



### *Traveling with a Purpose*

Jessa Garibay-Yayen

Palawan, Philippines

As a teenager, every third Saturday of June, at the start of the rainy season, Jessa and her school mates would wake up at 4 a.m. for the Pista y Cagueban (Feast of the Forest). "It's a massive community event – with students, government officials, civic groups, individuals, families from our city," she explains. "We are all hauled in gigantic garbage trucks – 100 people per trip –and taken up to the mountains to the watershed areas to plant trees." It was exciting for her, that her whole community would wake up so early on a weekend. "It felt like such a special moment, to get my hands dirty."

Palawan's capitol city of Puerto Princesa is called "City in the Forest" for the lush green surrounding it. Only 3 percent of the pristine forests in the Philippines are left, and most of that 3 percent is in Jessa's hometown. It's known as the "last ecological frontier."

Jessa and the families in Palawan feel super rich living in such a paradise. People come from around the world to see Palawan's natural wonders. With its wonderful coral reefs, ecosystems, and biodiversity of special plants, animals, and habitats, it's one of 17 mega-diverse environments in the world. It's extremely beautiful and extremely pristine – and it is also a very challenged and threatened ecosystem, because over the years, it's become a hotspot for unsustainable tourism. "There's nothing like seeing your hometown being degraded at such a fast rate to inspire you to take really bold actions towards conserving this wonderful place we live in," says Jessa, adding "And where you want to raise your own children."

At an early age, Jessa dedicated her life to caring for her island's precious land. At 14, she was chosen as a youth speaker for local schools, speaking about what youth can do to help safeguard clean air for everyone. Since then, she's had lots of empowering experiences.

Jessa she has lots of visual metaphors to share her story - for one she carries a childhood photo of an avocado. "In the Philippines, we eat avocados as something that's sweet, like as a dessert," she explains adding, " We put milk and sugar on it. In the Western world I was surprised to learn that people eat avocados differently - on toast, in a sandwich or a salad. Everyone has different ideas." Jessa's 'avocado moment' inspired her to travel, and explore new ways of doing things.

When she was 18, she first went to Manado, Indonesia, as a foreign student on an internship program, and stayed with a local family. "I was very curious about the world, especially about the environmental field. I was curious about how others discover solutions to their problems, and about how people are creatively solving their environmental problems in other communities."

Thus began Jessa's "traveling with a purpose."

Then, when she was 21, she traveled to the United States, to Seattle, to work with EarthCorps, where she met other emerging youth environmental leaders from different countries. There, building and restoring trails and salmon habitats, she learned about native plants, invasive species - and herself.

In 2016, when she was 26, Jessa was invited to be part of the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) in Honolulu, to speak alongside then-US Department of Interior Secretary Sally Jewell. There she encouraged other

youth to pursue environmental-related careers. "It was such a big audience!" she says. "I met a lot of like-minded individuals my age. It keeps you inspired and motivated in the work you're doing. It really was such an amazing experience to get my voice to be on that kind of platform."

Invigorated by her travels, Jessa returned home to create the Centre for Sustainability PH in the Philippines (CSPH), a women-led youth environmental conservation NGO. It's a team of six young folks. "We all have had the same childhood, we grew up swimming in the sea with turtles and exploring the wild forests as our backyard," she says.

CS has found its niche as a conservation lobbying organization. The tourist boom in Palawan has led foreigners to buy land and build lodging and restaurants. Without zoning laws and permits to help govern them, a lot of the land is near critical areas. Much of the land is undocumented, so having legal documents to claim people's land rights is essential. "Unless we lobby for some control over local peoples' lands, the situation is going to continue to degrade at a fast pace...this is the only way to really ensure that we will be able to enjoy the land in perpetuity."

"At CH, we believe the best way to ensure the sustainability of our island is by legally protecting our natural resources - fish stocks, forests, and our watersheds -- creating protected areas, led by indigenous and local communities," Jessa says. "Our work comes FROM communities, FOR communities TO communities for many years to come."

"As a young person, it's really easy to be disregarded by a lot of the old politicians and leaders who think youth are inadequate, just not capable of doing something." To strengthen their position, Jessa says, "We put everything on paper. When we write to politicians, we make sure everything is in black and white, everything is well reported and well published. We have good records, so people can see that we're actually doing the work."

