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Reclaiming the Voice of the Forest: The Lorax vis-à-vis Indigenous Filipino Ecological Consciousness

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Abstract

This research examines *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss in comparison with the ecological worldview of indigenous Filipino cultures. The study explores how both *The Lorax* and the environmental ethics of groups such as the Ifugao, Aeta, and Lumad peoples articulate an ecological consciousness grounded in respect, reciprocity, and interdependence. Using qualitative textual and cultural analysis, the research identifies thematic parallels in ecological guardianship, environmental exploitation, communal interconnectedness, and ecological restoration.

Findings indicate that the indigenous Filipino philosophy of *kapwa* (shared identity) and the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) embedded in rituals and farming practices parallel the moral and ecological values in *The Lorax*. The study concludes that the indigenous Filipino worldview embodies a living expression of the environmental ethics allegorically represented in Seuss' text, offering a valuable foundation for environmental education and sustainability discourse.

Keywords: Deep Ecology, Arne Naess, Ecological Egalitarianism, Environmental Ethics, Philippine Society, Social Equality

Introduction

The environmental crisis of the twenty-first century—marked by global warming, deforestation, and biodiversity loss—has prompted renewed reflection on humanity's relationship with nature. Literature has long served as a moral lens through which ecological crises are examined, offering both critique and vision. Among the most enduring works in environmental literature is Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971) ^[11], a children's narrative that transcends its intended audience through its allegorical critique of industrial greed and ecological destruction. The story's simplicity masks profound moral and philosophical themes: the commodification of nature, the silencing of ecological voices, and the moral imperative of care and restoration (Garrard, 2004). Dr. Seuss's ecological fable captures the moral dimension of environmental degradation through the character of the Lorax, who "speaks for the trees." The Lorax's resistance to the Once-ler's unrestrained industrial ambition exposes the anthropocentric mindset that has historically defined human-nature relations. Scholars have interpreted *The Lorax* as a modern eco-parable aligned with Deep Ecology, a philosophical movement founded by Arne Naess (1973) ^[6] that asserts the intrinsic value of all life forms independent of human use. The text, therefore, becomes a moral allegory on ecological justice and interdependence (Buell, 1995).

In the Philippine context, this moral ecology resonates deeply with indigenous traditions that predate Western environmentalism by centuries. Indigenous Filipino cultures, such as the Ifugao, Aeta, Lumad, and Tagbanua communities, possess Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) systems built upon animist cosmologies and relational ethics. These worldviews perceive the environment as a sacred community of beings imbued with life and spirit (*diwata* or *anito*) (Scott, 1994) ^[10]. In contrast to Western dualism separating humans from nature, indigenous Filipino epistemologies are guided by *kapwa*, a core value that emphasizes shared identity and interconnectedness among all beings (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000) ^[4, 7].

Within these worldviews, moral responsibility extends beyond human social relations to encompass nonhuman entities—rivers, mountains, forests, and ancestral spirits. The indigenous concept of *paninindigan sa kalikasan* (moral stand for nature) exemplifies this ethos, demanding reciprocity and restraint in human interaction with the environment (Jocano, 1998) ^[5]. The

muyong system of the Ifugao people—wherein families maintain forest reserves for communal use—demonstrates how local ecological ethics integrate sustainability with spirituality (Conklin, 1980) ^[2].

Reading *The Lorax* vis-à-vis the indigenous Filipino ecological consciousness reveals striking philosophical convergences. Both articulate the moral necessity of listening to nature's voice—a voice often suppressed by capitalist modernity and colonial exploitation. The Once-ler's relentless extraction of the Truffula trees mirrors the Philippines' colonial history of environmental plunder, from the Spanish *encomienda* system to contemporary logging and mining operations in ancestral lands (Bankoff, 2007) ^[1]. The silence that follows the Lorax's departure parallels the silencing of indigenous ecological wisdom under colonial and capitalist systems (Deloria, 1994).

