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## Presidential Proclamation Signed to Protect Philippine Rise

*Rodrigo Duterte signed a presidential proclamation to protect 50,000 hectares of the Philippine Rise including the pristine Benham Bank, where some areas have 100% coral cover, as a “strict protection zone”*

“Today I’m officially issuing a presidential proclamation, formally declaring parts of the Philippine Rise undersea feature as a marine resource reserve,” Duterte said in a media briefing aboard BRP Davao Del Sur off the coast in Aurora in the northeastern part of the Philippines, which is the nearest port to Benham Bank.

The protected area includes Benham Bank which is around 17,000 hectares declared as a no-take zone, and will be closed to any human activities except for scientific research.

An additional 300,000 hectares will also be declared as a fisheries management area (FMA). Fishing using active gears is banned in FMAs under RA 10654 which amended the Fisheries Code. A fisheries management area is subject to protective measures to ensure that there will be no illegal fishing and overexploitation of the marine resources.

The Philippine Rise is a 24.4 million hectare undersea region located east of Luzon, which includes a 13.4 million hectare outer section that was validated by the United Nations’ Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLOS) as part of the Philippine territory in 2012. The shallowest part of the region is Benham Bank, with a depth of at least 50 meters.

Duterte said that the presidential proclamation includes the requirement for continuous assessment of coral reef and fish species, which he said is “vital for the management of the Philippine Rise and its resources.” He also committed to capacitate Filipino scientists to fulfill their mandates in conducting scientific research in the Philippine Rise.

Duterte also emphasized that the declaration of portions the Philippine Rise as an FMA signifies the need to sustainably fish in the area, to ensure that the future generations would still have fish to eat.

The Presidential proclamation is expected to set the legal framework for the protection and sustainable management of the Philippine Rise as it is automatically subject to the National Integrated Protected Areas System Act, RA 7586.

According to Senator Loren Legarda, President Duterte is likewise expected to sign soon into law the bill amending RA 7586, the proposed Expanded National Integrated Protected Areas System (ENIPAS) Act, which seeks to increase the number of Congress-declared protected areas. The bill has been approved by the bicameral conference committee.

“This is a remarkable event, especially for the protection of our oceans and ensuring seafood security for future generations, amidst the growing threats of climate change and overfishing,” said Marianne Pan Saniano, marine scientist for Oceana Philippines.

Saniano said that the protection of the Philippine Rise was achieved through the pooled efforts of government agencies and advocates, who supported the urgent call to protect the Philippine Rise, and especially declare the Benham Bank as a strict protection zone.

“When we went to Benham Bank in 2016 with our government scientists, navy and coast guards, we saw terraces of corals, as far as the eye could see. We still have such a vast and pristine coral reef ecosystem within Philippine territory which we still need to protect,” Saniano said.

In 2016, government scientists reported 100% coral cover in several sampling sites during an expedition in Benham Bank, and documented diverse species of reef fishes. Scientists said that the Philippine Rise is also the spawning site of the Pacific Bluefin tuna, one of the most expensive fish in the world.

Lawyer Gloria Estenzo Ramos, Vice President of Oceana in the Philippines, commended President Duterte and the government officials and partners from the civil society and private sectors who worked tirelessly to protect the Philippine Rise. She adds that "The presidential proclamation is much awaited as it paves the way for the conservation, management and protection of corals, fisheries and the rich biodiversity in the iconic place. It is now subject to the governance structure and requirements under the National Integrated Protected Areas System. This is much needed to protect fragile marine habitats, address food security and increase the resiliency of our marine ecosystems to the impacts of climate change ."

She emphasized that the proclamation is a highly significant event happening this year declared as the International Year of the Reef and the month of May, as the Month of the Ocean. Ramos adds that "It is noteworthy that in 1998, declared as the International Year of the Ocean, then President Estrada likewise issued Proclamation No. 57 declaring the Month of May of every year as the Month of the Ocean in the Philippines."

Oceana and other environment organizations also circulated an [online petition](#) calling for the protection of the Philippine Rise, and which rallied more than 26,000 supporters and signatories.

### Captioned Images:



The Philippine Rise is a 24.4 million hectare undersea region, east of Luzon. In 2016, Oceana joined an expedition in Benham Bank, the shallowest portion of the Philippine Rise with a depth of 40 meters. The team documented 100% coral cover in the surveyed areas with at least 170 species of fish recorded. The protection of Benham Bank and the greater Philippine Rise means that this national heritage will be preserved for the present and future generations. © Oceana/UPLB



Plates of foliose corals look like terraces in Benham Bank. This is a common sight on a bank, and a characteristic of mesophotic or “twilight” reefs, which are found at depths from 30 meters to 150 meters. © Oceana/UPLB



A solitary oriental wrasse is known to inhabit coral reefs with abundant invertebrates, which they feed on. © Oceana/UPLB

*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](http://ph.oceana.org) to learn more.*

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