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ASEAN ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES IN THE PERSPECTIVES SOUTHEAST ASIAN MIGRANTS IN METRO MANILA

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Abstract

This study explores the environmental values of Southeast Asian migrants residing in Metro Manila and how these values shape their perceptions of Philippine climate change policies. Grounded in Eco-Harmony Theory, the research examines how traditional cultural beliefs such as harmony with nature, collective responsibility, and respect for ancestral lands influence environmental attitudes and responses to governance. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically to capture participants' views. Findings reveal that migrants interpret climate policies through culturally embedded worldviews, which may either align with or challenge formal governance frameworks. The study highlights the importance of integrating cultural perspectives into climate policy implementation to enhance inclusivity and effectiveness. By focusing on an underrepresented population, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of climate governance in the Philippines and supports broader efforts toward sustainable and culturally responsive environmental action.

Keywords: *Climate Change, Environmental Values, Southeast Asian Migrants, Climate Governance, Philippines*



1. Introduction

Migration in Southeast Asia is highly dynamic and largely regional, with over 10 million international migrants and approximately 92% of migration occurring within ASEAN, highlighting strong intra-regional mobility (International Organization for Migration, 2019; UNICEF, 2019). Around 7.1 million ASEAN migrants live and work within member states, underscoring the importance of understanding migration within the regional context (European External Action Service, 2020). While the Philippines is primarily a migrant-sending country, it also hosts a smaller but diverse population of foreign migrants, particularly in urban centers such as Metro Manila (Migrants & Refugees Section, n.d.).

Although ASEAN nationals reside in the Philippines, they represent a relatively small and under documented population, as shown in Philippine census data (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). Estimates suggest that while the country hosts millions of foreign nationals, only a small proportion come from ASEAN countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam (PSA, 2023). This highlights the limited but meaningful presence of ASEAN migrants in the Philippines and the need for further research on their lived experiences.

At the same time, Southeast Asia faces severe climate change risks due to its geographic vulnerability and reliance on climate-sensitive sectors, with frequent extreme weather events threatening both livelihoods and development (Elliott, 2017; Harris, 2019). In response, ASEAN has implemented regional climate initiatives such as the ASEAN Climate Change Initiative, ASEAN Green Bond Standards, and the ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility to strengthen cooperation and climate resilience.

In the Philippines, these regional efforts are supported by national legislation, particularly the Climate Change Act of 2009 (Republic Act No. 9729), which institutionalizes climate governance through the Climate Change Commission (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines, 2009; Climate Change Commission, n.d.). While existing literature primarily focuses on policy and institutional frameworks (Handayani et al., 2022; Overland et al., 2021), there remains a gap in understanding the cultural and value-based dimensions of environmental action.

This study contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), by examining how Southeast Asian migrants in the Philippines perceive and respond to climate change policies within their host environment. It highlights how cultural values and environmental worldviews shape climate awareness, policy interpretation, and behavioral responses, while also emphasizing migrants' role in fostering inclusive and sustainable urban communities.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to examine how traditional environmental values from Southeast Asian cultures are reflected in the climate change policies of the Philippines, based on the lived experiences of Southeast Asian migrants. It sought to generate insights that contribute to more culturally grounded approaches to environmental governance, and to offer recommendations for integrating ancestral values such as harmony with nature, collective responsibility, and respect for the environment into ASEAN and national climate initiatives.

Specifically, it sought to:

1. To describe the demographic profile of Southeast Asian migrants in the Philippines in terms of age, sex, country of origin, religion, length of stay, and reason of migration.
2. To explore the traditional environmental values and cultural practices from their home countries that migrants observe as being reflected or upheld in Philippine climate and environmental policies.
3. To examine how participants interpret the alignment between traditional values such as harmony with nature, collective responsibility, and respect for ancestral lands and current climate governance in the Philippines.
4. To investigate the challenges or conflicts migrants experience between the cultural environmental values and existing environmental policies in the host country.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study research design to explore environmental values among Southeast Asian migrants residing in Metro Manila. The case study approach is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth and context-specific examination of how migrants interpret, experience, and engage with climate change policies in the Philippines. By focusing on a bounded group Southeast Asian migrants within a particular urban setting the study captures the complexity of cultural, social, and environmental factors shaping their perspectives.

Data are collected through qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, enabling participants to share their lived experiences, cultural beliefs, and personal interpretations of environmental issues. The data are analyzed thematically, to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and insights related to environmental values and climate governance. This approach emphasizes participants' subjective experiences and highlights how cultural worldviews influence their understanding of climate change and related policies.

