

3/22/2017

Now is the Time to Protect Benham Rise - Oceana

Oceana, Earth's largest international non-government organization working on ocean conservation, urged the Philippine government to protect Benham Rise – an undersea territory east of Luzon brimming with natural resources.

“Benham Rise is part of Philippine territory. We must exercise our sovereignty over this area and assert our rights. The immediate creation of a **management framework** to ensure the protection of this special place and the conservation of its marine resources is a compelling first step,” says lawyer Gloria Estenzo Ramos, Vice-President for Oceana Philippines.

The Department of National Defense (DND) recently disclosed that a Chinese vessel conducted an unsanctioned survey in the region, believed to be rich in both marine and mineral resources.

Benham Rise is an undersea territory located east of Luzon. It includes a 13-million hectare extended continental shelf 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.

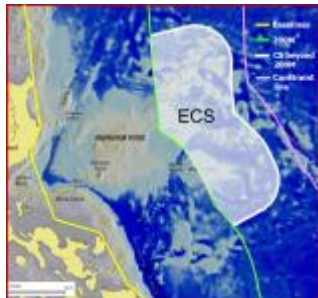
The Philippine government has conducted numerous expeditions to the region to study its resources. Last May 2016, Oceana joined government scientists from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), plus the University of the Philippines, Philippine Coast Guard and Philippine Navy for an expedition to Benham Bank – the shallowest portion of the Rise.

The expedition team reported an astounding **100% coral cover** in the surveyed area – extremely rare in the country and perhaps the only one – plus a diverse assemblage of marine resources. Marine scientists also documented a vast '**mesophotic**' or **deep-sea reef ecosystem** at minimum depths of 50 meters, which experts cited as a potential source and refuge for shallow reef fish and other marine organisms which can be affected by climate change.

“With 100% coral cover, this area is possibly the only place left in Philippine waters in such a pristine state. Further research should be done to ensure that the area is developed sustainably. We must work together and exercise our sovereign rights to nurture and protect it – a first step would be to **declare Benham Bank as a 'no-take' zone**, immediately protecting it from any exploitation,” says Ramos.

Oceana today came out with an [online petition](#) urging Filipinos to declare their support for Benham Rise. (30)

Captioned Images:



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



A lone Philippine flag sits in front of a Sarcophyton soft coral at a deepwater reef in Benham Bank. (Oceana / UPLB)



A colony of foliose corals at a minimum depth of 50 meters in Benham Bank. (Oceana / UPLB)

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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 www.oceana.org to learn more.

BENHAM RISE

Quick Fact Sheet

- Benham Rise is a 24.4 million-hectare undersea region located east of Luzon.
- It includes a 13 million hectare outer section which was validated by the United Nations' Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLOS) as part of the Philippine territory in 2012.
- Benham Rise expanded from the original 11.4 million hectares to 24.4 million hectares – almost as big as the land area of the Philippines (at 30 million hectares).
- The shallowest part of the region is Benham Bank, with a depth of at least 50 meters.
- Benham Rise is named after American surveyor Andrew Benham, who first mapped the region in 1933.

Natural resources and exploration:

- In May 2016, a team of scientists from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), University of the Philippines, and Oceana conducted an expedition in Benham Bank. The expedition team documented a vast coral reef ecosystem and diverse marine species.
- The expedition team conducted oceanographic, benthic (study of the seabed), and microbiological surveys, documented large marine life, and reported 100 percent coral cover in Benham Bank.
- The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said the continental shelf has huge deposits of minerals including nickel, copper, cobalt, silver, and rare earth metals.

References:

http://www.un.org/depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/ph122_09/ph1_esomeary.pdf
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Senate P.S. Resolution 707