Sustainable Fisheries Management and Marine Conservation
Oceana Philippines Policy Brief

As a sea nation, the Philippines harbors a wealth of marine resources that provides food and livelihood to millions of Filipinos. It ranks 14th in the world as a source of seafood caught in the wild.

Despite recent improvements in fisheries law enforcement, however, illegal fishing remains a huge problem. Commercial fishers continue to enter and illegally fish in municipal waters in a lop-sided competition with the artisanal fisherfolk for the declining fish stock, while foreign fleets poach high-value species. Destructive fishing – such as bottom trawl fishing, blast fishing and the capture of young fish before they can grow into adulthood – is a significant threat to the health of fish populations and the livelihood of fishing communities. The government itself estimates that 75% of our principal fishing grounds are now considered overfished. Artisanal fishers bring home fewer large fish, if they are lucky enough to catch any.

Reef fish have declined by up to 90 percent, leading to major losses in coastal economies. Recent data also show that the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone has fish stocks depleted by as much as 90%, sea grass beds destroyed by as much as 50%, and coral reefs degraded by as much as 96%, all in the past 50 years. Moreover, the destruction of large areas of important ocean habitats such as coral reefs can result in lower incomes from fishing, reduced food production, higher disaster risk, and extreme poverty. The urgency of the situation is compounded by the fact that the Philippines is one of the most vulnerable countries to the deleterious effects of climate change such as sea level rise, storm surges and displacement of coastal residents.

These adverse impacts can be minimized through marine conservation, habitat protection and sustainable fisheries and adoption of the ecosystem-based approach enacted into national and local policies that are fully implemented. But, weak enforcement of our fisheries and environmental laws is another big challenge to surmount.

In this archipelago of more than 7,500 islands, the people’s way of life is closely connected to the sea. The country’s highly productive fisheries, if managed sustainably, can feed the growing Philippine population and achieve economic growth and security. As such, we must enact and fully implement laws and policies to restore the abundance of our oceans.

Sustainable Fisheries as Key to Food Security

Healthy aquatic ecosystems contribute greatly to food security. Worldwide, fish provides essential nutrition for 3 billion people and contribute a significant amount of animal protein to the diets of the
Healthy Oceans for Climate Change Adaptation

Oceans provide the very air we breathe and are the earth’s main buffer to climate change. From 2000 to 2007, our seas removed around 25% of atmospheric carbon dioxide emitted by human activities. They absorb more than 95% of the sun’s radiation, making air temperatures tolerable for life on land, and provide 85% of the water vapor in the atmosphere, regulating the climate on land and sea. Evidently, ocean health influences the capacity of oceans to absorb carbon.

The problem is even more pressing now as the country deals with the adverse effects of climate change. Culturally and economically important fish such as sardines are highly sensitive to changes in ocean conditions. Coastal communities and fisherfolk are especially affected by climate change impacts such as sea level rise, ocean acidification, droughts and floods. As it stands, it is clear that artisanal fisherfolk, the country’s poorest of the poor, will bear the full force of these impacts through less stable livelihoods and heightened disaster risk in coastal communities, and possibly displacement from their traditional fishing grounds.

Fisheries are economically, culturally, socially and ecologically important to all Filipinos, and the productivity of our fisheries is closely tied to the health of coastal ecosystems - coral reefs, mangroves and sea grass beds being particularly important. However, these resources are under heavy pressure as evidenced by the declining fish catch, size and species composition around the country. Fishers now spend more time at sea for smaller yields. A small-scale fisher who used to catch more than 40 kilograms of fish per day can now expect to catch just three kilograms with the same amount of effort. Overfishing, illegal fishing and habitat destruction combined with the increased demand for fish and population growth continue to drive fisheries production down to the point that natural fish populations may be unable to recover. As such, the current condition of fisheries in the Philippines and worldwide is bleak.

Considering the fact that the Philippines supports a rapidly increasing population reliant on marine resources, the sustainable management of our fisheries should be a main agenda of our government.