The qualitative case study design is well-suited to the objectives of this research, as it provides rich, detailed narratives that reveal the interplay between traditional Southeast Asian values and contemporary environmental policies in the Philippines. It allows the study to move beyond surface-level analysis and uncover how concepts such as harmony with nature, collective responsibility, and respect for ancestral lands shape migrants' environmental attitudes and behaviors. Ultimately, this design supports a culturally grounded understanding of climate governance from the perspective of a specific yet underexplored population.

3.2 Participants

The study focused on 20 Southeast Asian migrants currently residing in Metro Manila, specifically individuals who have migrated from ASEAN member states. The participants were adults aged 18 years and above who have lived in the Philippines for a minimum of one year, ensuring that they have sufficient exposure to the country's climate change and environmental policies.

The participants were selected to provide culturally grounded insights into how traditional environmental values—rooted in their countries of origin—align or contrast with modern climate governance in the Philippines. As individuals who bring with them unique cultural, spiritual, and communal understandings of nature, these migrants offer valuable perspectives on the integration (or lack thereof) of traditional values in national and regional climate strategies.

3.3 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on the participants' preferences and availability, ensuring flexibility and accessibility.

Before data collection, informed consent was secured, and participants were provided with the Participant Information Sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical safeguards.

Interviews were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed for analysis. Data was securely stored in password-protected files, accessible only to the researcher, in compliance with Republic Act 10173 (Data Privacy Act of 2012).

4. Results

From the analysis of data, the following were formed:

1. Demographic Profile of Participants

The participants are predominantly young adults, with 40% aged 25–29 and 35% aged 30–34. Gender representation is balanced (50% male, 50% female). The largest nationality group was Thailand (30%), next with Malaysia (20%) and with the remaining participants representing Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Most participants hold bachelor's degrees (80%), with some holding postgraduate (10%) or vocational-level education (10%). Half of the participants have resided in the Philippines for 4–5 years (50%), and most migrated for employment opportunities (75%).

These characteristics indicate that the participants are economically active, socially engaged, and capable of providing informed insights on environmental practices, policy exposure, and cultural integration. Religious affiliation shows a majority identifying as Buddhists (65%), followed by Christianity/other (20%) and Islam (10%).

2. Traditional Environmental Values

ASEAN migrants maintain strong cultural and spiritual environmental values, including living in harmony with nature, collective responsibility for resources, and respect for ancestral lands.

However, participants perceive a moderate disconnect between these cultural values and Philippine environmental policies. They noted that local programs rarely acknowledge migrant traditions, indigenous knowledge, or cultural rituals. Despite this, migrants continue to practice these values through waste segregation, resource conservation, and spiritual expressions of gratitude toward nature.

2.1 Theme 1: Environmental Care as a Spiritual and Communal Duty

Participants began by recalling their childhood environments — villages surrounded by rivers, forests, or rice fields where people lived closely with the land. Their stories revealed that caring for nature was taught early, not as a regulation but as a moral and spiritual obligation.

Participant Responses:

"My parents taught me not to waste food because wasting food disrespects the farmer. They always reminded me that every grain of rice represents hard work, time, and effort from the people who planted, harvested, and prepared it. In our household, food is treated with great respect, so we are expected to take only what we can finish and to be mindful of how much we

serve. Leaving food uneaten is seen not just as carelessness, but as a lack of appreciation for the farmers and the natural resources involved in producing it.” – Vietnam

“My grandma said trees have spirits, so before we cut them, we always ask permission first. She taught us that trees are living beings with their own spirit, and we should not treat them carelessly. In our family and community, this belief is taken seriously, so even when trees need to be used for wood or other purposes, people usually pause and offer a small prayer or expression of respect before cutting them down. It is a way of showing gratitude and making sure we do not harm nature without acknowledgment.” – Myanmar

“Our parents always tell us not to destroy what gives us life. They remind us to be careful with water and to avoid wasting it because it is a precious resource. In school, we also practice this value every Friday during our cleaning time, where all students and teachers participate in cleaning activities together. We call it Jumat Bersih or ‘Clean Friday,’ and it teaches us responsibility for our environment and the importance of working together to keep our surroundings clean.” - Indonesia

Across these narratives, the tone was consistent: environmental care in communal, spiritual, and inherited. It is performed through rituals, shared labor, and moral discipline. For these migrants, the environment is not a separate entity but part of their identity something to live with, not merely to protect.

2.2 Theme 2: Partial Reflection of Values in Philippine Practices

When participants compared their home countries to the Philippines, they found a mix of familiarity and distance. Many appreciated that Filipinos also show care for nature through community clean-ups and tree-planting events. Such moments reminded them of home and created a brief sense of belonging.

