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‘A victory for migratory species’

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In Photo: Block noddies can be found in Tubbataha Reef’s smaller southern islet, Parola. Conservation advocates in the Philippines have reasons to celebrate these days. They considered the recent listing of the five endangered migratory species in the appendices of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), also called Bonn Convention, as a big step toward their protection and conservation throughout their migratory routes or range.

Environmental ministers, who took part in the 12th Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CMS (COP12 CMS), recently approved 11 Philippine-drafted resolutions, including the up-listing of a shark and a fish species; and three migratory bird species.

Whale sharks, also called butanding, are tourist attraction in Oslob, Cebu. What are these species and what needs to be done?

Whale shark. Locally called *butanding*, it is an iconic marine wildlife—the largest of all known fish species in the world.

The Philippines has been pushing for greater global protection of the whale shark since the 1990s, and has been promoting sustainable ecotourism with the animal as the main attraction in Donsol town in Sorsogon province.

Joining the Philippines in pushing for the inclusion of the whale shark on Appendix I while maintaining its status under Appendix II of the CMS are the governments of Israel and Sri Lanka.

CMS’s Appendix I lists migratory species that have been assessed as being in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range.

Appendix II, meanwhile, covers migratory species that have an unfavorable conservation status and that requires international agreements for their conservation and management.

It also includes those that have a conservation status that would significantly benefit from the international cooperation that could be achieved by an international agreement.

The conservation status of the whale shark further became alarming—from “vulnerable” in 2000 to “endangered” in 2016 on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Red List (IUCN) because of its global population decline of greater than or equal to 50 percent due to several factors.

The whale shark was included in Annex I, or Highly Migratory Species of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES), another international treaty to which the Philippines is a signatory.

White-spotted wedgefish. The global population of the white-spotted wedgefish is on the decline. Listed as vulnerable in 2003 on the IUCN Red List, the global population decline of this species is estimated between 50 percent to 80 percent over the last three decades, thus, joining the IUCN “endangered” category.

A highly mobile ray species, it occurs more widely from Southeast Asia and Australia, ranging from Thailand, Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia to the Australian subtropics and throughout the central Indo-West Pacific, as far east as Fiji and as far west as India.

There is limited information on the species’ population, structure and movements. The white-spotted wedgefish inhabit coastal areas, such as enclosed bays, estuaries and coral-reef areas.

There is little to no protection for the species and their habitats in its range states.

Christmas frigatebird: In her presentation, titled “Highlighting New Avian Species Nominations by the Philippines to the CMS Appendices,” Simplicia A. Pasicolan, chief science research specialist of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources’s (DENR) Ecosystems Research and Development Bureau, reported that the Christmas frigatebird, which breeds exclusively on Christmas Island, Australia, occurs widely in

waters of South Asia countries, including the Philippines to Indochina and to Northern Australia.

The current population of the mature birds of this unique species is estimated at 2,400 to 4,800 individuals.

It is capable of raising one fledgling every two years. It nests in tall forest trees, particularly the *Terminalia catappa* and *Celtis timonrensis* species, and feed on flying fish, squid and other marine creatures.

Currently, the Christmas frigatebird's conservation status is listed as "critical" by the IUCN. It is also listed in Appendix I of CITES.

CITES's web site says that Appendix I lists species that are the most endangered among CITES-listed animals and plants that are threatened with extinction. The CITES prohibits international trade in specimens of these species except when the purpose of the import is not commercial.

The population of these species is declining at 66 percent over the last three generations. Among the factors to the population decline include entanglement in fishing gear, severe marine pollution, live catching and clearing of habitat and breeding sites because of phosphate mining.

Yellow bunting: This species breeds in Japan in May, and in the Philippines in winter. The global estimate of the species in the band range is 2,500 to 9,999 mature individuals.

The yellow bunting nests in bushes or on the ground.

Its known migration sites are Hong Kong, North and South Korea, China and Taiwan.

It is currently classified as "vulnerable" on the IUCN Red List because of various threats, including habitat loss, poisoning owing to high levels of pesticide use and trapping for bird trade.