Stronger Legal Framework under the Amended Fisheries Code (Republic Act 10654)

Due to decades of over-exploitation and rampant illegal fishing, the Fisheries Code was amended by Republic Act (RA) 10654 in January, 2015, strengthening the protection and promoting the sustainability of our fisheries. RA 10654 seeks to “prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated” or IUU fishing in the country. The new law includes higher deterrent penalties, speedier adjudication, and stronger measures for conservation and monitoring. These measures, such as vessel monitoring,
harvest control rules, and stricter traceability rules, are sought turn around the critical decline in our fisheries health. For instance, requiring vessel monitoring for all commercial vessels, to track and monitor their position, course and speed for the purpose of fisheries management is especially important within municipal waters and in marine protected areas, where commercial fishers are prohibited to fish. These substantial amendments to the Fisheries Code give our country a better chance of rebuilding fish stocks and allow for a more rational approach for fish catch production.

**Necessity for Stronger Enforcement of the Law**

The Philippines has good laws on paper but has been lacking in enforcement. While the country has been going along the right direction in terms of reforms, it is crucial that there is political will for proper implementation of the law to ensure food security and economic growth in the long term.

The strengthened enforcement of the law to stop illegal commercial fishing is particularly important and can serve as a deterrence to crimes. This has been proven to be possible in certain areas, given strong political will and support from government and the communities. In Tañon Strait Protected Seascapes (TSPS), the largest marine protected area in our country, efforts that seek to end the encroachment of commercial fishing vessels within the protected area through regular sea-borne patrols, inter-agency collaboration, apprehension of fishing vessels and filing of cases against violators are now starting to bear fruit.

Other laws and regulations that need to be fully implemented are the nationwide ban on modified Danish seine, known as ‘hulbot hulbot’ and dynamite fishing. For blast fishing alone, the Bureau of Fisheries estimates that there are 10,000 incidents every day, resulting in the daily loss of 240 million pesos worth of sardine fisheries alone, and the appalling destruction of our rapidly declining coral cover and marine ecosystems. The prevalence of illegal dump-and-fill or “reclamation” projects is also another glaring ecologically disastrous activity usually undertaken in highly vulnerable or biodiversity rich areas without proper compliance with the requirements of the law, and almost often without the essential development road map such as an updated comprehensive land use plan which integrates the impacts of climate change.

**Habitat Protection for the Future Generations of Filipinos**

The Philippines is in the apex of the Coral Triangle, known for its astounding diversity of coral reefs and wildlife. Though numerous marine protected areas have been established to protect these resources, most are considered mere “paper parks” with little to no enforcement or management.

Aside from protecting important ecosystems and habitats, protected areas are necessary in order to feed our growing population. Scientific studies prove that properly managed marine protected areas all over the world result in dramatic increases in spawning stocks, and that fish in marine protected areas live longer, grow larger and produce more eggs. Furthermore, we need protected areas for our survival
in the face of climate change, as these places promote ecosystems resiliency and mitigate disaster risk. Thus, our protected areas should be given the highest protection they deserve, to ensure that our national heritage will still be around for the future generations of Filipinos.

Habitat protection is also essential to safeguard the sustainability of our fisheries resources. Intervention in sardines fisheries management has shown that although supply has declined, science-based rules and regulations have resulted in improved fish catch. This proves that policy reform can provide economically feasible and socially acceptable solutions to environmental problems. As such, science-based policies should be enacted and replicated in all our fishing grounds and territories, to achieve long-lasting solutions to our fisheries management problems.

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Political authorities need to consult with the various fisheries stakeholders on the issues that are still unresolved, and provide clear and time bound platforms on fisheries management and with sustainable fisheries management as a critical pillar of their electoral agenda. We are all reliant on the oceans for food, work, oxygen, and ultimately life. We must commit to bringing in a new era of sustainable fishing to Philippines waters. The oceans are our shared life support and shared responsibility. Only together can we move forward to save our oceans, now in deep crisis.

Sources:

“Oceana in the Philippines”, A Primer
“Fisheries in the Philippines”, Fish Forever. Retrieved at http://www.fishforever.org/where/philippines/#VuQv0Tq70
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We look forward to seeing the leaders of our nation continue to take on measures to restore the health, richness and abundance of the Philippine oceans by working closely with local governments, civil society, academics, fishers and people’s organizations. As we recognize that the health and productivity of our oceans are in peril due to decades of over-extraction, over-exploitation, and rampant Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing (IUUF) caused by weak governance, we need to craft and implement our strong laws and policies that will address these problems and build long lasting solutions to rebuild our fisheries.

