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This last summer, I was fortunate to be awarded the Burch Fellowship to the Philippines, a land of beauty, wonderment, and also the birthplace of my ancestors. As to why I was there begins with a story of Baguio City, where I stood taking this picture—an entire mountainside gone, a massive landslide that occurred in 2009, taking the lives of 160 Filipinos.

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Vanessa Fixmer-Oraiz

While there is much debate in the United States about climate change, many island nations are already experiencing some of the devastating effects of stronger typhoons, and shifting resources, such as water availability. I soon realized that this is why I chose to come to the Philippines, because



the government has chosen bamboo production as a part of their climate change mitigation and adaptation strategy. While looking for a way to become involved, I was fortunate to discover BambooPhil, a non-governmental organization committed to bamboo education and advocacy, linking scientists with entrepreneurs and policy makers.

It was here that I began my seven week training course on bamboo, learning about its extraordinary characteristics, such as, its unique root structure that allows it to retain soil; thus reducing the amount of erosion sliding down the mountainside. It has a rapid growth rate, (it can grow 2 feet in one day, you can literally watch it grow!). And it is classified as a woody plant sequestering carbon from the atmosphere at a rate that is competitive with some tree species; therefore aiding in the reduction of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. In addition, bamboo has promising fuel capabilities, particularly in the form of bamboo pellets, which can easily be used as fuel for home-cooking and heating, as well as for industrial purposes. Currently the Philippines have 3 test sites, which would provide enough energy for a small



village, and lead the way for energy independence. And of course it is incredibly strong, some species are even stronger than steel! It is used for a diverse array of purposes, from construction to food, in the form of bamboo shoots, in fact there are over 1500 known uses of bamboo. One of the reasons for the monumental push for bamboo is its ability to create livelihood generation opportunities not only for craft-workers and weavers, but through the use of engineered or laminated 'plyboo' or plywood bamboo. This creates marketable furniture through lamination processes that are similar to that of wood, utilizing already widely known carpentry skills.

While I can say that I learned an incredible amount about bamboo, I was also blessed with making wonderful new friends through my bamboo training and language course. It was here where I was able to learn and rediscover the rich history of my heritage, a gift that truly keeps on giving. I will take with me the memories of the brightly-colored jeepneys- a kind of private-public transit system,

and the maze-like palengkes or wet-markets, where fish and produce alike were sold on one side and anything from shoes to umbrellas on the other. These were some of

my favorite places, where vendors shouted their wares and your nose usually led the way, and young and old intermingled. Along the streets people moved along close together, usually hand on a shoulder or linked arm in arm, young and old, boys with boys or girls with mothers, all leaning in to each other, even the buildings pressing in, letting the grilled and skewered sweet meats and bananas waft up to their open windows. I learned so much on this trip, from ways to incorporate native materials into climate change solutions, to what it means to be an American born, mixed-race Filipina, returning to my homeland.

As a result, this experience has inspired me to pursue a Master's degree in City and Regional Planning, in order to look at the ways in which we are going to face the consequences of a changing global climate. As we continue



to shape our cities and towns to meet these new challenges, it is helpful to look at what resources we already have at our doorstep; right in front of us. Currently, it is the island nations of the world that are immediately at risk, and it has been a privilege to learn from the top forestry scientists in the country, meeting farmers, listening to everyday citizens, and learning about the struggles and the successes of a nation whose shores and borders are similar to our own—vulnerable. It is appropriate that one week after Japan has been hit with the largest Tsunami in recorded history, and nuclear meltdowns are ravaging cities and towns, spewing radiation and threatening the lives of young and old, that we take a serious look at climate change. Indeed, it was in this same country, after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima, that the only living specimen to grow back in the span of two weeks was...bamboo. So let us look toward the future, with a renewed passion for possibility and a strong sense of what is already in our backyard.

