

## **The YGC Earth Care Story – Year 2023 Onward**

The year 2023 saw the continuation of sustained initiatives undertaken to preserve the gains made for the YGC Earth Care program in prior years. Through the effective leadership of the YGC Earth Care Council, led by Council chairperson Liway F. Gener, various activities were done with this end in mind.

### **SUSTAINED INITIATIVES**

The first month of the year saw YGC CSI Project Managers conducting regular inspections to ensure that recently-planted trees are alright and surviving. This was also in preparation for the forthcoming inspection by the Earth Care Coordinators (ECCs) coming from the different YGC sponsor-companies.

The inspection by the ECCs was conducted in 2 batches. Their task was to conduct an inventory count of the planted saplings, check on their condition, measure the distance between them, check if the prescribed clearing was followed, and conduct an inventory of the “muho” and stakes used.

The first ECC inspection was conducted on February 10, 2023 and participated in by 16 ECC members from RCBC and 6 from Mapua, and covered a total of 20 hectares. The second batch conducted its inspection on February 17, 2023, with 13 ECC members from EEI, 9 from the House of Investments, 8 from Malayan Insurance, 8 from RCBC Credit Card, and 7 from Petro Energy. A total of 22 hectares was inspected. In both batches, the inspectors were supported by members of the YGC CSI Team and Blackhound security marshalls.

The planted trees were found to be generally in good condition with a high survival rate.

For the next months, the katutubo-partners did their monthly clearing of their lots and submitted pictures of the cleared lots, for YGC CSI Project Managers to determine compliance with prescribed arrangements which served as the basis for payment of the monthly maintenance fees and conservation fees. Maintenance fees are paid for the upkeep of the lots assigned to them under Phase 4 of the Earth Care Program, while conservation fees are paid to katutubo-partners tasked look after the trees in specific lots under Phases 1-3.

Another inspection was made on May 25, 2023 by a 13-man YGC CSI team for the 42 hectares, supported by 11 marshalls. An increased mortality was reported, although still within standard and acceptable levels, as informed by DENR and foresters. The increase in mortality was mostly on plants in wide open spaces exposed to direct sunlight.

On June 16, 2023, another inspection was conducted by the Earth Care Coordinators from the different YGC sponsor companies. This inspection brought to the fore the concept of volunteerism, inasmuch as all the participating ECC members are volunteers in their own right and doing this initiative on their own volition. This is consistent with the award given by DENR to YGC in celebration of the 2022 National Volunteers Month with the theme “Volunteer Now: Spark Hope, Create Solutions, and Respond to Pandemic Challenges”. YGC, together with other volunteers and partners, was given recognition for extending its services, time, and resources and collaborated with DENR in the conduct of various activities and information sharing for environmental protection and sustainability.



On top of the mountain, the ECCs formed the triangle of unity, representing the different companies involved in the project. The concept “Synergy in Action” came about, as their collective and unified efforts made for a stronger outcome in this undertaking. The participants chanted the battlecry “Kung sama-sama, kayang-kaya kung sama-sama” and this spurred each and every one to work harder and towards the attainment of the objectives of the program. A total of 47 ECC members, 14 YGC CSI officers and 21 Blackhound marshalls took part in this one-day earlier event. This, plus the inspections, were memorialized in video coverages and photos that captured and preserved the highlights and proceedings of the project.



For the next couple of months, katutubo-partners cleared their assigned lots, sent pictures of the cleared lots for validation, and got paid the corresponding maintenance and conservation fees based on the validation results.

### **The El Niño Phenomenon**

By the third quarter of 2023, concerns about the effect of El Nino phenomen on the planted trees arose. From the initial “weak” category in April-May 2023, the category was elevated to “moderate” in October 2023 and “strong” towards the end of the year. By then, the effect of the El Nino started to be felt with the weakening of “habagat”, resulting in less rainfall and high daytime temperature. Dry spells and drought started to be experienced in different parts of the country and worsened in the months that followed.

Although the YGC Forest was also affected by the El Niño, it was not as severely felt as in the other parts of the country. This is mainly because the YGC Forest is located in Mt. Bangkaan, one of the mountain ranges supporting the Laiban sub-watershed, a microbasin of the bigger Kaliwa dam. The existence of this watershed greatly helped in the survival of most of our trees, in view of the importance of the water cycle (evaporation, condensation, and precipitation) that partly countered the effects of El Nino. In addition, forests located in watersheds regulate the waterflow and create temporary storage of water through root systems and rough water floor. This water storage, plus the benefits of being in the watershed, continued to provide moisture and helped sustain our plants during the driest periods of El Nino, for as long as it could.