When we save the oceans, we feed the world. Proper management and conservation of our natural resources will guarantee the sustainability of our fisheries, ensure food security, and drive economic growth in the coming years.

For the next set of leaders who will steer our country towards responsible and sustainable fisheries management, we have the following policy recommendations:

1. **Establishment of more marine protected areas (MPAs).** MPAs protect fish spawning habitats and boost productivity of our waters. Several scientific studies provide proof of the successes of MPAs in enhancing biodiversity and benefiting sea life. Areas facing reduced pressure, where fishing has been banned or restricted, have healthier communities and often host fish that are significantly bigger and more plentiful than in the areas outside reserves. As fish get bigger in a protected area, productivity increases and creates a spillover effect into surrounding areas leading to bigger catches in these neighboring areas.\(^1\) Furthermore, at least fifteen percent (15%) of the total coastal areas in each municipality are required to be identified and automatically designated as fish sanctuaries by the LGUs\(^2\) pursuant to the Fisheries Code, a requirement that should now be complied with to ensure the sustainability of our resources and the livelihood of our fisherfolk.

2. **End commercial fishing in protected areas and municipal waters.** Government must end the encroachment of commercial fishing vessels within protected areas and municipal waters as they wreak havoc to the valuable ecosystems and destroy spawning habitats for fish. Furthermore, one of the causes of the continuing high poverty rates in our coastal communities and among fisherfolk is due to the declining fish catch brought about by the illegal exploitation of commercial fishers in municipal waters, which deprive artisanal fisherfolk of their day’s catch and livelihood.

3. **Science-based policies.** Harvest control rules are sets of well-defined rules used to determine allowable fishing effort and ensure sustainable catch limits. There is an urgent need for the

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2. Section 81. Fish Refuge and Sanctuaries. Fisheries Code of the Philippines (Republic Act 8550), as amended by RA 10654
formulation and implementation of strong harvest policies to allow government to act swiftly under certain standards to ensure that harvest does not exceed any acceptable limits. These rules ensure the sustainability of the resource and the consistent supply of fish to our markets. In the process of crafting these rules, scientific advisory groups must be formed composed of experts from government, academic, research institutions and fisheries policy organizations to provide science based policy recommendations to fisheries management decision makers. Moreover, the government should develop a national decommissioning program based on harvest control rules for all destructive, illegal and overly-extractive fishing vessels.

4. **Strengthening institutions.** There is a need to strengthen enforcement agencies and capacitate their personnel with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement the law, including empowering the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Councils (FARMCs) to be fully functional to support sustainable management policies. Government agencies should also provide strong technical support to stakeholders and LGUs to ensure that local communities and personnel have the necessary skills and technical capacity to implement environmental laws and to properly manage the resources in their municipal waters. This will also enable stakeholders to avail of the legal remedies under our environmental laws that allow for faster prosecution for violators and which promote public participation in resource management. Conversely, the judicial system must also be strengthened to prosecute violators of environmental and fisheries law and ensure that impunity will not be tolerated.

5. **Traceability.** To ensure that all seafood we consume are legally and sustainably caught, publicly verifiable traceability policy must be put in place for all fisheries products, for both domestic and international markets.

6. **End dynamite fishing.** This highly destructive practice can be eliminated through policies such as restricting and implementing the regulation on ammonium nitrate, the active ingredient in blast fishing explosives. This restriction, coupled with strengthened community-based enforcement activities, will catalyze the end to this ecologically destructive and dangerous practice. Market denial policies will also help deter blast fishing, with government intensifying efforts on getting markets to enact policies to ensure that fish sold in their markets are not caught by explosives. As there is an urgent need to stop this activity, a task force in the executive department should be constituted to make sure that this illegal practice is addressed at the soonest possible time.