Jessa works with local people to help them understand how their lands are being ravaged by illegal logging, mining, monocropping, poaching and wildlife trade. "Conservation work is stronger when it's backed up by strong science," she adds. "Thanks to our research, two amphibians that were lost track of for about four or five decades were rediscovered." Strong scientific rediscoveries like this have enabled Jessa to lobby more effectively to various stakeholders and government agencies.

Now at age 29, the heart of Jessa's work is focusing on conserving the forests, building on her success with the Cleopatra's Needle Critical Habitat Project. "Five years ago when I started this project, I said to myself that protecting Cleopatra's Needle conserve 41,350 hectares of land, is enough of a legacy for me to my hometown." She knew this is her island's best protection against climate change. "To be honest, it's really addicting," Jessa admits. "You just want to go out and declare more areas for conservation." Their new goal is 300,000 hectares, more than 3/4 of a million acres.

"It's very easy for people with initiatives and vision to just barge into a community and say, "Hey, this is what we think you should do. One thing we've learned is to be really good at drinking coffee," Jessa says, with a smile. "We spend a lot of time sitting down with community members, especially with indigenous people in their communities, and just drinking coffee with them. We hang out with them at their homes, and really try to listen to them. and build connections."

Jessa credits CS's success partly with being a small organization. "We've spent a lot of time really getting to know the people, showing them how sincere we are in the work we're doing. We've invested so much in doing community organizing work, really being out there. Our motto is that our work should come 'from communities, for communities, and to communities.' Our flagship project, saving the Almaciga tree, was conceived because of the time we had spent in the communities. It's very important to the indigenous communities. And it's the first ever seed-based propagation of the Almaciga tree species."

As a nation of 7,000 islands, the Philippines is one of the most vulnerable to climate change. "We're seeing a lot of devastation happening in our communities due to climate change," Jessa says. Entire islands have been wiped out by typhoons, earthquakes and tsunamis. Until now, Palawan has remained safe, but the rain patterns are unpredictable, and this affects farmers and food supplies. Jessa works with the vanishing Batak tribe. With just 200 people left, they live near river systems. As the rains become stronger year by year, the rivers flow higher, houses are devastated, forests are destroyed. Since the Batak are hunter gatherers who still live by those traditions, if the forests are destroyed, there's no food for them. "The Batak people I work with, they're actually hungry; they don't have enough food to gather."

One of Jessa's biggest lessons is to be reflective. "When you do a lot of work in the environment, it's not easy," she admits. "A lot of people don't like to hear about what went wrong," she explains. "There's actually very little published about the failures in conservation work. And while it's great to see success stories, it's also important to reflect on what the failures are. To reflect on the past so we can actually take that on into something more, something bigger, something smarter. So we strive to account for all the things that went wrong for us."

In 2019 Jessa was invited to Geneva, Switzerland by the Conservation of Internationally Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). As part of the technical advisory group for the Philippine delegation, voting on the Endemic Species Trade, Jessa lobbied for the Asian small clawed otters, who are found only in Palawan, Philippines. "We won, and got it listed in the CITES Appendix I," she says. "It was a big success for me as a young person, in such a very big and really old audience," she says. "It was such an empowering experience, to be able to influence other countries to do something about conserving animals that are present in your own hometown."

Each year Jessa joins in the Feast of the Forests--to reconnect with her community, and with nature, to get her hands dirty, and plant trees. "I look up to a lot of the women leaders in my community; they are my heroines," she says.

Jessa is also aligned with Greta Thunberg's 30 by 30 Campaign, to take immediate actions by 2030. "That's the path we're on -- we want to conserve as much forest as possible in the next 10 years. We're lobbying our partners, our stakeholders, our donors, telling them that we have to conserve 30 percent of the Earth's surface - to ensure good sources of clean water, fresh air for our habitats and for biodiversity. We must act now, and act fast!"

"It is about time that the younger generation take the spotlight in conservation," she adds. "In my country alone 30 percent of voters today are young people. Together, we can stand strong and demand the change we need. It's time for the older generations to listen to us," She sighs, and adds, "So now that youth are standing up, and their voice is getting louder, it's time for them to give us the opportunity."

"If we as youth all act together, support each other, and help each other rise up, the impact we can have is unimaginable."

*Ang Kabataan Pag-Asa Ng Bayan*

*The youth are the hope of the future.*

Jose Rizal

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