Participant Responses:

“When I joined a coastal clean-up in Cavite, it felt like home. Everyone helped and laughed while cleaning, and there was a strong sense of unity among the volunteers. Even though we came from different places, it felt like we were all part of one community working toward the same goal of protecting the environment. The experience made me feel welcomed and connected, and it also reminded me of similar community activities back in Vietnam where people also come together to care for shared spaces.” – Vietnam

“Older Filipinos also use herbal medicine like we do. I noticed that here in the Philippines, especially among older people, they still use plants and traditional remedies when someone gets sick, like for fever or cough. In Vietnam, it’s very similar. Our grandparents also taught us to use herbal medicine first before going to the hospital for minor illnesses. So when I saw it here, it felt familiar to me because the practice is almost the same in our culture.” - Vietnam

A sense of partial familiarity emerged among a participant, as they recognized certain environmental practices in the Philippines that reflect values similar to those in their home countries.

3. Perceptions of Policy Integration

Participants recognized that the Philippines promotes environmental awareness through community clean-ups, tree-planting, and eco-friendly campaigns. However, they noted gaps in continuity, cultural framing, and communal participation compared to their home countries.

3.1 Theme 3: Continuing Traditions through Everyday Adaptation

Although formal structures in the Philippines felt unfamiliar, migrants continued to practice their environmental values quietly in their daily lives. For many, this meant turning small acts into personal rituals of belonging.

Participants Responses:

"I grow herbs on my balcony even if condo rules don't really allow it. I just do it quietly because I feel better when I have plants around me. I was used to having fresh herbs at home, so when I moved here, I still wanted to continue that habit. Even if space is small, I try to grow things like basil and other herbs because it makes me feel more connected to home and to nature." - Vietnam

"I practice waste segregation, I use reusable containers, and I also try to save electricity at home. These are things I learned early on, so I just continued doing them even now. In Indonesia, we're really taught to be mindful about waste and energy use, so it became a habit for me. It just feels like a normal responsibility to take care of the environment." - Indonesia

Through these stories, a pattern of quiet resilience emerged. Migrants continued to live by ancestral principles even when unrecognized by local systems. Their personal discipline became a way of maintaining cultural identity.

3.2 Theme 4: Harmony in Principle, Gaps in Practice

As migrants observed the Philippines' approach to climate action, they recognized both good intentions and significant gaps. They admired the effort to promote environmental awareness but noted that the programs often lacked depth and continuity.

Participant Responses:

"Hmm, I think there are a lot of campaigns, but they're not really consistent. Like after a big flood or typhoon, everyone talks about it and people become more aware for a while. But after some time, it kind of goes back to normal and people stop talking about it again. I think they do mean well, but sometimes it feels like the system is a bit messy or not sustained." - Singapore

"I think the government tries, but a lot of people still don't really follow the rules. I personally try to recycle, but sometimes it's hard here because I notice the garbage collectors mix everything together anyway. But I still separate my plastics and bottles at home" - Malaysia

These comparisons reveal a difference in environmental rhythm: migrants are accustomed to regular, culturally grounded participation, whereas Philippine programs appear sporadic and administrative. Their reflections suggest that harmony with nature exists in principle in the Philippines, but the communal essence of that harmony is weaker in practice.

4. Challenges and Conflicts

Participants encountered several barriers that affected their participation in environmental initiatives. These included language barriers and the complexity of environmental policies, which made it difficult for some migrants to fully understand meetings, programs, and guidelines. In addition, cultural unfamiliarity with local environmental initiatives also played a role, as some

participants found it challenging to relate to or actively engage in programs that differ from practices in their home countries.

4.1 Theme 5: Disconnection through Language and Policy Barriers

For many participants, the most persistent challenge was not values but communication. They wanted to contribute to local programs but felt excluded due to language and institutional barriers.

Participant Responses:

"I wanted to join a tree planting, but the announcements were in Tagalog." — Indonesia

"Some meetings are only in Tagalog, so I don't always join. I try to understand, but sometimes it's hard for me to follow everything when they speak too fast or don't explain in English. So there are times I just skip HOA [Home Owner's Association] because I don't really get what's going on."- Vietnam

Aside from language and communication, some participants noted environmental practices conflicting with home-country values. Some participants expressed concern over practices that contradict their environmental norms, like burning of trash.

"Sometimes I see people burn trash near the house. In Vietnam, we try not to do that because it's really bad for the air and also for the neighbors. So it feels kind of uncomfortable for me when I see it here." — Vietnam

"Burning garbage near the house, in Myanmar that's not really okay. And also, when people cut trees without praying or showing respect first, it feels wrong for me. It's something I grew up believing, so I notice it a lot here." — Myanmar

A Singaporean participant highlighted how differences in environmental regulation enforcement lead to confusion and adaptation:

"My husband laughed before because I wash plastic containers before throwing or recycling them. He said it's too much work... In Singapore we get fined if we don't do it properly." – Singapore

Their lived experience illustrates how language and institutional gaps can alienate individuals who already share the same environmental values as locals.

