

PHL rising to challenge in Benham Rise

By Manuel Cayon

Business Mirror, MAY 10, 2017



In Photo: A Coast Guard boat tugs the buoy to its designated point above the Benham Rise, as the bigger and newly acquired Coast Guard patrol ship from Japan pulls alongside. Three Coast Guard ships provide security escort to the research ship, MV DA-BFAR.

BENHAM RISE—The second expedition of the MV *DA-BFAR* over this controversial extinct volcanic ridge east of Luzon is more than the historic repeat of a scientific expedition three years ago.



Crewmen unload the sinker, the cemented drums and the buoy, the orange marker, which consist the payao, or the fish-aggregating device to attract the big fishes, at the Benham Rise. The research ship MV DA-BFAR dropped one payao during its May 5 to 7 expedition, and would drop 14 more at designated points at the Benham Bank to aid fishermen in getting the bigger fishes.

The expedition of the research ship has another import to establish. It wants to project Philippine presence and ownership signal to whoever would still venture and covet this part of one of the country's richest fishing grounds.

This was expressed in bold strokes by Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel F. Piñol. Piñol mounted the expedition and announced he received the imprimatur from President Duterte to evaluate all options to take to protect Benham Rise from further incursions.

The Benham Rise has been regularly poached by Taiwanese fishermen who periodically figured in violent fishing maneuvers with Filipino fishermen over much of the region.

Located in the Philippine Sea approximately 250 kilometers east of the northern coastline of Dinapigue, Isabela, it has a total area of 25.9 million hectares. Its size down to the extended continental shelf is more than two-thirds the size of the Philippine archipelago.

It was the presence of a Chinese ship at the Benham Rise early this year that sent critics asking for more aggressive posture from the Philippines to protect islets, shoals and fishing grounds within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).



A fishing boat at sea for six days unloads some of its catch, including a 40-kilo yellowfin tuna, to the MV DA-BFAR research ship, which made its second expedition to Benham Rise from May 5 to 7.

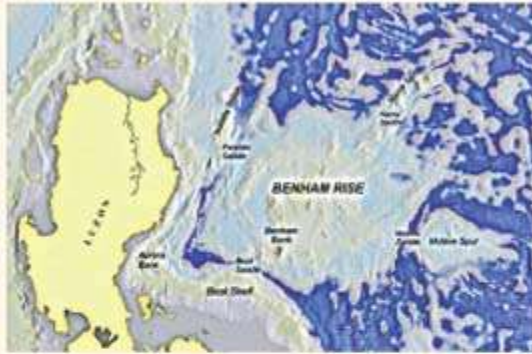
The Philippines has recently become agitated as a nation over the incursions in the western side of the country and within its 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. A big part of these territories and the much richer fishing grounds have been lost to China's bullying and, to a smaller degree, to the incursion of countries like Vietnam and Taiwan in the Spratlys and the nearer Scarborough Shoal.

The research expedition from May 5 to 7 would have far greater implications in the country's protection of its fishing grounds. These fishing grounds are well within the world's richest marine and biologically diverse Coral Triangle, to which the Philippines has joined the continuing multination preservation effort.

Exclusive production

WHILE there are discussions as to which extent the country would want to go to preserve the fishing grounds east of Luzon, Piñol would rather push for the inclusion of the entire Benham Region, which includes the Benham Rise, as the country's exclusive food-production area.

BENHAM RISE (QUICK FACTS)



- Also known as Benham Plateau
- Named after American admiral and geologist Andrew Benham who discovered it
- A 13-million hectare underwater plateau
- Around 5,000 meters deep from the sea surface
- Situated at 250

kilometers east of the Northern coastline of Dinapigue, Isabela

- It is wider than Luzon, Samar and Leyte combined, is now officially part of the Philippines because it is the only country within 200 nautical miles of the plateau
- A rich source of natural gas, minerals and other natural resources, such as heavy metal
- First mapped in 1993, but its connection to Philippine shelf was validated only recently to justify the country's economic claim
- Solidified methane was found during mapping
- Up to approximately 300 nautical miles in the Pacific Ocean
- Stretches from the coast of Cagayan and Bicol
- First major expansion of the country's maritime boundaries since the late 1970s when it was declared an exclusive economic zone (EEZ)
- People of the ancient Catanduanes called the plateau "Kalipung-awan" or a "forlorn place"
- The Philippines has exclusive sovereign rights to explore and exploit living and nonliving natural resources of both the EEZ and the seabed underneath

With such declaration, other nonfood exploration and actual exploitation for natural resources, such as minerals, oil and natural gas, would be off-limits.

