

Oceana Partners with Stakeholders to Champion Benham Rise

Together with its allies in the government and private sector, Oceana Philippines is urgently pushing for the legal protection of Benham Rise (renamed recently as Philippine Rise) as a marine protected area including the declaration of Benham Bank, the shallowest portion of Benham Rise, as a no-take zone, where human activity is not allowed.

In a policy dialogue called “*Bayanihan Para sa Benham*” hosted by Oceana and graced by representatives from various government agencies and other stakeholders, Director Mundita Lim of the Biodiversity Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources shared that Benham Rise was designated as an Ecologically and Biologically Significant Marine Area (EBSA) by 196 countries during the 13th Meeting of the Convention of Parties (COP) to the Convention of Biological Diversity in Mexico in December 2016.

EBSAs are said to be “geographically or oceanographically discrete areas that provide important services to one or more species or populations of an ecosystem or to the ecosystem as a whole, compared to other surrounding areas or areas of similar ecological characteristics, or otherwise meet the following scientific criteria: Uniqueness or rarity, Special importance for life history stages of species, Importance for threatened, endangered or declining species and / or habitats, Vulnerability, fragility, sensitivity or slow recovery, Biological productivity, Biological diversity and Naturalness.” Benham Rise scored high in four of the seven criteria, a global recognition of its importance, and of being pristine and unique.

The COP Decision described Benham Rise as “relatively pristine ... of critical ecological importance, including for offshore mesophotic coral reef biodiversity and for the sustainability of fisheries.” It added that “aside from being an important source of biodiversity and contributing to the resiliency of threatened ecosystems,” Benham Rise was also cited as “forming part of the only known spawning area of the Pacific blue fin tuna, *Thunnus orientalis*.” Other world famous EBSAs include the famed Galapagos Islands in Ecuador and the Rajah Ampat Park in Indonesia.

“We need to conduct more research on Benham Rise to know exactly what there is to protect,” explained BMB Director Mundita Lim.

The Philippine government has launched several expeditions to the vast and still-largely unexplored region. 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 expedition team reported an astounding 100% coral cover in the surveyed area – where corals grew atop other corals. In a country where healthy reefs are the exception rather than the rule, Benham Bank is a treasure trove for oceanic life. Scientists cited the area as a potential refuge for shallow reef fish and other marine organisms which can be affected by climate change.

“Where else can we find 100% coral cover?” asks Oceana Philippines Vice-president Atty. Gloria Estenzo Ramos. “This area is possibly the most pristine reef in the country, which is why it was declared as an EBSA.

We must work together and exercise our sovereign rights to nurture and protect it. The first step is to declare the pristine Benham Bank as a no-take zone, immediately shielding it from any form of exploitation.”

Oceana has been pursuing its campaign through university talks, dialogues and photo exhibits – one of which has been set-up at the Senate of the Philippines from 29 May to 2 June.

“We’ll actively protect and strongly defend the breadth and depth of our territories to ensure that future generations of Filipinos will still have the opportunity to take pride and find joy in our country’s rich biodiversity. The Philippine Rise (formerly called Benham Rise) contributes tremendously to our biodiversity with its vast reef ecosystem, presence of numerous species of fish and other natural resources. Let’s continue to protect it,” says Senator Cynthia Villar.

Oceana is also gathering public support to protect the area through an online petition and sign-ups in its Benham Rise campus tours.

“We fully support our government’s initiative to develop a management framework to ensure the protection of this special place. Whatever the case, Oceana will always be ready to jump in and help,” concludes Oceana marine scientist Marianne Pan-Saniano. (30)

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References:

Decision, Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, 17 December 2016.

Ecologically and Biologically Significant Areas, <https://www.caff.is/protected-and-important-areas/ebas>.