Microclimate in Mt. Bangkaan also helped our planted trees survive.

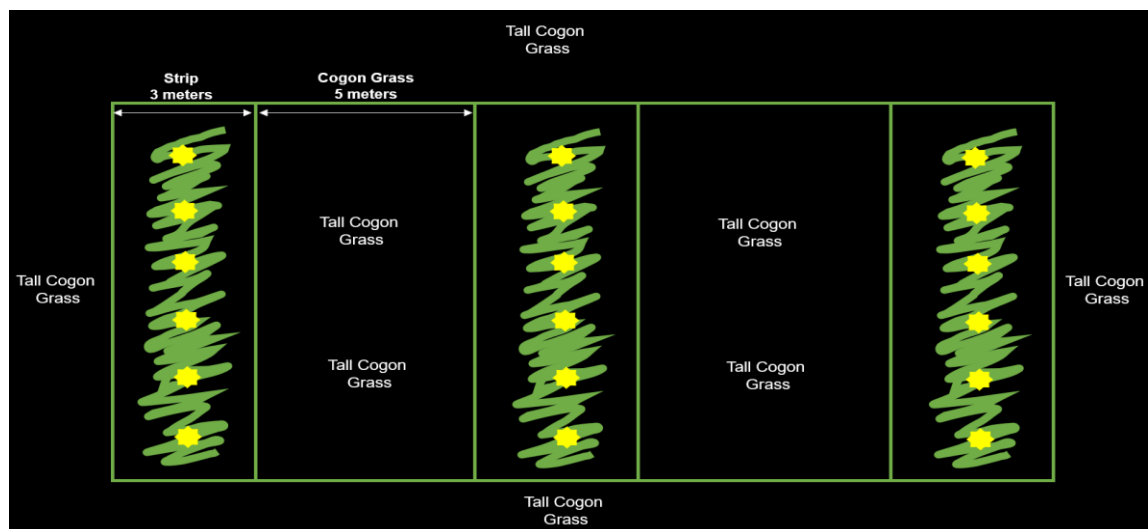
- The existing trees that were not cut during the YGC planting (as required by DENR) and the fast-growing cogon grasses acted as a windbreak that filtered solar radiation and helped maintain cool forest floor temperatures, for as long as it could.
- The water bodies of the different rivers alongside the watershed operated as the cooling sources of the microclimate in Mt. Bangkaan.

- These cooling sources and the cooler forest floor temperature enhance evaporation and precipitation to facilitate cloud formations that bring in rain, especially at night. This was particularly true even during the earlier stages of El Nino.

### YGC Measures Implemented for El Niño

To negate high daytime temperatures and protect its planted trees, YGC adopted the following measures:

- Implemented strip clearing (in lieu of total clearing) which allows cogon grasses to grow high outside of the strips so they can provide shade to the tree saplings.
  - Strips measuring 3 meters wide were placed in between cogon grasses
  - Cogon grasses helped retain moisture by absorbing rainfall water
  - Color-coded bamboo sticks served as markers and guide
- Mulching is likewise being practiced, where the cut cogon grasses are placed on top of the soil basin to increase soil moisture



*Strip clearing concept*



*Actual strip clearing*



Nevertheless, despite the natural support and efforts by YGC, since the impact of the El Niño was so severe that it resulted to the lost of billions worth of crop nationwide, even our YGC Forest was not spared in the end, resulting to death for some of our trees.

To negate this and bring back our trees to their original count, replanting initiatives will be put in place after the El Niño. This, however, will be limited to tree varieties, like mangoes, that have proven to be capable of surviving the conditions in the mountains.

### **Relations with Partners**

A good working relationship has been established between YGC, DENR, and the katutubo-partners. For the latter, this is imperative to bring out the best in them by continuously encouraging them to be cooperative and to look at the benefits of the program in the long term.



Special events were celebrated to further foster camaraderie. A Christmas party was held with them to celebrate the Christmas season, participated in by the YGC, katutubo-partners, and DENR. Christmas presents were handed out to all, making the occasion all the more merrier. Food was likewise ordered from a Katutubo-partner engaged in the food business.

YGC also extended support to katutubo-partners in need, as in the case of 2 katutubo-partners who lost their houses due to a fire incident.

A re-orientation on the program was conducted, for the benefit of the new katutubo-partners who were not around when the first orientation on YGC Earth Care Program was conducted. This also served to remind all katutubo-partners of their duties and responsibilities under the program, and what they can expect in return.