7. **Creation of a Department of Ocean Affairs or Department of Fisheries.** As an archipelago, it is high time a department-level government agency focused solely on ocean concerns is established. This department will focus on the management and conservation of our natural resources, and will strengthen the enforcement and regulatory functions in order for the government to effectively manage our coastal and marine resources and protect the livelihood of the fisherfolk, the poorest of the poor in the country. Being a nation that is highly dependent on our seas, it is but proper to give more attention to these matters through a higher authority which is part of the decision-makers in the cabinet of the President.
8. **Full implementation of the Fisheries Code, as amended (Republic Act 10654).**

With the strong measure under the newly amended Fisheries Code, the Philippines is on its way towards a sustainable path. As such, provisions of the law that include deterrent penalties, vessel monitoring system, harvest control rules, and strong traceability measures must be fully implemented to give effect to the law and achieve our goals of food security and economic growth. In the process, stakeholders must be encouraged to be involved in crafting the next steps of the amended Code’s implementation, which include refining the procedural rules for Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources’ Administrative Adjudication board, rules on vessel monitoring measures and other key fisheries management policies in the new IRR that are yet to be studied.

9. **Ban destructive fishing gear.** Destructive fishing gears and practices devastate the marine environment and cause irreversible damage to our ecosystems. One of the most harmful techniques is bottom trawling, a fishing method which uses enormous nets that are dragged along the sea floor, crushing everything in their way. Bans on other destructive gear (e.g. *hulbot* or Modified Danish seine) and practices (e.g. *muro-ami*, *kayakas*) should also be strictly enforced so that violators are prosecuted. These destructive practices must end for marine ecosystems to start rebuilding and for Philippine fisheries to flourish.

10. **Prevent the destruction of coastal habitats and unplanned coastal development projects.** Sensitive and interconnected marine ecosystems such as coral reefs, sea grass beds and mangroves are destroyed and dumped filling materials due to destructive industrial activities such as dump-and-fill or “reclamation” projects. National government agencies and LGUs must therefore exercise their legal authority to prevent dumping and filling projects which do not comply with the requirements of a national law and plebiscite before any substantial alteration of territorial boundaries take place, in addition to a thorough assessment of its environmental impacts and heritage and climate impacts. Moreover, these projects should comply with the stringent requirements of various laws before any application to be considered. In this regard, there is a need to strengthen the Environmental Impact Statement System (EISS) of the Philippines to safeguard the environment in the face of growing industrialization and urbanization. Moreover, the local government units must be strictly required to adopt an integrated comprehensive land use plan that uses the ecosystem based approach.

11. **Vessel Monitoring Measures for all Commercial Fishing Vessels.** Vessel monitoring measure (VMM) is a means, method or system used to track and monitor the position, course and speed of the vessels at any given time for the purpose of management of fishing effort and fisheries resources and for traceability. Although government has crafted a schedule for the requirement of the use of vessel monitoring mechanism for commercial fishing vessels, these are yet to be fully implemented and effectively enforced. Mandatory VMM use will result in better deterrence against the operations of commercial fishing vessels in protected areas and
municipal waters, where they are not allowed to operate. These measures ensure that commercial fishing vessels can be monitored and apprehended for any violation of the law. With a VMM in place, there must also be a mechanism to facilitate the sharing and use of information between the government and LGUs on Vessel Monitoring Measures (VMM), to allow LGUs and other law enforcement agencies/bodies to effectively implement the law and apprehend violators.
About Oceana Philippines

Founded in 2001, Oceana is the largest international advocacy organization dedicated to protecting and restoring the world’s oceans on a global scale. Oceana campaigns in the countries that control nearly 40 percent of the world’s wild fish catch in order to win policy victories that can increase biodiversity in our oceans and deliver more seafood to the future. Oceana’s efforts focus on rebuilding ocean fisheries, securing seafood for a growing world, protecting marine wildlife and special places, and stopping ocean pollution.

The Philippine branch of Oceana was established in 2014 to promote national policies that protect and sustain the country’s vast marine resources. We utilize policies and laws to ensure that fish and fishers receive the protection they deserve. We extend our scientific expertise to help establish sustainable catch limits, reduce by catch, and protect spawning habitats. We educate the public on the importance of healthy oceans and its vital role as a source of food, livelihood, and life.

Oceana Philippines seeks to restore the health, richness, and abundance of the Philippine oceans. By working closely with civil society, academics, fishers and government, Oceana Philippines promotes the use of science-based policies to help ensure sustainable fisheries and vibrant marine ecosystems for the benefit of the Filipino people.

Save the oceans. Feed the world.

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