

Terraces rice served in US gourmet market with Peace Corps help

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SAGADA, Mt. Province –Mary Hensley, a former US Peace Corp Volunteer in Lubuagan, Kalinga, is back.

She is behind the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project and the Eight Wonder company that retails Mountain Province rice in the United States.

Since 2005, the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project has partnered with Vicky Garcia, Executive Director of the Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs (RICE), to promote folk farming knowledge.

Their aim: to spur the local economy and preserve the terraces and its environment as well.

Hensley believes the evasive key to the decades quest to save the rice terraces lies in the indigenous cultures of the Cordilleras and the heirloom rice that it grows.

And she is determined to “establish a project that would be successful financially and not dependent on dole outs from the government or international development agencies.”

She is assisted by Adam Angsten, another US Peace Corps Volunteer with a degree in economics based in Banaue, Ifugao.

In recent years, locals slowly abandoned rice terraces farming in favor of tourist-related work. Or they migrated to the lowlands where farming is more lucrative. Losing half of these farmers, the rice terraces were about ready to crumble.

The past two decades saw many “Save the Rice Terraces” projects, none of which succeeded. Tourism-related projects, retraining for new farming skills, the introduction of high value fruits and vegetables, and high yielding rice varieties – all came to naught.

According to the Tebtebba Foundation, the mass production of wood carvings and the establishment of lodgings on properties within the rice fields actually made a major environmental toll. The use of pesticides by vegetable farmers introduced new pests.

Meanwhile, the all-important concerns remained unresolved: the out-migration of farmers, the deterioration of watersheds, the collapse of centuries-old irrigation systems, and the disappearance of indigenous cultures that revolved around the growing of traditional rice.

One thing seemed certain: the rice terraces in the highlands of Abra, Benguet, Kalinga, Ifugao and Mt. Province gradually shrunk to only about 20,000 hectares functional fields.

Now it seems rice could very well be the answer. In 2006, Eight Wonder retailed over 7 tons of rice from Kalinga and Ifugao terraces. This year, the target is 20 tons of selected mountain varieties.

Farmers have suddenly found a reason to continue terraces rice farming.

The way to go, according to Hensley, was to put money on the centuries-old, noble and ingenious farming.

A former social worker, Hensley initiated the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project together with RICE, terraces farmers in Ifugao and Kalinga, Eight Wonder and the local government.

Back in a US graduate school, Hensley did a feasibility study on whether native rices could be sold in the highly competitive US specialty food market.

When the results looked promising, she wrote a five-year business plan projecting the organizational needs and costs for organizing farmers, and developing a marketing strategy to sell the rice at a price that compensated the farmers for their incredibly hard work.

Her master's thesis proposed the shared equity business model – poor farmers would be part-owners of Eight Wonder. She and Vicky Garcia, RICE executive director, then convinced the farmers about the scheme.

Back in 2003, few believed the Tinawon rice from Ifugao and the Unoy rice from Kalinga would sell. Now for the first time, more farmers are returning to the rice terraces because they sense a profit, says Julie Aclam, Kalinga's assistant provincial agriculturist.

With the assistance of RICE, the newly established Rice Terraces Farmers' Cooperative of Ifugao and Kalinga was able to produce and process 7 tons of native Tinawon and Unoy rice for the export market.

This was shipped to Eight Wonder in the US for sale in the gourmet rice market. The rice was purchased at a fair trade price, with an advance payment to help capitalize the cooperative.

In Kalinga, farmers have started forming a federated association of unoy rice growers. They have established seed banks as ready sources of rice seeds. Other farmers are set to follow.

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