This comparative study seeks to examine how *The Lorax* symbolically represents an ecological consciousness already present in the lived philosophies of indigenous Filipino communities. It argues that Seuss's fable, when read through the lens of Filipino indigenous thought, becomes more than a Western environmental allegory—it transforms into a cross-cultural moral text affirming the universality of ecological justice and the sanctity of life.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To analyze *The Lorax* through the framework of indigenous Filipino ecological philosophy;
2. To identify parallels between Seuss's environmental allegory and indigenous practices of ecological stewardship; and
3. To propose how indigenous Filipino ecological consciousness can serve as a pedagogical and ethical resource for environmental education in the Philippines today.

In bridging the moral ecology of Seuss's text and the lived wisdom of indigenous Filipino communities, this research contributes to the growing discourse on ecocriticism, postcolonial ecology, and decolonial environmental thought in Philippine scholarship. By re-centering indigenous knowledge within global ecological dialogue, it aims to reaffirm that the call of the Lorax—the call to “speak for the trees”—has long been voiced in the archipelago's mountains, forests, and ancestral lands.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing textual analysis and comparative cultural interpretation. The purpose of this design was to explore how the ecological themes in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971) ^[11] resonate with and reflect the ecological consciousness of indigenous Filipino communities. Qualitative research was chosen to capture the interpretive and symbolic dimensions of both literary and cultural expressions.

Through an interpretivist paradigm, this study situates *The Lorax* not merely as a literary text but as an ethical discourse that parallels indigenous ecological thought. The interpretive nature of the research allows for a dialogical reading—where the text and indigenous worldviews illuminate each other in a cross-cultural ecological conversation.

Sources of Data

The study analyzed two primary sources of data:

1. **Primary Text** – Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* (1971) ^[11],

published by Random House, served as the central literary text for analysis. The narrative was examined in its entirety, focusing on character symbolism, narrative structure, and moral discourse.

2. **Secondary Texts and Ethnographic Sources** – Cultural and ethnological studies of indigenous Filipino communities were consulted to identify ecological principles, values, and rituals. Major sources included *Filipino Indigenous Ethnic Communities: Patterns, Variations, and Typologies* by F. Landa Jocano (1998) ^[5], *Barangay: Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society* by William Henry Scott (1994) ^[10], and *Ethnographic Atlas of Ifugao* by Harold C. Conklin (1980) ^[2].

In addition, works on indigenous psychology and Filipino values—particularly Enriquez (1992) ^[4] and Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino (2000) ^[7]—were used to interpret the concept of *kapwa* (shared identity) as a cultural foundation for ecological ethics.

Analytical Framework

The analysis was guided by Deep Ecology and Indigenous Ecological Epistemology as complementary theoretical frameworks.

Deep Ecology, developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1973) ^[6], critiques anthropocentrism and affirms the intrinsic value of all living beings. This philosophy advocates for a biocentric worldview—recognizing humans as part of, not superior to, the natural environment. The principles of Deep Ecology were used to interpret the moral and ethical messages embedded in *The Lorax*.

Indigenous Ecological Epistemology, on the other hand, reflects the knowledge systems and spiritual cosmologies of indigenous Filipino communities. This framework understands nature as a living, relational network of beings where humans bear moral responsibility toward both the physical and spiritual dimensions of the environment (Salazar, 1999) ^[9].

By integrating these frameworks, the study situates *The Lorax* within a decolonial ecological paradigm—acknowledging that indigenous Filipino worldviews offer an embodied form of ecological wisdom that complements Seuss's literary vision.

Analytical Procedure

The study proceeded in four stages:

1. **Textual Immersion:**
The researcher conducted multiple readings of *The Lorax* to identify recurring ecological themes, symbols, and moral dialogues.
2. **Thematic Coding:**
Themes related to ecological guardianship, exploitation, interconnectedness, and restoration were coded and analyzed.
3. **Comparative Analysis:**
Each identified theme was compared with documented indigenous Filipino ecological concepts and practices (e.g., the *muyong* forest management of the Ifugao, the *diwata* belief system among Visayans, and the Lumad principle of *paninindigan sa kalikasan*).
4. **Interpretive Synthesis:**
Findings from the comparative analysis were synthesized to articulate the shared ethical and ecological dimensions between *The Lorax* and

indigenous Filipino worldviews.

