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Once Displaced, Now Thriving—Sustainably

Published on June 29, 2017 by Laura Terrall, director of RA-Cert

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On the outdoor stage of the Bunun tribe's retreat facility in rural, southeastern Taiwan, sixteen men and women, dressed in traditional embroidered vests and skirts, stand in formation and begin to sing acapella; soon drums come in to accompany them. From where I sit in the audience of about 40 tourists, students, reporters, and government officials, I am so drawn in by the music that it takes me a while to recognize these gifted singers as the same people I saw working in the retreat's cafeteria earlier that morning. Later in the day, some of the same faces will appear at a workshop on building a sustainable bamboo enterprise.

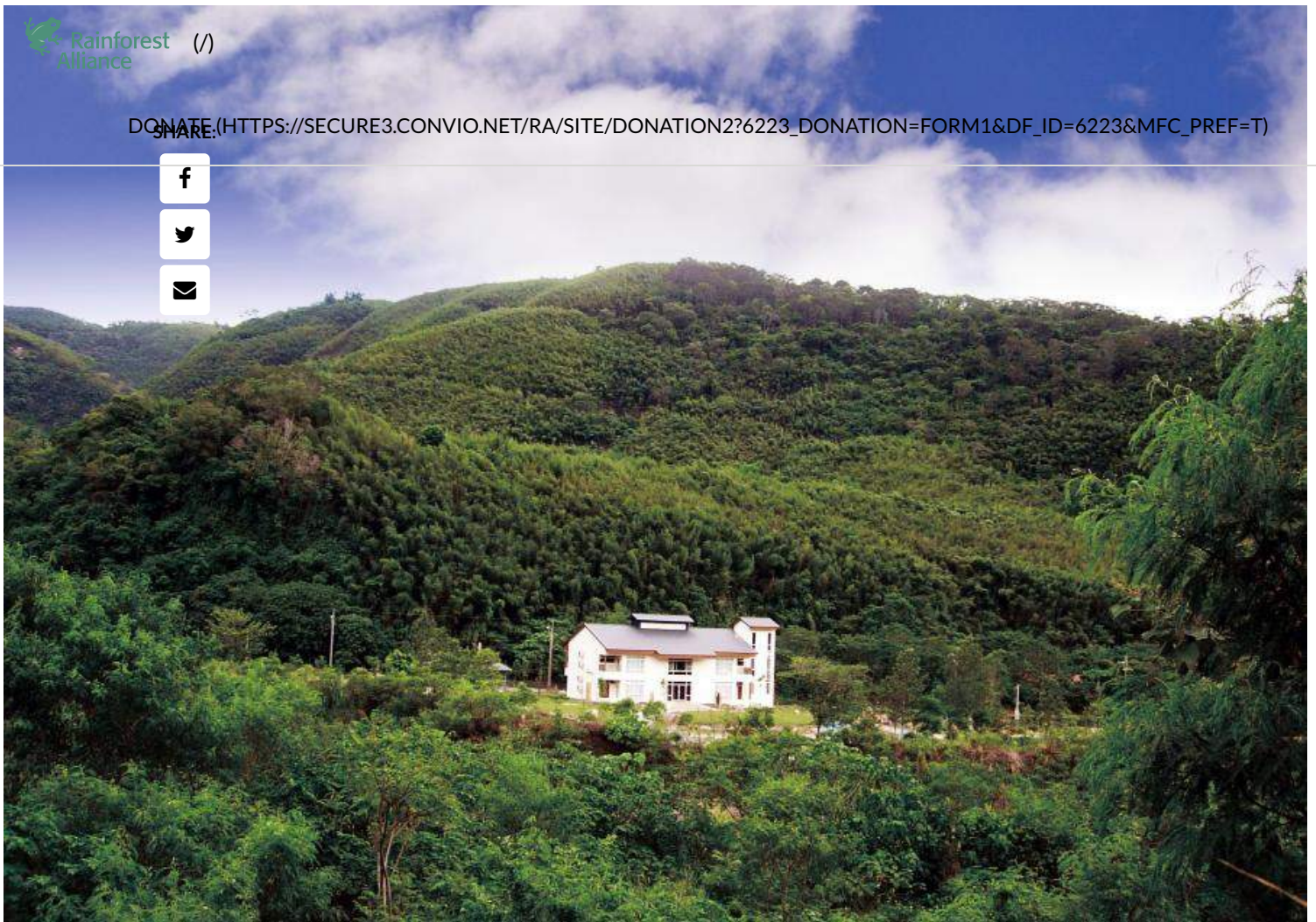
Here at the Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation, everyone is trained to do everything, my guide Professor Liu of National Taitung University explains. As an advocate for indigenous Taiwanese communities, Professor Liu has been working with the Bunun tribe in order to support their sustainability efforts. Today, the singers' performance, along with workshops and other activities, mark an impressive milestone in that journey: the Bunun has become the very first indigenous community in all of Taiwan and the greater China region to earn Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC) certification, and the first in Taiwan to earn it for bamboo. I was honored to be invited to present their certificate at this wonderful ceremony—though my speech could not possibly measure up to the choir's dazzling performance.



Members of the Bunun tribe receive their FSC certificate from Laura Terrall

The Bunun tribe's history echoes that of indigenous people all over the world: displacement, followed by a struggle to adapt to new lifestyle and economic realities. Decades ago in Taiwan, Chinese and Japanese settlers pushed indigenous people off their ancestral mountainside homes into the valleys, upending traditions and fraying the communities' social fabric. The Bunun became subsistence farmers and retained some traditions, but opportunities for young people were few, and as a community the Bunun was languishing.

But one tribal member, Pai Kwang Sheng, managed to go away to college in a nearby urban center, where he became a pastor, and, together with his wife, the Reverend Lee Lishwee, he returned to the Yanping village in 1984 to help his people. The Rev. Pai first established a four-story church (http://www.bunun.org.tw/tw/index.asp?au_id=247&sub_id=248) (as is the case with many indigenous groups in Taiwan, the Bunun are Christian) and community center that he filled with services, like classes and a kindergarten, the first in any Taiwanese aboriginal community. A Bunun choir—such as the one that sang today—traveled to Taipei and other cities to perform its traditional songs to raise funds. In 1995, Pastor Pai established the Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation, and today the foundation's retreat grounds include organic farms, restaurants that source from the farms, a hostel, conference facilities, a weaving shop, and cultural classes. It also houses a bamboo processing plant, where the community makes bamboo vinegar extract (used in soaps and other products), bamboo charcoal (used for fuel and filtering water), crafts, souvenirs, textiles, and construction materials.



The Bunun tribe's temple, surrounded by bamboo forest

The Bunun have clearly made great strides in rebuilding their community, reinvigorating their traditions, and finding sustainable methods to support themselves. But FSC certification of the bamboo forest the Bunun tribe is managing shows the world—and more importantly, local government agencies—that this indigenous group is more than capable of successfully and sustainably managing its ancestral lands.

The Rev. Pai agrees that sustainability fits perfectly with the Bunun's traditions—and with its desire to remain a vital, self-reliant community for generations to come. "The forest and mountains are our home—it is where we live, and where our ancestors lived. There is no reason for our people not to protect the mountains and forests." And now, with an internationally recognized FSC certification, the Bunun tribe can show the world that, too.

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