Scheduled dialogues have been boycotted by one sector or the other. This is an indication of mistrust, or unwillingness to compromise, to hear out one another. In other words, there was a failure in communication.

ANALYSIS

These five points of view are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they overlap to a certain extent. We are unable to present empirical evidence at the moment to demonstrate the proportion of these overlaps. Having become familiar with the situation, our gut feeling tells us that if we superimpose the five points of view over one another, there is some amount/area of commonality - an area where the protagonists more or less agree with one another. This is the area of convergence (Kincaid, 1979).

The wider this area of convergence, the wider the area of agreement, the bigger the possibility of conflict resolution. We may attempt to widen this area of convergence through dialogue and compromise.

The implication here is that there is a possibility that the different stakeholders in the Mt. Apo geothermal power plant problem can actually agree. The goal is to widen the area of convergence through sincere dialogue, where the protagonists are willing to hear out the others.

The Mt. Apo geothermal project is not really doomed to a conflict riddled fate. But serious dialogue among the stakeholders must be undertaken right away, if an acceptable compromise is to be reached.

SUMMARY

This paper attempted to illustrate the influence of perception and communication on situations concerning common property in ecosystems under stress. It focused on the Mt. Apo Geothermal Plant a facility, being built and managed by the Philippine National Oil Company.

The Mt. Apo Geothermal facility has been riddled with conflict for the past two years. Conflict between the PNOC and NGOs; between the local government unit and tribal groups; between DENR and the Church. The following propositions were forwarded:

1. Differing perceptions on Mt. Apo as common property led to conflict among different sectors regarding its use as the site for a geothermal facility.
2. Differing perceptions were caused by conflicting worldviews and values.
3. Conflict may be resolved through dialogue (as the referent of communication).

Five differing perceptions on Mt. Apo were observed: the Environmentalist Point of View, shared by some NGOs, the Archdiocese of Kidapawan and some Regional DENR officials; the Lumad Point of View supported by some NGOs and the Archdiocese of Kidapawan; the Resource Utilization Point of View of PNOC; the Crisis Governance Point of View of the national government; and the Economic Point of View shared by the LGUs and the business community of Kidapawan.

Although these perceptions differ from one another, these are all quite valid given their specific contexts. These are not mutually exclusive and they overlap to a certain extent. This area of commonality - an area where the protagonists more or less agree with one another - is the area of convergence (Kincaid, 1979).

The wider this area of convergence, the wider the area of agreement, the bigger the possibility of conflict resolution. We may attempt to widen this area of convergence through dialogue and compromise.

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