This interpretive synthesis was guided by hermeneutic principles (Ricoeur, 1981), allowing the text and culture to be read in mutual dialogue rather than through hierarchical comparison.

Scope and Delimitation

The study focused on *The Lorax* as a singular representative text of Western ecological literature and its comparison with general principles found across major indigenous Filipino communities. It did not attempt to provide an exhaustive ethnographic account of each group but rather synthesized recurring ecological themes common to indigenous Filipino thought. Quantitative or field-based ethnographic methods were not used; the analysis was entirely literary and interpretive in nature.

Ethical Considerations

All indigenous cultural materials and beliefs discussed in this study were drawn from previously published and publicly available scholarly works. Respect for indigenous intellectual property and cultural sensitivity was maintained throughout the research process, ensuring that representations of indigenous beliefs were contextualized within their cultural and historical frameworks (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples [NCIP], 2012).

Results and Discussions

The analysis of *The Lorax* alongside the ecological worldview of Indigenous Filipino communities revealed four major thematic intersections: (1) ecological guardianship and moral agency, (2) the critique of exploitation and colonial capitalism, (3) *kapwa* and the ethics of interconnectedness, and (4) ecological restoration and communal resilience. These findings illuminate how a Western eco-parable and Indigenous ecological epistemology share deep moral and philosophical convergences, despite their differing cultural origins.

Ecological Guardianship and Moral Agency

In *The Lorax*, the titular character emerges as the moral voice of nature—“speaking for the trees” that cannot defend themselves against the destructive greed of the Once-ler. This archetype of an ecological guardian mirrors the role of Indigenous Filipino spiritual leaders such as the *babaylan* (Visayan shaman-priestess) and *mumbaki* (Ifugao ritual specialist). Both figures act as mediators between the human and the nonhuman world, ensuring ecological harmony through ritual communication and moral stewardship (Salazar, 1999; Demetrio, 1991) [9, 3].

The *babaylan*'s function as a custodian of balance and her ability to “speak for the spirits” reflect the same ethical impulse embodied by the Lorax. As the Once-ler expands his industrial empire, ignoring the Lorax's warnings, Seuss allegorically portrays the silencing of spiritual and ecological wisdom—a theme resonant with the colonial suppression of Indigenous ecological authority in the Philippines (Scott, 1994) [10].

From the perspective of Indigenous Filipino ontology, the forest (*gubat*) and its beings are animated by *diwata* (nature spirits) who demand respect and reciprocity (Jocano, 1998) [5]. The Lorax's insistence that “a tree falls the way it leans” metaphorically echoes Indigenous cosmologies that view moral imbalance as the cause of ecological disruption.

Hence, both systems portray ecological guardianship not as dominion but as a sacred responsibility to maintain the equilibrium between human and nonhuman realms.

The Critique of Exploitation and Colonial Capitalism

The Once-ler's relentless pursuit of profit through the production of “Thneeds”—a symbol of unnecessary consumerism—serves as Seuss's critique of industrial capitalism. This critique finds a historical parallel in the Philippines' experience of colonial extraction and capitalist exploitation of natural resources. From the Spanish *encomienda* system to American logging concessions and modern mining industries, Indigenous lands have been systematically exploited for profit (Bankoff, 2007) [1].

Indigenous Filipino cosmology, however, resists this commodification through the belief that land is not property but kin. In the worldview of the Aeta and Lumad peoples, the forest is an ancestor, and to exploit it is to desecrate one's lineage (Conklin, 1980) [2]. The Lorax's moral opposition to the Once-ler thus parallels the Indigenous resistance against colonial and capitalist resource extraction. Furthermore, the silence that follows the Lorax's departure at the end of Seuss's tale allegorizes the historical silencing of Indigenous voices in environmental governance. Similar to the Once-ler's domination of the Truffula forest, colonial powers in the Philippines dismissed Indigenous knowledge systems as “superstitious,” marginalizing sustainable ecological practices that had preserved local biodiversity for centuries (Prill-Brett, 1994) [8].