Some fisheries officials were thinking of declaring the Benham Rise only as a fish sanctuary or marine-protected area.

A presentation by retired Coast Guard Commodore Eduardo E. Gongona has recommended to the national government to declare the Benham Rise as a special fisheries-management area to help small fishermen in the eastern coastal Luzon provinces.

The Benham Rise is the seabed protrusion rising to about 3,200 meters from the Benham region seabed. The seabed bottom itself has an average depth of 5,000 meters from the sea level. The Benham Rise is described as an underwater plateau, with the top measuring 15,000 hectares, and its base, 128,600 hectares.

The entire region, including the extended continental shelf, would measure 25.9 million hectares, 5 million short of the country's total land area.

Of this area, 11.4 million hectares are within the country's EEZ, a concept adapted during the third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1982. This grants coastal nations the right to explore and exploit the marine resources within its adjacent coasts extending 200 nautical miles to the continental shelf.

Resource management

RAFAEL Ramiscal of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) said the absence of another country east of the extended continental shelf would practically allow the country to extend a management program beyond the exclusive zone.

The Benham Rise, about 203 nautical miles east of the coastal town of Infanta, Quezon, is so small compared to the entire Benham region that it appears like a dot, or post, to the map, according to Ramiscal, BFAR's fisheries researcher.

The protrusion, most likely believed to be that of an extinct volcanic formation, is named after US Navy officer Admiral Andrew Ellicott Kennedy Benham, who led a team of American surveyors in the early 20th century to discover the underwater plateau.

Piñol said the entire Benham area should be best declared as fish-production area, and to put a research structure in the middle of the ocean from which the Benham Rise is located.

“This would allow a better management of the resources in the Benham region.”

Ramiscal said he would personally confer with Duterte on this plan, noting that the plan would no longer require Congressional action. An executive order or proclamation would suffice, he added.

With him in this first high-level expedition, involving a Cabinet member onboard, were Gongona, also designated Agriculture Undersecretary for Fisheries. Six scientists were also onboard to do a hydrographic survey, status of planktons and microscopic nutrients and oceanographic profile. Four technical divers were also part of the expedition.

Alfeo Peloton, the BFAR acting assistant director for law enforcement and regulation cluster, noted this second expedition of the MV *DA-BFAR* repeats the scientific expedition made on the same day on May 5 and 6, 2014.

Two Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS) boats and the Coast Guard patrol ship recently given by Japan accompanied the expedition team aboard the research ship the Philippines acquired from Spain in 1999.

Rare species

THE region has been largely understudied yet, with the MV *DA-BFAR* conducting the study of the Pacific Ocean side of the Philippines beginning 2006. The lone Philippine fisheries research ship has also conducted fisheries and oceanography studies in the Celebes Sea south of Mindanao and the West Philippine Sea.

The technical divers who explored its depths were amazed with what they discovered.

A Kidapawan City diver trained in Davao City said he went down as deep as 191 feet and said he was surprised to still see the sun's illumination up to that depth.

“It tells us of the healthy condition of the waters in that area.”

However, the part of the bank, or the plateau of the Benham Rise, has only patches of corals and most are only rocks, the divers reported.

The shallowest part of the Benham Rise is 40 meters (about 131 feet).

Ramiscal said previous explorations, including the first expedition done on the same day three years ago, have also shown the healthy surface of the bank, especially along the ridges.

“It's because the bank's 15,000 hectares is too big to be entirely covered by the few explorations we have so far,” he explained.

Members of the expedition dropped a *payao*, a fish-aggregating device, consisting of five drums filled with cement and tied together to serve as the sinker. The rope connects to a long orange cylinder that serves as the buoy. A Philippine flag was tied to the buoy.

Another rope allowed to float is tied with dried coconut leaves. The leaves would attract the formation of algae and other decomposers, which, in turn, would attract small fishes looking for food. The school of small fishes would also attract the big fishes. The process would take more than one week before fishermen would put to sea.

