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## Maritime and Archipelagic Nation Awareness Month Celebrates Ocean Conservation

The first-ever **Maritime and Archipelagic Nation Awareness Month (MANA MO)** celebration concluded last month. MANA MO was proclaimed by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte as a special month of celebration intended to raise awareness on issues related to national maritime and archipelagic concerns, to be celebrated in the Philippines every September.

*“Mana means heritage. Our waters form the lifeblood of our national heritage which we draw on to protect our people and preserve our way of life,”* said Executive Secretary and National Coast Watch Council (NCWC) Chairperson Salvador Medialdea during the formal launch of MANA MO, which was led by the NCWC in Malacañang Palace last September.

Government initiatives promoting natural resource protection are working in areas like the **Tañon Strait**, a 161-kilometer channel which separates the islands of Cebu and Negros. It is incredibly rich in biodiversity – hosting 63% of the country’s coral species, 56% of its mangrove species, plus 50 % of its whale and dolphin species.

The Tañon Strait Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) required all transiting commercial fishing vessels in the protected seascape to install **Vessel Monitoring Measures (VMM)**. VMM is an effective enforcement tool to track the behavior of commercial fishers which are banned from operating in the area.

A big boost to the enforcers was the designation of a special prosecutor from the Department of Justice to handle fisheries and conservation cases taking place in the Strait, greatly bolstering law enforcement capacity. Seaborne patrol operations and cases have been filed against illegal fishers by a composite team of enforcers who recently met the newly-appointed special prosecutor – a good development for the focused and successful prosecution of cases.

Oceana supports the trailblazing initiatives of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) and local government units in protecting other marine enclaves such as the **Visayan Sea**. “The Visayan Sea is the country’s third-largest producer of wild fish – but stocks have already declined by 70% from 1948 to 2016. Because it’s a hotbed for Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing, we must work together to protect and conserve the area. Many fishers rely on it for life,” says BFAR Western Visayas Director Remia Apari.

BFAR has already pledged to declare the Visayan Sea as the first fisheries management area in the country, promising to take the lead in facilitating its creation and implementation, together with LGUs and nonprofit partners.

To support the government’s MANA MO festivities, Oceana staged several exhibits featuring the beauty of **Benham Bank**, the shallowest portion of the Philippine Rise, a 24.4-million hectare undersea territory which

hosts some of the most pristine coral reefs in the country. Exhibits were staged at Malacañang Palace, the House of Representatives and Subic Bay.

Oceana Philippines Vice-president **Atty. Gloria Estenzo-Ramos** was invited to talk about the Philippine Rise during the meeting of retired Chief Justices and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court of the Philippines. “Our government is making strong headway in enhancing enforcement drives and improving the way we manage fisheries,” concludes Ramos. “When we conserve our oceans, we ensure the health of the natural systems which give us food, livelihood and other important ecosystem services. We must protect our rich natural heritage. Ito ang pamana natin sa mga susunod na henerasyon.” (30)

#### For More Information:

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#### Captioned Images:



Led by National Coast Watch Council Chair Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana, NCWC Executive Director Undersecretary Jose Luis Alano, and Oceana Philippines Vice-president Atty. Gloria Estenzo-Ramos, the Maritime and Archipelagic Nation Awareness (MANA) Month was kicked off last 4 September at Malacañang Palace. (OCEANA / Ryan Miller Romitman)



Oceana Vice-president Atty. Gloria Estenzo-Ramos (in gray) is flanked by Catanduanes Representative Cesar Sarmiento, Bataan Representative Geraldine Roman and other government allies during the launch of Oceana's MANA MO exhibit at the House of Representatives last 25 September. (OCEANA / Ryan Miller Romitman)



Oceana works closely with the government and local communities in saving the oceans and feeding the world. Shown are freshly-caught pelagic food fish in Negros Oriental. (Gregg Yan)