The correlation between Seuss's industrial parable and the Philippine colonial experience highlights a shared moral insight: that ecological crisis arises from the moral failure to listen—to nature, to ancestors, and to the marginalized.

Kapwa and the Ethics of Interconnectedness

The Indigenous Filipino concept of *kapwa*—a term that connotes shared identity, interrelatedness, and mutuality—offers an ethical framework that parallels the ecological interdependence depicted in *The Lorax* (Enriquez, 1992; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000) [4, 7]. Within the narrative, the destruction of the Truffula forest precipitates the collapse of an entire ecosystem: the Bar-ba-loots lose their food source, the Swomee-Swans their clean air, and the Humming-Fish their clear water. Seuss thereby dramatizes the relational chain that binds all forms of life.

In the same manner, *kapwa* extends Filipino social ethics to the natural world, affirming that humans exist only in relation to others—whether people, animals, or spirits. As Salazar (1999) [9] explains, *kapwa* is not merely empathy but a worldview that dissolves the boundaries between self and others. This philosophy resonates with Deep Ecology's principle of *biospheric egalitarianism* (Naess, 1973) [6], which asserts that all beings possess intrinsic worth. By reading *The Lorax* through *kapwa*, the text transforms from a Western moral allegory into a reflection of an Indigenous Filipino ecological ontology. It reveals that environmental destruction is not only an ecological failure but also a relational one—a rupture in the moral fabric that binds all beings together.

Ecological Restoration and Communal Resilience
The ending of *The Lorax*, wherein the Once-ler entrusts the last Truffula seed to a young child, embodies the theme of restoration through intergenerational moral awakening. This symbol of renewal parallels numerous Indigenous Filipino

practices of ecological regeneration. The Ifugao *muyong* system, for instance, ensures watershed protection through collective forest management, allowing natural regeneration to sustain both the community and the ecosystem (Conklin, 1980) [2]. Similarly, Lumad and Subanen rituals of *pamuhat* (offerings to forest spirits) reaffirm communal responsibility for ecological balance.

Both the *Truffula seed* and the *muyong* represent the principle of renewal through responsibility—acknowledging that human survival depends on moral reconciliation with the earth. In *The Lorax*, the seed functions as a covenantal reminder: “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better.” This moral injunction finds its real-world manifestation in Indigenous Filipino environmental ethics, where care for the land is a sacred duty transmitted across generations.

Ecological restoration, therefore, is not a mere technical process but a moral and spiritual act. Indigenous Filipino cosmologies teach that regeneration requires ritual, community cooperation, and ethical mindfulness. The *Lorax*’s message to the child symbolizes the handover of this sacred duty—a passing of moral stewardship from one generation to the next.

Deep Ecology and Indigenous Filipino Wisdom The thematic convergence of *The Lorax* and Indigenous Filipino ecological philosophy can be understood within the framework of Deep Ecology. Both reject anthropocentrism, advocate for biocentric equality, and emphasize moral responsibility toward the nonhuman world. However, while Deep Ecology emerges as a philosophical abstraction in the West, Indigenous Filipino ecological consciousness manifests as lived spirituality and social practice. As Naess (1973) [6] argues, ecological awareness arises from self-realization and identification with the wider biosphere. Indigenous Filipino cosmology embodies this principle through *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa-tao*, where the self is extended to encompass all beings. Hence, Indigenous ecological wisdom actualizes what Deep Ecology theorizes. By situating Seuss’s *The Lorax* within this framework, it becomes evident that the moral insights of the text resonate with precolonial Filipino cosmologies. Both envision an ecocentric moral order in which respect, reciprocity, and restraint govern human-nature relations.

