

2/1/2017

## **The Search for Ocean Heroes and best locally-managed Marine Protected Area in Tañon Strait is on!**

The Ocean Heroes Awards 2017 for Tañon Strait was launched today by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) through their regional offices in Central Visayas and Negros Island Region (NIR); Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources in Central Visayas; the provincial governments of Cebu, Negros Occidental and Negros Oriental; Oceana and Rare.

In its second year, the awards will be given to three individuals from each of the provinces of Cebu, Negros Occidental, and Negros Oriental, plus a special award for an exceptional woman leader who has demonstrated and shown exemplary dedication in the fields of conservation, enforcement and in ensuring sustainable fisheries in Tañon Strait.

Recognition will also be given to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) that are effectively managed through strong local government and community partnership and collaboration; and have diverse, abundant, and healthy biophysical resources and provide equitable social and economic benefits to communities and fishers.

“Oceana believes that giving recognition to those who have persevered to protect our marine resources, biodiversity and fisheries resources through the years is very important and encourages more citizens to take action for our oceans,” said lawyer Gloria Estenzo-Ramos, Vice-President for Oceana Philippines.

“Amidst all the hardships and challenges, even faced with threats from those committing illegal acts for short-term gains, these people have worked silently but bravely in the frontlines to defend our environment,” Ramos added.

Initiated last year, the awards have expanded in partnership with the provincial governments of Cebu, Negros Occidental, and Negros Oriental. Rare, a non-government organization implementing the SMART SEAS programme in Tañon Strait is also taking an active role as a partner this year.

“At Rare, we understand the value of having the community throwing their full support behind the fishers, enforcers and other conservation workers protecting the ocean. The Ocean Heroes’ Awards are a powerful way to make this support tangible, so we are honored to join Oceana in celebrating even more achievements -- this time, among the local governments that manage marine protected areas within Tañon Strait” said Rocky Sanchez Tirona, Vice-president of Rare in the Philippines.

Amongst the winners last year is Norlan Pagal, who hails from San Remigio in Cebu. His adherence to his duties as a bantay-dagat enforcer and local leader exposed him to attacks from illegal fishers.

“I believe that working for the protection of our marine resources is a very important task and requires unity of the heart and mind. We act because this is for the benefit of our people and the future generations,” Pagal said.

A new category for the awards has been added this year and is sponsored by the Protected Area Office of the Tañon Strait Protected Seascape.

“This year we also wanted to give recognition to the best locally managed marine protected areas to recognize the important role of communities and Local Government Units in safeguarding marine ecosystems in Tañon Strait,” said Protected Area Superintendent Prospero Am Lendio.

The nomination for this year’s Ocean Heroes Awards is now open and winners will be announced in June 23 in Bacolod City.

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