Adjustments were made to the maintenance fees to the katutubo partners in view of the reduction in the count of live trees. This move is intended to –

- Instill responsibility and accountability among them on the care and well-being of planted trees under their watch; and
- Encourage them to cooperate in the replanting and of trees after the El Nino, in order to attain initial income projections after 5 years (from 2022) when YGC turns over the project to DENR. This will also help ensure that there will be enough trees to sustain the initiatives of this program.

### **OTHER PROJECTS:**

#### **Construction of Kubo**

Seven (7) kubo were constructed in strategic spots across the YGC forest. These serve as protection for YGC personnel and Earth Care partners from the rain and hot direct sunlight. These also serve as a place where they can rest and eat.



*A kubo constructed at the highest point of the YGC Forest*



*Locations of the 7 kubo across the 42-hectare Phase 4*

### Construction of Stairways and Railings

Stairways and railings were likewise put up in 6 locations that are hard to ascend and descend and where there are a number of instances of slippages. When it rains, these are slippery due to mud, and when the weather is dry, these still are slippery due to the loose topsoil. Some of these are also located beside narrow trails beside ravine. Thus, aside from making the trek easier and faster, these stairways and railings also provide protection for our teams against untoward accidents.



*Before*



*After*

### Putting up of Signages

An issue arose on lot ownership because some individuals/entities were alleged to be after the ownership of some of the lots under the YGC Forest. To address this, the DENR Protected Area Supervisor visited some of the area and had the message relayed to these individuals/entities that any sale, if any, was not valid even if witness by barangay officials, as these are part of the Protected Area. He instructed the katutubo-owner to advise the third party alleged to be the new owners, to go to the DENR office so they can be clarified on the status of their alleged “purchase” of the land.

Upon the advice of DENR, YGC put up signages on the lots of each katutubo-partner informing the public that the YGC Forest is a joint undertaking project of DENR, Samahan ng Magsasaka ng San Andres, Inc. (SAMASAI), and YGC, and is covered by the Protected Area Community-Based Resource Management Agreement (PACBRMA) issued by DENR to then Samahang Tribu ng San Andres Multi-Purpose Cooperative, now known as SAMASAI. PACBRMA is an agreement entered into by and between DENR and organized tenured migrant communities or interested indigenous people in protected areas which has a term of 25 years and renewable for another 25 years.



#### **OTHER CONCERNS:**

One concern of the program is the land ownership issue pointed out above which has been addressed through the signages put up, in coordination with DENR.

There is also the challenge to bring out the best in the katutubo-partners, to constantly make them embrace the objectives of the program, and to look at the benefits of the program for the long-term and not just be after the current maintenance and conservation fees. Actions were taken to make them to be more responsible and accountable for their actions, and this includes adjusting the maintenance fees based on the count of live trees. To compensate for the adjusted rates, replanting will be done once conditions are viable.

Another concern is the kaingin practiced by some parties in the area. This practice reached the fringes of the lot of one of our katutubo-partners where around 18 plants died. This has been reported to DENR for appropriate action.

#### **ROLE OF PROJECT MANAGERS**

The Project Managers (PMs) of YGC CSI play a critical role in the success of this project, together with YGC CSI leadership and support staff.

Generally, the PMs are responsible for planting and growing trees on the hectares of land assigned to the katutubo they supervise. In particular, they –

- coordinate with assigned katutubo-partners on the maintenance of the planted trees;
- recommend and oversee monthly payment of fees to assigned katutubo-partners;
- regularly inspect of assigned lots; and
- coordinate with Earth Care Coordinators.

They are officers of YGC CSI, with 20% of their FTE allocated for this project. They report to top management on the results of their endeavour.





*The YGC CSI Project Managers in action*

## THE EARTH CARE OUTLOOK

The El Niño phenomenon was the biggest challenge encountered to date by the Earth Care Program. This has caused a number of our planted trees to perish.



*Recent photos of plants, taken at the height of El Niño. Some are wilting, some have died, but a great significant number managed to survive.*



There are still several challenges that lie ahead before we can truly say that the YGC Earth Care Program is a success. But these are not insurmountable. While there may be challenges, YGC continuously looks for opportunities, options, and steps along the way that can be utilized to ensure the success of the program. It is just a matter of preparing for adversities and making the right moves. And with the stakeholders and our partners doing their roles, cooperating, and moving as one, there is no reason why we cannot reach the objectives of the program and continue being an active force in the protection of nature and in the preservation of our environment.

