

Fisheries reform, one coastal town at a time

By Jonathan L. Mayuga
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In Photo: RARE and Oceana leaders, along with San Carlos City stakeholders, discuss ways to better protect the municipal fishing ground.

INTERNATIONAL non-governmental organization (NGO) RARE is making its mark in promoting sustainable fishing through local fisheries management in the Philippines.

Through social marketing, local fisheries reform is taking place in RARE's project sites, one coastal town at a time.



A parrot fish mascot is one of the attractions developed by RARE and its partners as part of its social marketing to effect behavior change.

With this, the protection and conservation of the country's important fishing grounds, including the Tañon Strait, the country's largest protected seascape, is getting the much-needed boost.

Pitching the call for stronger protection measures for the Tañon Strait Protected Seascape (TSPS), RARE and Oceana led a three-day event recently in Negros Occidental and Cebu provinces to highlight the benefits and people's appreciation of their marine ecosystems.

The advocacy in Tañon Strait is part of the \$53-million, five-year program to boost fish population under the Vibrant Oceans Initiative of Bloomberg Philanthropies in Brazil, Chile and the Philippines.

'Fish Forever'

Fish Forever campaigns are being held in Belize, Brazil, Mozambique, Indonesia and the Philippines, where there is "high level of marine biodiversity, important coral reef habitat and the dependence of coastal communities on their fisheries for food and livelihoods."

Under the program, local government leaders are trained to manage their municipal waters more sustainably by setting up managed access areas around sanctuaries, which give fishers exclusive rights to fish in the area in exchange for compliance with more sustainable fishing practices.

It is RARE's flagship program, which started in the Philippines in 2010 in partnership with 37 local government units (LGUs).

The group is currently working with communities in 93 LGUs across the country, making it the NGO with the widest and farthest reach in terms of development work focused on sustainable fisheries management.

"We partner with local governments to help improve their management of their marine and fishery resources. Our goal is to train them and provide support to staff of local governments so that even after we leave, they have the capacity to do it themselves," said Rocky Sanchez-Tirona, RARE vice president for the Philippines.

Conservation fellows

Part of capacity building, Tirona said, is providing opportunities to learn about fisheries and fishers in the communities through higher education and learning.

RARE administers a master's degree program in the Philippines and is currently training 12 conservation fellows recruited from 12 different municipalities.

"They are going through a three-year program. Their thesis is the campaign they are running in the community. They are doing a research to understand the fishery and profile of fishers. They work with the communities to step up the managed access areas," Tirona said.

The conservation fellows encourage the communities to support sustainable fishing by doing social marketing.

“They make posters, conduct activities, use mascots to inspire people to do the right thing. Its part of our behavior-change campaign,” Tirona explained.

Managed access areas

Developing managed access areas is a strategy of RARE to encourage communities to take part in the protection and conservation of marine-protected areas (MPAs).

Adonis Sucalit, senior director for programs of RARE, said this is done to give communities a sense of ownership of the program or project.

Speaking in mixed English and Filipino, Sucalit said a managed-access areas is a combination of “no-take zones” and areas around it. Under the setup, the communities decide who can have access to the fishing grounds.

“Because the communities are the ones protecting the marine-protected areas, it is only right for them to determine policies, including when or where to fish, and who can fish in those designated areas,” Sucalit said.

San Carlos City in Negros Occidental is part of the Fish Forever program. The fishers of Sipaway Island in San Carlos City, which is an island covered by two local MPAs, will get preferential use of their waters around their MPAs “if they stay out of the no-take zone, use only approved fishing gears, participate in meetings and report their catch.”

Behavioral change

RARE said the purpose of social marketing is to instill behavioral change among stakeholders.

“We know that, ultimately, conservation is really about how people behave; its about human behavior. So, in the end, it is what every fisherman does. Fish at the right place, fish the right species, use the right gear,” Sucalit said.

Tirona said its partnership with Oceana under the Vibrant Oceans Initiative attacks two problems that beset the fisheries sector.

“The policies are needed. They are important at the national and provincial levels, but without community support, [and if] their behavior is not aligned with the policies, it will not work. Compliance is important. In our partnership with Oceana, the idea is that Oceana helps drive policies at the national level while RARE drives the community-level change,” Tirona said.

