

Khyn P. Yap, The Philippines. A project descriptive essay as it relates to Principle 5 on preventing introduction of harmful organisms

Using the Earth Charter in Local Campaigns against Genetically Modified Organisms



Khyn Yap is President of Eco Trekkers Society, Inc. (ETSI) a non-profit youth NGO. While coordinating for ETSI, he was employed as community organizer

working on micro-finance to help the poor. He is now studying nursing at Riverside College in the Province of Negros Occidental. Mr. Yap involved with the Earth Charter Youth Initiative after visiting the website of ECI. From then he has used the Earth Charter as a guiding principles in activities and introducing it to other youth organizations in The Philippines. Later in life, he looks forward to mentoring the youths who will follow in his path.

The Philippine government has shown a positive attitude towards bioengineering and the introduction of genetically modified organisms by granting permits to corporations despite various protests from local people and concerned citizens who are affected by the field trials. The first officially-granted permit to commercially propagate Yeildgard, a genetically engineered corn variety popularly known as “Bt Corn,” was issued in December 2002, whereas field trials had already started back in 1999. The planting of Bt Corn has been approved on my island of Negros Occidental, one of the five provinces that compose Western Visayas. Negros Occidental can be found near the center of the Philippine archipelago of 7,107 islands.

When news reached us about hunger strikes and other forms of protest by different activist groups in Manila calling for a moratorium on the commercialization of Bt Corn in 2003, my youth organization, Eco Trekkers, joined the local campaign against genetically modified organisms that was started by Greenpeace activists. Eco Trekkers was founded in 1999, by a group of amateur outdoor enthusiasts, as a campus club at the Technological University of the Philippines – Visayas. It was created solely as an adventure club with members’ interests focusing on mountaineering and outdoor activities. Most of our activities at that time were mountain climbing and nature tours. Negros Island has only three forest areas left after logging firms have almost completely ravaged the natural forests leaving us with only three percent forest cover left. Passing by forest areas affected by timber poaching and illegal forest activities triggered us to widen our club’s objectives to focus on environmental awareness and education. In 2002, we decided to formally register our club as a non-governmental youth organization. From the name Eco Trekkers Club, it was changed to Eco Trekkers Society, Inc. or ETSI.

The goal of ETSI is to advance the role of the youth and actively involve them in the protection and promotion of sustainable development. The percentage of youth involvement on sustainable development and other youth related issues is very low. Many of

the Filipino youth don’t even know that their problem of unemployment is inter-related with the environmental issues of the country. Most of them have not even participated in any volunteer work nor are they involved in any youth organization. Against this background, our main focus is on organizing the youth from the grassroots where poverty and lack of education hinders them from actively participating in finding solutions to issues that affect them.

Parallel with our vision of creating a sustainable world, we decided to endorse the Earth Charter as our guiding principles and ethical framework. The Earth Charter calls on young people to act locally and collectively towards the common goal of fostering sustainable development. The Earth Charter Youth Initiative gave us the opportunity to link up with other groups and individuals around the world and exchange successful projects and activities that can be replicated by others. That is why we joined the program of Earth Charter Youth Groups in July 2003. By using the ECIY-label we seek to demonstrate our connectedness to other youth around the world who promote the vision of the Earth Charter in their local communities. In addition, it strengthens our efforts of disseminating the Earth Charter in our community and our networks. Among the institutions we will encourage to give their endorsement is the national Youth for Sustainable Development Assembly, which consists of nine Filipino youth-serving organizations. The Youth for Sustainable Development

Principle 5. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth’s ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.

Assembly network eventually included a workshop on the Earth Charter in the Kamp Kalikasan (Nature Camp) 2004 as one of its program highlights.

Our campaign against the introduction of genetically modified organisms is based on Earth Charter Principle 5.d.: "Control and eradicate non-native or genetically modified organisms harmful to native species and the environment, and prevent introduction of such harmful organisms."

Most people in our community are unaware of the dangers that go along with the introduction of genetically modified organisms such as the contamination of other non-genetically modified corn plants as a result of cross-pollination. Scientists have warned that genetically modified organisms pose serious risks to the environment as the crops are depending on herbicides and beneficial insects are killed by the usage of these herbicides. We have seen, from one of the field visits organized by PEACE.Net on Bt corn plantations in Cauayan, that snails have mutated and changed their shapes. We are not yet concluding that it is the effect of the Bt toxins present in the soil, yet as the Earth Charter wisely suggests, a precautionary approach should be applied when scientific knowledge is inconclusive.

While other activist groups lobby for the government's rejection of genetically modified organisms, Eco Trekkers Society, Inc. is focusing on local awareness-raising and education. Our goal is to let the people know that genetically modified organisms are a threat to our health and environment. They must know their rights and power as consumers. Therefore, we have organized small, group discussions in our school, distributed flyers and brochures in our community, and put up exhibits which warn about the risks of introducing the engineered crops and educate the visitors about their rights as consumers to be informed about whether the food they eat is genetically



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modified or not. In our forums, which are held once a month during the semester and are attended by around eighteen to twenty-five students respectively, we provide information on the issue of genetically modified organisms, such as lists of these types of food sold in markets, and then we engage the participants in discussions. Earth Charter Principle 5.d. has been discussed thoroughly, and short debates and controversies about its consequences have made discussions more lively and interesting.

Another issue that we have been discussing intensely is the negative impacts of the introduction of genetically modified organisms on our national economy. Farmers who will plant Bt crops will not be allowed to save, exchange, or improve the seeds that they are using, which makes them rely on the multinational corporations who own patents on these modified crops. So, in the years to come farmers will be depending on the herbicides and seeds of these corporations, and, thus, will be even less autonomous and self-reliant.

The only alternative we see and strongly propagate in our campaign is the intro-

duction of sustainable agriculture and the usage of technologies that are appropriate to our environment. We also strongly endorse the mandatory labeling of the genetically modified food sold in the markets. It is so ironic that while most first world countries banned genetically modified crops to enter their food supplies, we in the third world countries seem to accept them with open arms. Against this background, the Earth Charter provides a prudent and holistic strategy of addressing these interrelated challenges of global economic injustice, threats to the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, and poverty.

Our involvement in the Earth Charter Youth Initiative made us realize that we are not alone in striving to make our world a better place, but that there are individuals like us who persistently pursue peace and sustainable development. We became aware that small local actions, like cleaning up garbage in our cities' shoreline or our campaigns against harmful genetically modified organisms, make a big impact nationally and internationally. And if we all acted together, who says that we cannot build a sustainable and peaceful world? ●