5. Sustained Cultural and Environmental Practices

Narratives highlighted quiet resilience, with migrants embedding cultural practices into daily life even without formal recognition. This demonstrates that migration does not diminish environmental consciousness, but instead encourages adaptation and continued practice within the Philippine context.

5.1 Theme 6: Inclusion, Translation, and Collaboration for Culturally Grounded Climate Policies

Despite their challenges, participants spoke with optimism about how inclusion could be improved. Many emphasized the importance of translation, participation, and recognition of cultural diversity in environmental programs.

Participant Responses:

"Please make programs open to foreigners too. Sometimes we want to join but we're not always included or informed early. It would be better if these programs were more open so that foreigners living here can also participate and contribute. I think many of us are willing to help, we just need more chances to be involved." — Indonesia

"Post information in English so we can understand. Sometimes we see announcements but not in English so it's hard for us to fully understand the details like schedules or instructions. If the information is also in English, it would be easier for us to join." — Vietnam

5. Discussion

The findings reveal that Southeast Asian migrants in the Philippines carry deeply rooted environmental values shaped by spirituality, communal responsibility, and respect for nature, which they continue to practice even in a foreign setting. These values are often learned early in life and expressed through everyday behaviors such as waste reduction, recycling, herbal medicine use, and participation in community-based environmental activities. This is consistent with studies on environmental behavior in Southeast Asia, which emphasize that ecological practices are deeply embedded in cultural traditions and belief systems rather than solely driven by formal regulations (Elliott, 2017; Kim & Park, 2020). Similarly, research on indigenous and local knowledge systems highlights that environmental stewardship in Asian contexts is often guided by moral and spiritual frameworks, reinforcing the idea that sustainability is culturally transmitted across generations (UNESCO, 2019).

While migrants recognize some similarities between their home countries and the Philippines particularly in practices such as coastal clean-ups, tree planting, and the use of herbal medicine they also perceive these efforts as often inconsistent, reactive, and weakly integrated into cultural or spiritual frameworks. This observation aligns with findings by Harris (2019), who noted that climate responses in Southeast Asia are frequently reactive to disasters rather than sustained through long-term community engagement. In addition, Overland et al. (2021) argue that climate governance in the region tends to prioritize technical and policy-driven solutions, often overlooking socio-cultural dimensions of environmental action. This helps explain why migrants perceive Philippine initiatives as more procedural than value-oriented.

Despite these differences, migrants continue to practice their environmental values in subtle and personal ways, such as reusing materials, conserving resources, and maintaining small-scale gardening practices. This reflects what Ager and Strang (2008) describe as "integration through everyday practices," where migrants maintain aspects of their cultural identity while adapting to new environments. Studies on migrant adaptation further suggest that everyday environmental behaviors serve as coping mechanisms that foster a sense of belonging and continuity in unfamiliar settings (Berry, 1997; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

However, participation in formal environmental programs remains limited due to language barriers, lack of access to information, and institutional constraints that reduce inclusivity. This finding is supported by research on migrant integration, which identifies language and communication barriers as key factors limiting civic participation and access to public services (Castles et al., 2014). In the context of environmental governance, Walker (2012) highlights that inclusive participation is essential for effective sustainability initiatives, yet marginalized groups including migrants are often excluded due to structural and institutional gaps.

Overall, the study highlights a clear gap between shared environmental values and their practical integration into Philippine climate governance. While alignment exists at the level of principles, migrants emphasize the need for more culturally responsive, inclusive, and communicative environmental policies. This supports the growing call for culturally grounded and participatory approaches to sustainability, particularly in Southeast Asia, where environmental governance must account for diverse cultural perspectives (Handayani et al., 2022). Furthermore, ASEAN policy frameworks increasingly recognize the importance of regional cooperation and inclusive development, suggesting that integrating migrants' cultural knowledge can enhance both policy effectiveness and community resilience (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020).

6. Conclusions

Based on the findings, the study concludes that ASEAN migrants possess deeply rooted environmental values shaped by spiritual, cultural, and communal traditions, which emphasize harmony with nature, collective responsibility, and moral discipline. While Philippine environmental initiatives generally align with these values in principle, they are perceived as largely scientific and procedural in implementation rather than culturally grounded. Structural barriers such as language limitations, limited inclusivity, and the lack of recognition of migrant perspectives contribute to migrants' sense of disconnection from local climate programs. Despite these challenges, ASEAN migrants continue to practice sustainable behaviors in their daily lives and demonstrate strong potential as valuable contributors to culturally enriched climate action. Overall, the study highlights the need for greater cultural integration and multilingual environmental communication strategies to bridge the gap between migrant environmental values and Philippine climate governance.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Informed consent was obtained from participants; confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured.

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Data availability: De-identified data may be made available upon reasonable request, subject to ethical considerations.

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Conflicts of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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