



## 100 scientists declare RP as world's 'center of marine biodiversity'

By Katherine Adraneda

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Some 100 scientists have declared the Philippines as the world's "center of marine biodiversity" — not the Great Reef Barrier off east Australia — because of its vast species of marine and coastal resources, according to the World Bank.

However, the scientists raised the alarm that the country's marine diversity is under threat of degradation.

Based on the WB report, "Philippine Environment Monitor 2005," the Philippines appears to be using its coastal resources "in a very inefficient manner" compared to other Southeast Asian countries.

The overall performance of the Philippines in marine and coastal resources conservation "is generally poor or very poor relative to other developing countries," the report added.

Elisea Gozun, former environment secretary and WB consultant, said the broad trends affecting the Philippine coastal areas include rapid population growth, widespread poverty, declining fishery productivity, increasing environmental damage and loss of biodiversity, and climate change.

"The coastal and marine waters of the Philippines are considered the center of marine biodiversity in the world," Gozun said during the National Forum on Sustainable Development of Coastal and Marine Resources at the Philippine Plaza hotel in Pasay City yesterday.

Gozun gave a presentation on the "State of Marine and Coastal Environment in the Philippines."

"(But) many of the important marine species in the Philippine marine environment are threatened (mainly by) habitat loss and degradation, pollution, destructive local and commercial fishing activities and rapid growth in Southeast Asian regional market for marine products," she said.

Her presentation is part of the Philippine Environment Monitor 2005, which hopefully will be released next month.

Gozun said the country's fishery resources are considered more heavily exploited than elsewhere in the world, and that the country has the most degraded reefs compared to five other Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia.

"The country's total fisheries yield per year is estimated to be \$2.5 billion, as more than one million people are employed in the fishing industry; 2.3 million tourists generated \$1.99 million in tourist receipts in 2004; while 6.2 million are people employed in tourism-related businesses," she said.

Gozun said only seven percent of the country's reefs have been declared as marine-protected areas, which is the lowest among Asian countries, as the mangrove decline in the Philippines is considered "very significant."

"But the country has to do more to sustain this, it has to face the challenges (to ensure conservation of marine and coastal resources) for the future," she said.

Gozun said the Philippines' main fish species, such as round scad or galunggong and tuna, are showing "severe signs of overfishing," and that economic loss over fishing is estimated at about P6.5 billion per year in lost fish catches.

Increasing pollution of bodies of water resulting in harmful algal blooms or "red tide" had produced yearly

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losses in fish exports of around P1.6 billion during the 1990s, she added.

Gozun said the government should take action to increase the protection of threatened marine and coastal resources, improve local livelihood for communities in coastal areas, and strengthen and simplify institutional arrangements to achieve a sustainable marine and coastal resources.

"As it has always been said, we have so many good laws but we lack proper enforcement of these laws," she said.

During the same forum, President Arroyo announced that she had signed an executive order adopting the Integrated Coastal Management.

Mrs. Arroyo said she had directed Environment Secretary Angelo Reyes to lead the formulation of a national integrated coastal management plan jointly with other concerned government agencies such as the Departments of Agriculture, Interior and Local Government, Foreign Affairs, Tourism, Transportation and Communications, and the National Economic and Development Authority.

"We are the second largest archipelago in the world with a fragile island ecosystem," Mrs. Arroyo told guests and participants of the National Forum on Sustainable Development of Coastal and Marine Resources.

"To protect our coasts and marine waters, however, we must protect the entire environment — our forests, our lands, our waters, our air — for almost everything that ensues from environmental degradation flows down and impacts negatively on the quality of our seas," she said.

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