



Fighting Alongside the Most Vulnerable Among Us

Mitzi Jonelle Tan

Philippines

Mitzi Jonelle Tan will never forget the first typhoon she experienced, growing up in Manila. “I have vivid memories of the thunderous sounds and the panic in the streets. I remember being scared of the huge trees being uprooted that could fall on our house at any time -- and the strong winds outside that were howling. It can be very scary for a child. For me, it was just a part of growing up in the Philippines.”

The Philippines is a nation of 7,000 islands - and the second most vulnerable country in the world when it comes to the ravages of the climate crisis. This is due to a combination of factors, including its political history and lack of leadership as well as its geographic location and its proximity to naturally occurring tropical weather events, which have increased in both frequency and strength as a result of climate change. This uptick in major climate events has caused the region to experience a rate of sea-level rise nearly three times the global average; this in turn threatens coastal habitats and the indigenous people who are occupying the at-risk land.

Human activity has hastened this loss of habitat and the related pollution. Roughly 30,000 hectares of land have been preapproved for reclamation projects that are destroying the surrounding ecosystems. What's worse is that this is happening in the coastal mangroves that act as barriers to erosion to the country's islands. More are being preapproved every day. The country also burns coal, among the dirtiest sources of energy, as 43 percent of its national energy mix. All this adds up to being the most typhoon-prone region on the planet, which is why the Philippines has among the highest rates of displaced persons in the world.

During typhoon season, electricity in the city of Manila routinely gets knocked out. Like most everyone in the aftermath of a typhoon, it became a common occurrence for Mitzi and her family to have candlelit dinners. These quiet evenings gave her time to reflect on and appreciate the power of nature, which she came to revere from quite an early age. She always felt very affected by these forces, and was always trying to figure out a way to live a life that was in harmony with them.

In 2017, Mitzi went on a goodwill trip that would prompt her environmental journey to move precisely in that direction. She went with her college's student council on an integration project with the Lumad indigenous people from the southern Mindanao region of the Philippines. One of the leaders told her about his people being displaced, harassed, and even killed, just for protecting their lands and the environment from extractive mining companies. Mitzi remembers that he then shrugged, and said, "This is why we have no choice but to fight back." “The simplicity of how he said something so powerful, in passing, about how we have to keep fighting no matter what. It just made me feel that we as students had no choice but to join their fight and become activists. It made me put things into perspective for the first time. I realized that individual lifestyle change is not enough when our lives are at stake. We have to join the struggle of our environmental defenders - our farmers, fisherfolk, and indigenous peoples. The struggle for justice.”

Since then, Mitzi has been passionate about demanding climate justice for the Global South MAPA (the Most Affected People and Areas), particularly in the context of places like the Philippines, which is disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis, and is always one of the top three most dangerous countries in the world for environmental defenders like the Lumad. This led her to partner with the international youth climate movement Fridays For Future founded by Greta Thunberg, and to form the regional Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines (YACAP).

With the formation of YACAP, Mitzi has taken a prominent leadership position fighting with MAPA in her region and beyond. “With this planetary emergency, common sense would dictate that climate should be at the top of the agenda, and that those who are already protecting the environment should be listened to. Instead, we have no concrete climate plans from our leaders, and our environmental activists and defenders are being harassed, displaced, even killed. This is why YACAP has laid out five simple Points of Unity, which spells out what actions we demand from our leaders.”

YACAP’s Five Points of Unity are centered around achieving climate justice; highlighting the urgency of climate action; defending environmental defenders who risk their lives to keep the natural habitat safe; driving youth-led collective action; and affecting systemic change. Mitzi and YACAP are also intent on getting their government officials to declare a climate emergency, which should include a moratorium on building any new coal-fired plants, as well as building projects in vulnerable habitats and regions. With such victories, local jurisdictions would be forced to consider ways to implement green energy sources and to address habitat destruction, both of which would benefit the environmental defenders who are most affected by these policies.

On September 25, 2020, YACAP made headlines when they held a Global Day of Climate Action. This campaign aimed to amplify the voices of MAPA, who are often thought of as voiceless. “MAPA are often unheard – but we are not voiceless,” Mitzi says. “We are battling the climate crisis today, and so we are fighting, not just for our future, but also our present. We will not let the most impacted among us be prisoners of injustice.”

Their digital campaign (#FightClimateInjustice) consisted of “Twitter storms” during which youth activists posted pictures of themselves making the MAPA symbol of solidarity, with their hands chained. Forming fists with both hands, and holding them together, with thumbs up, is the sign for “solidarity” in sign language. It also has a dual symbolic importance, since this is the gesture one makes when being handcuffed. This symbol is meant to show that the environmental community will not be taken prisoner by the world at large.

This Global Day of Climate Action garnered so much support that it continued on in digital form for many days after the event took place in order to accommodate youth around the world who wanted to continue to show support and solidarity for MAPA.

On September 20, 2019, during YACAP’s Global Climate Strike with Fridays For Future, Mitzi and YACAP met with Secretary Emmanuel M. De Guzman of the Climate Change Commission, who led the Philippines’ climate diplomacy on the Paris Agreement at COP21. Recognized as a global leader, he hosted the first Climate Reality Leadership Corps Training Program in 2016. He was pleased to receive Mitzi and YACAP’s Five Points of Unity and encouraged them to stay strong and keep fighting for the people.

Since she began her work with YACAP, aspiring youth leaders from around the world frequently contact Mitzi, and ask her for advice – and she’s glad they do. “Getting involved can be intimidating, so don’t be afraid to ask questions,” she says. “Sometimes, it feels like we are expected to know the ins and outs of every issue. But no one person knows everything. My best advice is to find a mentor, ask questions, read everything you can, and be willing to learn.” Mitzi is inspired by trailblazing youth leaders across the world like Greta Thunberg from Sweden, Disha Ravi from India, Nicki Becker from Argentina, and Laura Muñoz from Colombia, with whom she fights side by side as a youth climate activist. But she wants the spotlight to be on environmental defenders first and foremost. “It’s the indigenous forest defenders, the farmers and land defenders, the fisherfolk and sea defenders who really keep me going on this journey. What I do is easy.”

Going forward, Mitzi plans to keep talking about the climate. “In the near term, there is still so much we have to do in order to avoid the irreversible effects of climate change. Which is why I plan to be vocal. But don’t forget – the goal of climate activists should be to *not* be climate activists anymore.” While she knows that’s the eventual goal, she believes she has her work cut out for the next decade or so. Looking ahead, Mitzi plans to transition to working with a grassroots nongovernmental organization (an NGO), both to amplify her reach, and to find a network that will support her dream of mentoring youth environmental leaders. “I feel the need to fulfill my purpose of fighting for what is right. The way others guided and empowered me on my journey – I just want to be able to do the same thing for other youth. I want to help those who want to get involved be able to see their role in the movement.”

One might wonder, how does such an active youth leader like Mitzi not get burned out? Well, she’s figured that out

too. “This work in service of climate justice doesn’t come from a place of anger for me. It comes from a place of love. It comes from my love for the MAPA in the Philippines – for the most vulnerable among us.” Surely, the power of love is the most sustainable form of power—and it will drive a more united and effective front of youth leaders into environmental activism.

'Once upon a time, I conquered.' said the climate catastrophe.

'Once upon a time, we changed the story.' the climate activists replied.

Vanessa Nakate

Call to Action: Get involved with Mitzi’s chapter of the Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines at <https://yacap.org>. If you’re not from the Philippines, connect with the global youth climate movement at fridaysforfuture.org

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com