Fourteen other *payao* would be dropped at designated points in the bank within the week.

First evidence

IN 2006 the Philippine research presented the first evidence of the presence of the rare Pacific bluefin tuna (*Thunnus orientalis*).

Fishermen, especially in Quezon province, have reportedly been catching tuna—as heavy as 200 to 300 kilos—in the area.

Local leader Rafaela Santa Iglesia said some fishermen who caught a bluefin tuna “never thought their catch could fetch a few hundred thousand pesos”.

“Our neighbor sold it for just P15,000 but he was surprised, and regretful that he had no idea that it was worth much more than the prevailing market price of tuna,” Santa Iglesia, an officer of the

association of fishermen's spouses in Barangay Dinahican, Infanta, Quezon, told the BusinessMirror.

"It's a rare species of tuna that could only be found in the northern waters," Ramiscal said.

Riczyneth Ampoyos-Arinque, in charge of the oceanographic researches onboard the research ship, said the tuna catch in the area is not surprising, despite the dominant perception of tuna being caught only in the southern seas and farther due to the tuna fish landing in General Santos City and Davao City fishports.

Ampoyos-Arinque said the presence of the bluefin tuna and other fish and marine species found in other Pacific Ocean fishing grounds is likely influenced by the North Equatorial current moving to the east coast of the Philippines.

This current splits into two directions upon entering the Philippine waters, one moving south to Surigao and the other moving north at the Bicol Shelf up further northward. Also referred to as the Kurushu current, this current is the one that carries the migratory path of tuna, Ramiscal said. He added the current begins at the east coast of Japan, to the coast of Taiwan and south of Japan and back to east of Japan going north to the Pacific near Alaska, and going down to California and to central Pacific.

Migratory path

Part of the migratory path via the Kurushu current is the so-called High Packet 1, in central Pacific, more than 1,200 nautical miles east of Davao region.

Ampoyos-Arinque said a study beginning in 2006 has confirmed a 2001-2016 Pelagic Longline Fishing Survey that the Benham Rise "does not lie only along the migratory path of tuna, but it has been a spawning area".

She said the larvae collection study has shown consistency in this claim. And, in the last few years, "tuna larvae collection has been increasing," she added.

"The nature of tuna is not static. They migrate to warmer waters during winter and along this migratory pattern is the spawning," Ampoyos-Arinque said. "They spawn and leave, explaining why the adult tuna could not be found in large numbers in a particular area."

She added this is the same pattern in the Philippine South where fishermen have to venture long outside the country's territorial waters to catch tuna. Many of them end up caught by the maritime and coastal police of other countries.

Aside from the rare bluefin tuna, other species found in the area include the rare big-eye tuna, yellowfin tuna (common in the southern edges of the tuna migratory region) and the albacore tuna.

There are also the four species of the bill fish, a BFAR survey said.

Wait, see

AURELIO Saja, 60, a fisherman from Barangay Dinahican, Infanta, said he and his fellow fishermen from many coastal towns would catch the locally called *pipikat* (Giant Trevally), *talakitok* (cavalla), *malasugui* (swordfish) or the blue marlin, salmon, *bigho* and the *bariles* (long-tail tuna).

Ten years ago, he could fill two tons with a catch of assorted fishes in a few days' fishing.

"Now, families have to wait for two weeks for their husbands to return from fishing, or sometimes a month if a fisherman would land his catch in other coastal town markets where prices fetch higher," Saja told the BusinessMirror on May 5.

Some places, though, have imposed control on fishing in their areas, such as on Polilio Island off Quezon province.

A wife of a fisherman said in a town gathering Piñol should look into the stringent protection law of local governments prohibiting entry to the fishing areas of Polilio.

Bantay Dagat guards of Polilio would often block residents' path while fishermen from the mainland would chase schools of fishes going to Polilio.

Piñol said a fisheries management plan would soon be issued after consultations in many coastal communities.

Illegal fishing

THE waters at the Benham Region have become attractive to other fishermen outside of eastern Luzon.

The bigger problem hounding all fishing grounds in the country is foreign poaching and illegal fishing, according to locals from the barangay of Dinahican, where the expedition took off. Some said non-Luzon residents, some coming from Leyte in eastern Visayas and Surigao del Sur are said to have become active in the region.

