

COAST LIFE

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Siuslaw Valley Senior News:
The Siuslaw News
P.O. Box 10
Florence, OR 97439
FAX: (541) 997-7979
pressreleases@thesiuslawnews.com

For love of the land



COURTESY PHOTOS

John and Maria Yager, of Florence, enlisted the aid of local craftsmen in building this traditional longhouse on Mindanao Island, Philippines. The Yagers built it near the UNESCO World Heritage Site on Mt. Hamiguitan, which they were instrumental in preserving.

One Florence couple's commitment to save a rainforest half a world away

By JACK DAVIS
Siuslaw News

In 1992, John and Maria Yager conceived of a dream — to save one of the most unique rainforests in the world, the cloud forest perched atop Mt. Hamiguitan on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines, Maria's homeland.

Last summer that dream was realized when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared the rainforest a World Heritage Site, essentially guaranteeing its preservation and preventing any further human encroachment.

The journey was daunting, time consuming and filled with setbacks.

When the Yagers first thought of the idea, a heavy metal strip mine was operating on the far side of the mountain, coating the trails into the rainforest in chromate, which was being extracted from the mine.

Local farmers were logging off the other side of the mountain using slash-and-burn methods to clear the land.

"The native people have traditionally done things a certain way," John said. "When there is so little land, you have to convince them to do



A team of master craftsmen built the two-story longhouse from native woods and materials. The Yagers kept the design "as traditional as possible."

something different. It isn't that easy when they are so very poor. Our intention was to create an alternative."

The first step was organizing 50 local Philippine families into a co-operative to draw people away from cutting down the mountain forests and to stopping slash and burn agricultural practices. The Yagers helped to

The area on Mindanao Island, looking over the Pacific Ocean, was declared a national park by the local mayor. With the UNESCO World Heritage designation, the mountain and surrounding rainforest will be protected forever.

plant banana and coconut trees to create sustainable revenue sources.

Another project of the co-op was to build a longhouse for travelers who wanted to visit the rainforest.

"We worked and built this longhouse," John said. "We built it completely out of native materials. With the exception of things like kitchen counters, we tried to make this as native as possible. We saw this as an opportunity for the people to make an income off of tourists.

"Some of these people are master carpenters. We started out with trees that we milled to make the longhouse. Others wove mats for the ceilings. Every-thing was carted up the mountain by hand. There was no road up here when we started, only a trail," he added.

The now completed two-story longhouse sleeps 30 people. All meals served are based on traditional Philippine cuisine — no

Coca Cola, only water and coconut milk.

Mining, logging and other eco-destroying enterprises continued to threaten the rainforest, however.

"This is some of the last uncut rainforest in the Philippines," John explained. "There is no more than 5 or 6 percent left, at most."

"Tina Yu, the mayor of the local municipality where we worked for many years, was able to declare the very top of the mountain a national park," Maria said. "We have worked with her for many years to try and stop the cutting."

But national parks can still be subject to the whims of political graft and corruption. Something more permanent needed to be done.

UNESCO finally decided to consider the rainforest as a World Heritage Site.

"There was a lot of debate on the part of the UNESCO people because of the open mining on the other side of the mountain," John said.

"UNESCO finally declared the rainforest a World Heritage Site last summer."

When UNESCO was evaluating the rainforest, the representatives stayed at the longhouse, the only lodging available on the mountain.

The struggle to maintain the integrity of the mountain's natural resources is an ongoing challenge for the Yagers and the co-op.

"With Maria's connections, we were able to buy up parcels of land. We just bought a parcel not too long ago that a commercial water company wanted to develop to truck water down off the mountain. We had to purchase the land in order to block the water company from developing a plant up there. The location was just one mile from the longhouse," John said.

"Our efforts have been directed at first to protecting the water shed and protecting the people. Just like here, in order to protect the community you have to come up with viable economic options that also protect our resources."

The Yagers have lived in the Florence area since 1995. They grow organic produce, nuts and fruit on their 171-acre farm, south of Florence, that are sold at the local farmers market and through Real Food Co-op.