In areas where Fish Forever is implemented, it targets the old and young alike, such as in San Carlos City, where children take part in activities in ocean conservation.

Tañon Strait campaign

In Tañon Strait, in partnership with the Bloomberg Vibrant Oceans Initiative (VOI) and the SmartSeasPH project led by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), RARE is working directly with 21 LGUs.

Five of the LGUs—San Carlos City, Bindoy, Ayungon, Tayasan and Manjuyod—now have or are about to legalize the managed access areas around key MPAs.

Other Negros and Cebu LGUs started in September last year and are now launching social-marketing campaigns and are conducting fisheries profiling and education activities.

Bloomberg Philanthropies launched the VOI in 2013, with the belief that advocacy, policy and enforcement at the national and regional levels, combined with local engagement and management, are critical to addressing the issues of illegal and overfishing.

Oceana, with its expertise in driving critical fisheries reforms, will create the needed enabling environment for local municipalities to manage and protect their resources, while RARE provides the training and coaching support needed by the LGUs. Besides Tañon Strait, RARE has partnership with Fish Core and the Philippine Rural Development Program.

Strong LGU support

Strong LGU support is an essential ingredient in the Fish Forever campaign. Mayor Gerardo P. Valmayor of San Carlos City and Calatrava Mayor Araceli Somoza are supportive of the campaign as they recognize the importance of changing the behavior of their constituents.

Valmayor and Somoza have committed to sustain support to fishers' organizations in San Carlos City, which, in turn, vowed to help protect their respective MPAs against destructive fishing, including commercial fishing that raid their municipal fishing grounds. With the mayors' support, the communities are likely to follow and comply with the rules, Tirona said.

"Behavior-change campaigns are a key ingredients of RARE's approach. Local teams are trained to conduct social-marketing activities that inspire and support the community to manage their resources properly—there are festivals, mascots, murals and materials designed to change knowledge and attitudes and spark conversations. All stakeholders, from the mayor, the municipal council, teachers, students and fisher households are involved," she said.

Increased fish catch

Tirona said RARE's Fish Forever sites have experienced positive change over the past several years.

"We saw results in terms of fish biomass and fish abundance inside no-take zones. This was reported by our partner, Philippine Marine Science Institute, which conducted the surveys," Tirona said.

Tirona said fishers also claimed abundance of fish even outside no-take zones.

"This means that increased knowledge of communities and positive behavioral change works," she said.

In the communities where RARE work, it is believed there is need to really change how things are done, she added.

"Most areas in the Philippines have MPAs, but not all of them are well-managed. We work with the communities to improve it. Either to expand it to enhance coverage, or strengthen the enforcement," she said.

Economic opportunities

Maintaining a healthy fishing ground is anchored on keeping the spawning areas secured through MPAs.

Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim of the DENR's Biodiversity Management Bureau underscored the need to strengthen existing MPAs to ensure sustainable fish production.

Lim said MPAs help enhance the recovery of damaged marine ecosystems by providing recruits for coral reef recovery, important coral reef fishes and other marine species essential to maintaining a balanced marine ecosystems.

"These MPAs provide protection for small fishes. Here is where they eat, play and grow, in effect, helping replenish our fishing grounds with fish stocks faster," Lim said.

A major fish producer in the world, the Philippines generates around \$3.3 billion in revenues from fisheries alone, according to RARE.

Around 47 percent of fish caught in the Philippines are caught by municipal fishers, and 85 percent of fishers in the Philippines are municipal fishers who depend on the abundance of their 15-kilometer fishing ground.

According to RARE, considered the center of global coral ecosystem biodiversity, the Philippines's waters contain almost 10 percent of the world's coral reefs, large swaths of mangrove forests and more MPAs than any other country in the world.

More than 1.6 million small-scale Philippine fishers and their families rely on coastal waters to provide income and sustenance. They are among the poorest and most vulnerable sectors in the country. Their average catch per day has been declining steadily for decades. Fishers now spend more time at sea, going further and further from home, but with smaller yields.

Through the Fish Forever program, RARE is hoping to turn the tide of coastal and marine ecosystem degradation, to make the oceans' bounty thrive once more.

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