

Tales of biodiversity sprout at QC wildlife park

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WILDLIFE PARK Miss Earth Eco Tourism Denisse Toribio reads a story about marine life to children during an Inquirer Read-Along session at the Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Center in Quezon City. ARNOLD ALMACEN

MANILA, Philippines – On a lagoon amid clear skies and the chirping of birds, peals of laughter were heard as some 90 children listened to stories about the environment at an Inquirer Read-Along session last weekend.

Coinciding with Ocean Month, the two-day session at the Ninoy Aquino Parks and Wildlife Center's Fishing Village in Quezon City featured stories on biodiversity, the ocean, mangroves and conservation of nature. It included a workshop on the basics of storytelling.

The session featured Miss Philippines Eco-Tourism 2011 Denisse Toribio, Alitaptap storytellers Rich Rodriguez and Mario Noval Jr. and the best graduates from the storytelling workshop, Myra Liza Lontok and Yolanda Magpantay.

For 12-year-old Ameen Jabeer Bin Siradj Abantas, one of the 40 children brought by the Al-Salaam Peace Community in Culiati, the session "was a different experience." "I have attended Inquirer Read-Along sessions before and (Saturday's) is one of my favorites. The storytellers were so lively and funny. I also loved the venue. It made me appreciate nature more," he said.

For Desiree de Guzman, a social worker at Laura Vicuña Foundation, the session was "special."

"Besides the talented storytellers, I found the venue very beautiful. I think it is appropriate that today's stories are about nature," she said.

"It was the first time I've seen this kind of environment in the city. There were so many trees. It was very relaxing. I found myself enjoying the stories more," said Elenel Sipe, one of the 30 children brought by the foundation.

Lim's dream

The 22.7-hectare park is one of the largest remaining protected green areas in Metro Manila.

Children reading about biodiversity at the park has been a dream of Dr. Theresa Mundita Lim, director of the Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau (PAWB).

Opening the Read-Along 101 workshop, Lim said she saw the read-along as a vehicle to a bigger dream, that of building a critical mass involved in preserving biodiversity. She said her office had had "a hard time getting across (their) message to protect and serve our biodiversity."

While it may be too late for most adults to better appreciate the richness of the country's diversity, she saw hope in the children.

"It is best to start long-term awareness and appreciation with the children. A few years from now, they would be in their teens and we would have more people helping us," Lim said.

Joys of reading

Beauty queen Toribio read "Sa Ilalim ng Dagat (Under the Sea)" by Augie Rivera, a story about underwater animals.

A first time read-along storyteller, Toribio said she "could not wait to come back."

"The kids seemed very receptive," she said. "I'm very happy that I am able not just to share with the children the joys of reading but also the importance of the environment. I think it is great to start children early. They may even influence other people."

Toribio ended her storytelling with child-friendly tips on taking care of the environment, like turning off and unplugging appliances when not using them.

Picking up techniques

Noval read "Sa Bakawan (In the Mangrove Forest)," a story about the threats mangroves face from pollution and mishandled solid waste. The story is authored by Miss Earth Foundation executive director Cathy Untalan, former Miss Philippines Eco-Tourism Reena Sarmiento and children's writer Mae Astrid Tobias.

Rodriguez read "Si Emang Engkantada at ang Tatlong Haragan (Emang The Enchantress and the Three Naughty Kids)," a story by Rene Villanueva about three naughty children who throw trash anywhere, uproot plants and trees, and waste water and electricity.

Lontok and Magpantay, both teachers at Woodridge Akademeia Inc. in Quezon City, did a tandem reading of "Hapon at Biya," by Carla Pacis, a story of friendship and teamwork between a shrimp and a fish.

"I learned a lot from the workshop, like different ways of telling a story to make it more engaging for the kids," said Lontok, a preschool teacher. "I picked up a lot of techniques which I used in our storytelling and which I am sure I will be able to use in the classroom, too."

More confidence

Magpantay said the workshop helped her "get over (her) stage fright."

"I was really nervous at first. I am used to a classroom setup but the workshop really helped me gain more confidence," she added.

Some 40 participants, mostly from the PAWB, attended the workshop on organizing and interactive book-based storytelling conducted by Rodriguez and Noval of Alitaptap Storytellers Club.

The other workshop participants were teachers, NGO workers and volunteers from Service for Peace, Laura Vicuña Foundation, Woodridge Akademeia Inc. and Mahalo Elementary School in Anahawan, Southern Leyte, who were on a Lakbay-Aral trip to Manila and the Inquirer.

They were taught concepts on reading motivation and how to make stories come alive using reading approaches like RFTS (read first then say), facial and vocal expressions, body language, gestures, chorus-response, casting and other techniques.

Messages to children

According to Lim, who invited the Inquirer Read-Along to organize the workshop, one of its aims is to create a core group that will implement a sustainable replication of the Inquirer's Read-Along project at the Ninoy Aquino park.

Nelson Castillo, the park superintendent, said the read-along taught him new techniques to bring across their messages to children visiting the place.

The participants received certificates from Inquirer national editor Jun Bandayrel.

For Mari Almeda, planning officer of the Philippine Raptors Conservation Program of the PAWB, the session participants were out of their "comfort zones."

"We learned a lot and we will utilize this learning in the conduct of our information and education campaigns," Almeda said. "Through the use of storytelling approaches, we can easily relay to our audience concepts that are technical in nature and deliver it in a manner that can be easily understood."

Message of peace

Venus Laceste, administrative assistant of the Service for Peace, said: "I was able to gain more self-confidence, especially in storytelling. It's very useful for me and my organization ... With this, we can further spread the message of peace through stories. We can touch the lives of children who have never experienced being read stories."

The Inquirer Read-Along team has held storytelling workshops at the newspaper's offices in Makati City and elsewhere, such as in Bacolod, Marinduque, Iligan and Cagayan de Oro.

Workshop facilitator Rodriguez said watching the participants made him feel that the goal of promoting love of reading was being met.

"When telling a story, I feel that the kids get much more because I think of it as giving two gifts. They become inspired in reading and they get to appreciate the values of the story (that) later they will use in life," he said.

Rodriguez has been a regular read-along partner since its inception five years ago.

The two-day activity was held in cooperation with Lim and Castillo of the PAWB, Rolly Abad, Untalan of the Miss Earth Foundation and Dondon Marquez of the Service for Peace.

A repeat of last year's simultaneous read-along sessions with the Philippine Navy's teleconferencing technology group will be held on May 19 at Navy headquarters in Manila and in eight naval bases across the country.