

Benham Rise

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Does the average Filipino know that Benham Rise, also called Benham Plateau, is part of Philippine territory? With an area of 13 million hectares, it is a quarter bigger than the entire Luzon island, making the Philippines' total land area 43 million hectares from its old area of 30 million hectares. It is located off the provinces of Aurora and Isabela and is known to be rich in natural gas and marine biodiversity.

Why is Benham Rise significant and how was it officially declared as ours? No less than former President Fidel V. Ramos, who also wrote a series of articles on Benham Rise, called my attention to its significance and why I should be personally interested in it.

Despite its proximity to the Philippine archipelago, Benham Rise was not previously included in the territory of the Philippines. You see, based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea or the UNCLOS, the continental shelf of a state comprises the seabed and subsoil of the submarine areas 200 nautical miles or 370 kilometers from a state's baselines or edges. Parts of the continental shelf that are not covered by the 200 nautical miles must be claimed and defended by a claimant state before the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. Using scientific data and hydrographic research materials obtained by the Bureau of Coast and Geodetic Survey of the National Mapping, Research and Information Authority, the Philippines lodged a full territorial waters claim with the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. The UNCLOS approved the Philippine claim and declared Benham Rise as the Philippines' extended continental shelf on 12 April 2012 or three years after the claim was filed and defended.

Former President Ramos was instrumental in the success of the Philippine claim because it was he, as then president, who issued EO 45 which institutionalized a synchronized, common reference system for accurate surveying and mapping of natural resources and cadastral limits. This integrated all old surveys with the new networks.

As written by Professor Jay Batongbacal of the UP College of Law who was part of the technical team that prepared the claim over Benham Rise and its defense in the UN, the Philippine claim over the Benham Plateau began with a workshop in 2001. The workshop was meant to assist the Foreign Affairs Department and the NAMRIA on the implementation of the Law of the Sea. Dr. Teodoro Santos of the UP National Institute for Geological Sciences proposed that Benham Rise, then a relatively unknown area of the Pacific Ocean, be claimed as a possible extension of the Philippine continental shelf. This resulted in the joint efforts of the government and the academe to make the necessary studies to support the Philippine claim. The Bureau of Coast and Geodetic Survey under NAMRIA, thus sent its two survey ships, BRP Hydrographer Presbitero and BRP Hydrographer Ventura to do extensive hydrographic surveys in the Pacific Ocean east of Luzon. As an aside, my personal interest in this was that BRP Hydrographer Ventura was named after my father, the late Commodore Antonio P. Ventura, who was the longest-serving head of the Bureau of Coast and Geodetic Survey. The results of the mapping and research done through these two vessels became the basis for the Philippine claim on Benham Rise.

Benham Rise was named after American geologist, Andrew Benham, who discovered the continental shelf. What is significant about Benham Rise? It is much bigger than Luzon and is rich in living and nonliving resources such as marine flora and fauna supporting biodiversity as well as minerals and gas. According to lawyer Batongbacal, based on initial samplings, Benham Rise keeps a large amount of manganese needed in the production of steel. It also contains gas hydrates, a potential rich source of natural gas. On top of this, the rich marine life in the Rise can support the food security of the growing Philippine population.

It is important for us, Filipinos, to know that we own Benham Rise. While the Philippines has established friendlier relations with China under the leadership of President Rodrigo R. Duterte, we should know that we have the right to be vigilant and to assert what is lawfully ours. It is disturbing that Chinese vessels

have been spotted in the Benham area although China has, on occasions, said that it recognizes that Benham Rise is part of Philippines territory. We should not forget how China has continued to build artificial islands on the reefs declared by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague as belonging to the Philippines.

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