In this light, *The Lorax* may be read not simply as a Western ecological tale but as a global echo of Indigenous environmental ethics—reminding contemporary readers that ecological salvation requires a return to ancestral wisdom.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax*, though written within a Western industrial context, profoundly resonates with the Indigenous Filipino worldview that upholds ecological balance, spiritual kinship with nature, and moral responsibility toward the nonhuman world. Through textual analysis and cultural comparison, this research revealed that both *The Lorax* and Indigenous Filipino cosmology articulate a shared ecological ethic grounded in guardianship, relationality, and reciprocity.

At the heart of both systems lies a moral vision of ecological harmony—where the destruction of nature is seen as not merely an environmental crisis but a moral and spiritual rupture. The *Lorax*’s role as a “speaker for the trees” parallels the Indigenous *babaylan* and *mumbaki*, whose ritual and moral authority safeguard the integrity of the

ecosystem. This reveals an ethical continuum between Seuss’s ecological parable and Filipino ancestral wisdom traditions that perceive the land (*lupa*), water (*tubig*), and air (*hangin*) as animate entities deserving of reverence and care. The study further concludes that industrial exploitation, consumerism, and colonial capitalism—as symbolized by the Once-ler’s greed—mirror the historical and ongoing degradation of Indigenous lands in the Philippines. Both the fictional *Truffula* forest and the real forests of Luzon and Mindanao testify to the consequences of human arrogance and ecological amnesia. Yet, both narratives also propose redemption through moral renewal and communal stewardship.

In essence, *The Lorax* is not only a children’s story but a universal ecological allegory that affirms what Indigenous Filipinos have long practiced: that the health of the earth is inseparable from the moral health of humanity. The synthesis of these perspectives thus reinforces the need to re-root contemporary environmental ethics in Indigenous Filipino values such as *kapwa*, *bayanihan*, and *pakikipagkapwa-tao*—principles that recognize the sacred interdependence of all life.

Recommendations

Building upon the insights drawn from this study, it becomes evident that *The Lorax* and Indigenous Filipino ecological consciousness converge not only in moral vision but also in their practical implications for education, policy, and community life. The findings highlight an urgent need to reclaim and integrate Indigenous ecological wisdom into contemporary efforts toward environmental conservation and moral formation. To actualize the values embodied in both *The Lorax* and Indigenous Filipino traditions, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Integration of Indigenous Ecological Ethics in Education**
Philippine educational curricula should incorporate Indigenous Filipino ecological concepts—such as *kapwa*, *diwata*, and *babaylan* cosmologies—into environmental education. Reading *The Lorax* alongside Indigenous narratives can foster ecological literacy rooted in cultural identity and moral responsibility.
2. **Cultural Reclamation in Environmental Policy**
Policymakers and conservation agencies should draw from Indigenous land management systems (e.g., the Ifugao *muyong*, Subanen *pamuhat*, and Lumad ancestral domain rituals) as models of sustainable resource governance. These systems exemplify what Deep Ecology theorizes but Indigenous Filipinos have long embodied—balance through restraint and reverence.
3. **Promotion of Eco-literature in Filipino Contexts**
Philippine writers, educators, and cultural workers should use eco-literary texts such as *The Lorax* to cultivate environmental awareness that transcends Western paradigms. Literary adaptation and translation in local languages can further contextualize ecological consciousness for diverse Filipino audiences.
4. **Community-based Ecological Restoration**
In the spirit of the *Truffula seed*’s symbolism, community-driven reforestation and watershed management should be prioritized, particularly in Indigenous territories. These efforts must recognize Indigenous peoples as rightful stewards rather than mere beneficiaries of conservation programs.

5. Further Research on Cross-cultural Ecological Ethics

Future studies may expand on this comparative framework by examining other eco-literary works in relation to Southeast Asian and Austronesian Indigenous cosmologies. This can contribute to a more inclusive and decolonized environmental philosophy.

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