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Environmental Groups and Experts Call on Immediate Protection for Philippine Rise

Environmental coalition and experts urge Philippine government to reconsider decision to allow Chinese 'scientific research' in the pristine area

A coalition of environmental groups strongly protests the Department of Foreign Affairs' (DFA) issuance of a permit for a Chinese marine research institute to conduct scientific research in the Philippine Rise, formerly known as Benham Rise.

"We call on our government to support Filipino-led research, formulate and implement science-based policies for the management of the Philippine Rise, and immediately declare Benham Bank as a 'no-take' zone for the benefit of the Filipino people," says *Pangisda Natin Gawing Tama* (PANAGAT), composed of Greenpeace, Oceana Philippines, the World Wide Fund for Nature, Tambuyog, NGOs for Fisheries Reform, Institute for Social Order, Pangisda and other groups. "Most importantly, we call on our government to prioritize food security."

The Institute of Oceanology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (IOCAS) was recently granted permission to explore the waters off eastern Luzon and eastern Mindanao, provided that representatives from the UP Marine Science Institute accompanied them.

Previously known only to a few, the Philippine Rise is an undersea territory located east of Luzon. It includes a 13-million hectare extended section validated in 2012 by the United Nations' Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UN CLCS) as the Philippines' newest territory. This expanded the original region from 11.4-million hectares to 24.4-million hectares – just under the total land area of the country, which currently stands at 30-million hectares. Recent furor over a Chinese ship traversing the area in 2017 ignited much concern from the citizenry and generated significant media attention.

A 2017 Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey conducted for Oceana revealed that 29% of Filipinos are aware of the Philippine Rise.

Filipinos Already Conducted Research in the Philippine Rise

Experts debunk justifications of Foreign Affairs Secretary Cayetano and Presidential spokesperson Roque for the issuance of the permit to the Chinese government.

Filipino research teams have done several scientific research in the Philippine Rise for years. "There seems to be a thinking that we need the scientific expertise of another country to be able to explore, study, and identify sustainable development options for our natural resources such as those in Benham Rise. I have full confidence in the expertise of our Filipino scientists. They can do it, with even a modicum or simplest of equipment," says

Silliman University President Dr. Ben Malayang III. “Let us affirm them, rather than diminish them for political purposes.”

“The claim that Filipinos cannot afford to explore Benham Rise and that the Philippines needs China to do it is completely wrong and a serious disservice to Filipino scientists. Filipinos have been exploring the Benham Rise Region for years now,” adds maritime affairs expert Dr. Jay Batongbacal.

Two oceanographic research cruises – one in 2014 and another in 2016 – were led by scientists from the government, with another one scheduled this year. The 2016 expedition assessed parts of Benham Bank and found portions with an astounding 100% live coral cover – extremely rare in the country – plus a diverse assemblage of fish.

Marine scientists confirmed the existence of a vast ‘mesophotic’ or deep-sea reef ecosystem at minimum depths of 50 meters, which is a potential source and refuge for shallow reef fish and other marine organisms which are vulnerable to climate change. The Philippine Rise is also an important fishing ground for Filipinos, and a recognized spawning area for North Pacific Bluefin tuna (*Thunnus orientalis*), one of the most expensive fish on Earth.

These findings of the uniqueness and richness of the biodiversity in the area from studies of Filipino scientists have persuaded 196 State parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in December 2016 to adopt the Philippine Rise as an ecologically and biologically significant area.

More than 50 organizations and institutions nationwide and thousands of individuals and netizens have called for the Duterte administration to declare a portion of the Philippine Rise as a protected area, including Benham Bank as a ‘no-take’ zone, calling for a clear management framework for its long-term sustainability.

“With potentially undiscovered species and 100% live coral cover, Benham Bank is possibly the most pristine reef in the country. We call on the government to prioritize the protection of our marine resources and habitat and our patrimony now, for the present and future generations,” concludes Oceana Philippines Vice-president Atty. Gloria Estenzo Ramos.

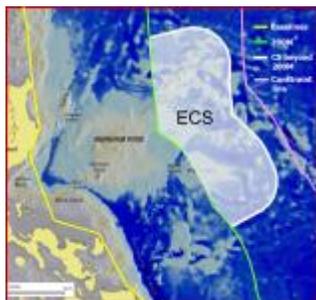
Oceana created an [online petition](#) to galvanize nationwide and global support for the area’s protection and sustainable management. (30)

Oceana is the largest international advocacy organization dedicated solely to ocean conservation. Oceana is rebuilding abundant and biodiverse oceans by winning science-based policies in countries that control one third of the world’s wild fish catch. With over 100 victories that stop overfishing, habitat destruction, pollution and killing of threatened species like turtles and sharks, Oceana’s campaigns are delivering results. A restored ocean means that one billion people can enjoy a healthy seafood meal, every day, forever. Together, we can save the oceans and help feed the world. Visit ph.oceana.org to learn more.

Captioned Images:



Oceana's manifestó calling for immediate protection for Benham Bank and a management framework for the Philippine Rise has been supported by over 50 organizations and tens of thousands of individuals online. (OCEANA)



The Philippine Rise is about 24.4 million hectares, close to the total land area of the country, which is 30 million hectares. (NAMRIA)

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