"We just heard from other fishermen that the fishes are still abundant here," said Leonida Gudoy, 51. "That's why we left our hometown Baybay, Leyte, along with our family."

In the eastern side, it is usually the Taiwanese fishermen who venture far into the Philippine territorial seas, according to fisherman Romeo Sarco, who is also from Barangay Dinahican.

Vietnamese and mainland Chinese fishermen are also a problem in the western side, from the contested Spratlys and the Scarborough, but even as near as Palawan.

"We need more ships to manage our seas, and to discourage poaching," Gongona said.

Boats, men

ON May 5 the Department of Agriculture gave eight 38-footer fiberglass fishing boats. Piñol also promised to give 200 30-footer fiberglass fishing boats. The bigger fishing boats are fitted with twin-engines and ice boxes.

Piñol urged that each boat be shared by two fishermen to inculcate responsibility. He also made the beneficiaries promise not to engage in illegal fishing, or lose their right to the boats. He cited the possibility of prosecution if the boats were used for illegal activities.

The distribution of fiberglass fishing boats was started last year to prevent running afoul with a prohibition by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources against wooden-hulled fishing boats.

Piñol also promised the Polilio local governments to give additional two patrol boats. He warned that Malacañang has already agreed to suspend all local government executives, the mayors and governors, in areas where illegal fishing has not been stopped by authorities.

Gongona told the BusinessMirror that 90 percent of all fishing vessels entering the Philippines are into illegal fishing.

Piñol said the country loses \$30 billion annually to foreign poaching and illegal fishing, and Gongona said Region 1, or the Ilocos region, alone loses \$37 million. The region, along with the Cagayan Valley region, is adjacent to Taiwan.

Gongona said the Philippines and Taiwan have been meeting on this problem and the latter has admitted to difficulty in running after its own erring nationals poaching on Philippine waters.

“It’s not only in northern Philippines that they are poaching,” he said. “They’re all over the place.”

The Philippines would be acquiring more ships, including donations from countries sympathetic to its woes in the South China Sea.

The country’s lone research ship needs to be refurbished, too.

Built by Astilleros, Gondan in Asturias, Spain, in July 1999, it was delivered two months later. It is 60 meters long with 1,186 gross tonnage. The ship can accommodate 50 officers, researchers and crew, and another 40 trainees.

On its recent expedition, its air-conditioning system has to be reconditioned, so that cool air could reach the lower cabins. In some sections of the ship, floor boards need replacing.

Projecting sovereignty

ALONG with scientists, Piñol also brought government engineers to assess the possibility of putting up a structure atop the Benham Rise. The engineers were also tasked to evaluate where in the underwater plateau foundations for the structure could be placed.

“We would also like our engineers and marine biologists to evaluate the kind of construction activities that would minimize destruction of the marine environment,” he said.

“The main intention of this expedition is actually to construct that structure,” he added, indicating government posture to address incursions of foreign fishermen on Philippine fishing territories.

“I have asked the President about putting out an expedition and assess the possibility of constructing a structure here, and he approved it,” Piñol said.

The structure would have multiple uses, he said.

“It would be a research facility for management [of the Benham Rise] as a fish-production area,” Piñol said, adding he would recommend the hiring of additional scientists to be assigned in the facility.

With a fixed research center, the Benham Rise would get the advantage of having its own baseline information and management center.

Sending signals

THE structure would also be designed to have its own dock, where only Filipino fishermen could rest from several days of fishing. Piñol said he also wants something that could accommodate three helicopters.

“It would have its own ice-making facility that would tap the sea water, adequate enough to provide refrigeration and ice-storage facility for the fish catch,” he said.

With as big as 15 hectares, Piñol added “we can build even that large a structure.”

“What we would like to have is a structure that is as prominent as the oil rigs in the North Sea, something that is visually dominant from afar,” he said.

The cost does not matter, he said.

“If we are losing \$30 billion every year to foreign poaching and illegal fishing, and allowing other countries to enjoy our rich fishing grounds, then it would not matter if we spend \$5 billion on that structure that would keep them off our territories,” Piñol said. “It would be a forward base, an advance command post against illegal fishing and foreign poaching.”

According to Piñol, the structure “should send a signal to those who covet Benham Rise that this is ours.”

Image Credits: Manuel T. Cayon