

Loren Legarda

On Living, Loving Green

By RHIA DIOMAMPO-GRANA | Photos by JUN DE LEON

A passionate environmentalist, the indefatigable senator is in her elements when giving a pep talk on “traveling green”.

SENATOR Loren Legarda can talk for hours nonstop especially if the subject matter is the environment . . . a topic she knows by heart and an advocacy she’s passionate about. She even believes it is her calling, written on the palms of her hands when she was born.

At the recent travel-themed event of *Woman Today* titled “Biyahé Na!” people of all ages, genders and orientation sat, enthralled, as the indefatigable senator delivered an interesting and informative talk on ecotourism, encouraging members of the audience to discover and explore our country’s very own tourist spots and urging them to take an active role in caring for the environment.

“There is no ecotourism to speak of, if we don’t care about the environment,” she pointed out. “It is not enough that we know the laws, the concept of waste segregation, composting and recycling. We have to really do our share in protecting Mother Earth.”

How long has she been taking up the cudgels for the environment? “It’s my life’s work. My love for nature and the environment started when

I was a very young child. In Malabon, where I grew up, I’d always find myself around nature, catching dragonflies, climbing trees, and enjoying the fruits from the trees in our compound,” she recalls during her interview with *Woman Today*.

Her deeply rooted love for the environment further manifested when she became a broadcast journalist, exposing “environmental destruction—mining, illegal logging, pollution, poor waste management, dynamite fishing, among many others—in my programs. At the same time, I also promoted the beautiful places in the Philippines, starting what is now known as ecotourism.”

And, of course, to this day, we acknowledge the Senator’s magnanimous efforts in promoting environmental preservation through Luntiang Pilipinas (a nationwide urban forestry program), and in reducing our risks of disasters brought about by climate change, a recognition further affirmed by her appointment—by the United Nations—as regional champion for Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation for Asia and the Pacific.

“I am fortunate to have

principally sponsored, authored and co-authored the following laws: the Climate Change Act of 2009; the Environmental Awareness Education Act; the Tourism Act of 2009; Solid Waste Management Act; Clean Air Act; Philippine Tropical Fabric Law; Reducing the Rate of Degradation of Marine Resources, which was an amendment to the Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998.

“As for the bills I have filed in the 15th Congress, I believe the following will promote local tourism and preserve the environment: Integrated Coastal Management Act, the Ecological Policy Act, Low Carbon Economy Act, the Forest Sanctuary Act of 2010; No Mining Zones Bill; the Sustainable Forest Management, the Barangay Greening Act; and the Plastic Bag Recycling Act,” she cites.

Understanding Ecotourism
“Ecotourism for me is being a responsible traveler, making sure that you have the least amount of impact on any ecosystem that you visit. Ecotourism is a way of traveling that puts the environment as the centerpiece of every journey and learning from it instead of bringing our unsustainable, reckless and

wasteful practices, and leaving our immutable footprint on the environment, to the detriment of the local community and their ecosystem,” she explains thoughtfully.

“There are some people who think that the protection of the environment necessitates completely leaving it alone. But I believe that tourism and protection of the environment go hand-in-hand and are intimately related—and that progress can be achieved without exacting a toll on our environment.

“We can promote the beauty of our country and give livelihood to our citizens in the countryside, but at the same time preserve our ecosystems. How can we boast of lush mountains, old churches and ancestral houses, pristine rivers and beaches when we’ve already polluted our waters, cut our forests, littered and vandalized our centuries-old churches? It is through the preservation of our world heritage sites, our marine and forest sanctuaries, and nature parks, among many other beautiful places, that we can continue promoting these as tourist destinations. Tourism as an industry can only flourish if we protect and preserve our environment.”



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At this juncture, the Senator segues to another equally important advocacy she’s ardently supporting—cultural tourism—which each of us can take part in “by learning the foundations or roots of each town, province or community we visit; meeting our indigenous cultural communities and discovering their stories and way of life; gazing at our ancestral buildings and imagining how they were built or used.”

Senator Legarda adds another facet to this—that of promoting distinct products from each and every town or locality (or the One Town One Product Program being promoted by the Department of Trade and Industry in cooperation with the Department of Tourism). “By indentifying unique products that have a competitive advantage, each local government is given the opportunity to promote their town as a tourist spot along with their unique products.”

She avers, “I believe that the effective merger of these three elements—ecotourism, cultural tourism, and the promotion of products from each locality—can truly create a robust tourism industry that

not only benefits travelers but also the local community.”

Having had the opportunity to visit the farthest reaches of the Philippines—from Aparri to Tawi-tawi—Senator Legarda firmly believes that our country has so much to offer the world.

“We have numerous UNESCO World Heritage Sites such as the Church of San Agustin in Paoay, Ilocos Norte; Vigan in Ilocos Sur; the Apo Reef National Park; the Banaue Rice Terraces; and the Tubbataha Reef National Marine Park, to name a few.

“Our culture is distinct. We have an aspect of life that has been influenced by American and Spanish culture—from the food, music to architecture—while still maintaining more than 110 ethno-linguistic groups all over the country. Our country is a melting pot of different beliefs, of different religions, of different cultures, and this is an interesting facet that we should share with Southeast Asia and the world,” the Senator remarks with pride.

PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 21

Hair and makeup by ERIC MANINGAT

Clothes by MANGO (white off-shoulder top), TOPSHOP (striped jacket, printed pink top) and DOROTHY PERKINS (hot pink cardigan and tiered light pink bolero)

Stud earrings and bangle by YHANSY (located at Shangri-La Plaza Mall)



Loren Keeps It Real

BENEATH the lively and seemingly aggressive persona is a girl-next-door with simple dreams for herself, her family, and her country. Senator Legarda reveals more about herself in this Q&A . . .

You already have numerous achievements. Is there anything else that you’d still like to accomplish in this lifetime?

I now take it one day at a time. I take care of my health and that of my children’s, their future, the children of our country, to make sure nature is nurtured, and that we leave a legacy of a good, clean, and safe environment.

You’ve gone through ups and downs in your political career. What keeps you

going? I believe in inner strength. What motivates me and inspires me are the results of our positive action on people. When people come up to me and say, “*Ako po ‘yung pina-opera n’yo*,” “*Ako po ‘yung pinag-aral n’yo*” and I see lives improved and actual results of our laws being done, I am more inspired.

Ups and downs, whether in political career or personal life, are part and parcel of life and it’s a blessing that God gifted me with resilience. I’ve been through ups and downs and inside me is really just a girl-next-door who has been through so much in life.

Who inspires you and why? The everyday man, inspirational stories of women

who battle disease and who battle domestic violence, people who go through hurdles in life to succeed, and people who, despite the odds, have experienced happiness and serenity.

Is there a dream vacation that you imagine yourself to have? With whom would you like to spend it with?

I’m blessed to have had dream vacations with my children in exotic countries like Laos, Cambodia, Burma, India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives, both for work and for vacation. We don’t go to usual tourist destinations, but those that evoke culture, art and history.

You mentioned in your talk that you’ve been to many different places around the

country. Where else haven’t you gone to? I’ve not been to Batanes, I plan to go there.

What are your guilty pleasures, if any? My only pleasure is having my nails done and having a massage.

What makes you smile? What ticks you off? Yeah, I know I should smile more often (laughs). What makes me smile? My children . . . when they are happy and content and have accomplished much.

What is “me” time for you? Having a massage or maybe an oxygen facial, my once-a-week nail cleaning, going to the gym or doing my yoga.

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