

# Gov't, LGUs take tougher stance against Tañon Strait illegal fishers

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Concerned government agencies and local government units (LGUs) will conduct more sea patrols and file cases against illegal and commercial fishers in Tañon Strait, the country's largest marine protected area between Cebu and Negros.

“Regular patrols and surveillance activities are necessary for the detection and intelligence gathering of violations within the protected area, as part of an enforcement plan,” said Am Prospero Lendio, area superintendent of the Tañon Strait Protected Seascape (TSPS), which is under the supervision of the Biodiversity Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR-BMB).

Lendio said the enforcement plan serves as guide in harmonizing the initiatives of concerned government agencies to protect Tañon Strait. The plan includes regular inspection of fishing vessels along Tañon Strait, a step-by-step strategy for operations and surveillance, and filling of cases against violators.

Tañon Strait is a critical marine habitat and important migratory path for 14 of the 27 species of whales and dolphins in the Philippines. It is a rich fishing ground, providing livelihood to thousands of fisherfolk and their families in the 42 coastal cities and municipalities in Cebu and Negros Islands.

The TSPS is governed by a protected area management board (PAMB) led by the DENR, with the provincial, municipal and barangay LGUs as members, including other concerned government agencies like the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), Department of the Interior and Local Government, Philippine National Police, Department of Justice (DOJ), and civil society organizations.

“Tañon Strait is a marine biodiversity hotspot. Effective management mechanisms are necessary, along with strong law enforcement, to ensure that it is protected. The operationalization of the enforcement plan should deter the banned commercial fishing and destructive activities in the protected area,” said lawyer Gloria Estenzo Ramos, Vice President for Oceana Philippines.

The enforcement plan is one of the components of Tañon Strait’s General Management Plan (GMP), which provides mechanisms for protecting marine habitats, ensuring sustainable fisheries, and reducing illegal fishing through increased patrolling and apprehension, prosecution of violators, and training of law enforcers, Ramos said.

She said Oceana, in partnership with the DENR-BMB, BFAR and the DOJ, has assisted in providing legal trainings to law enforcement personnel, including the newly designated special prosecutors for protected areas. Oceana also works with BFAR in the pilot-testing of vessel monitoring technologies to track fishing activities in Tañon Strait.

Despite being declared a protected area in 1998, Tañon Strait still suffers from exploitation by commercial fishers encroaching in municipal waters, degradation of critical habitats, and over harvesting of fishery resources, she said.

“Protecting Tañon Strait is a challenging, yet vital, task. The strengthened collaboration of various stakeholders to conserve and protect this critically important marine habitat and fishing ground, where thousands of fishers depend on for food and livelihood, has to be prioritized to ensure sustainable seafood security for future generations,” Ramos said.

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