As the proponent for its listing under Appendix II of the CMS, the Philippines encourages more stringent monitoring and protection of the population and their habitats.

Black noddy, subspecies worcesteri: The specie is classified as “endangered” by the Philippine Red List Committee. The committee conducted the assessment and evaluation of birds in the Philippines and prepared the draft DENR Administrative Order updating the Philippine Red List of faunal species based on its very small population which breeds in a tiny area on two islets within the Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, according to the Philippine Introductory Statement for its listing under Appendix II of the CMS.

The adult population of the specie is 10,656 individuals, and is projected to decline by more than 70 percent over the next 10 to 15 years because of the change in ecological character of their breeding habitat and other existing and potential threats.

Stronger protection, conservation

AA Yaptinchay of the Marine Wildlife Watch of the Philippines said that being in the CMS Appendices means more conservation attention will be given to these species.

“CMS is important for migratory species. A listing in this convention entails cooperation at an international level but must be started nationally and worked out among the Range States,” he said.

According to Yaptinchay, other migratory species that are also endangered or are classified as endangered must be on the list, but it must be proposed by a member-country.

He said the Philippines, being a country that is rich in biodiversity, will benefit from the list of the species. “Anything that helps protect species that maintains biodiversity, ensuring ecological services for the country and the world is beneficial. NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] and advocacy groups always support government programs. This new commitment will be supported as well,” he added.

The Philippines, he said, should start developing and implementing conservation programs for these species with the help of NGOs, government organizations and the communities.

International collaboration

For its part, Ocean conservation advocacy group Oceana lauded the leadership of the Philippine government, particularly the DENR and its Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB) headed by Director Mundita Lim and other nonprofit groups and environment champions in making the country's first COP12 CMS a success.

Gregg Yan, a noted conservation advocate and director for communications of Oceana Philippines, said international collaboration for the protection and conservation of over 10,000 migratory species is imperative.

“If an endangered whale swims through three countries but is only protected in one, then how can it escape from whalers?” he said.

“The recently concluded Convention on Migratory Species got countries to sit down and discuss how best to conserve animals traveling through their routes. Among the best ‘wins’ were for sharks—particularly the inclusion of the *butanding* or whale shark in Appendix I. This means that the hunting of whale sharks will now be banned all over the world,” he added.

Many of the endangered migratory species, he said, are worth far more alive than they are dead, citing the case of whale sharks.

“The tourism revenues earned by the town of Donsol in Luzon has uplifted the lives of thousands of Filipinos. Instead of butchering *butanding* and earning just once from selling its parts, [Filipinos] now earn good money as long as the animals live. See? Everyone wins,” he said.

Great victory

Vince Cinches, ocean and political campaigner of Greenpeace, said the listing of the species in the CMS is a victory “as the burden of protecting these species will be under countries within its migratory range, not only the Philippines.”

He added: “The more countries fulfilling their commitments, the more chances of survival or recovery of the listed species. The Philippines is among the countries with a high occurrence of migratory species from sharks, birds, etc. The listing will ensure that the diversity of species in our country will be protected and maintained, along with the many benefits it brings, such as a healthy ecosystem.”

Groups will now have more reasons to pursue conservation mechanisms with private entities, communities and individuals, and “will serve as an additional capacity in carrying out the mandates of the government within the Convention and as stipulated under [Philippine] laws,” he said.

According to Cinches, the government should provide an enabling space for a multisector approach to identify steps and ways forward in the protection and conservation of species that is based on science, socially equitable, and ensure to achieve the objective of allowing endangered and threatened species to survive and maintain its functions within the ecosystem it belonged.

He added that the government should move forward to eliminate existing practices that contribute to the demise of certain species, such as wildlife provisioning, unregulated and unsustainable tourism, destructive land-based activities, among others.

“It is also important to note that the conservation and protection of the species should be done not in isolation of other conservation efforts, and take into account current intervention of various organizations, including the government, so we don’t have to reinvent the wheel,” he said.

Better communication

Biodiversity Communication Advocate Paolo B. Pagaduan said parties to the CMS should continue to better communicate the importance of protecting and conserving migratory species.

“Perhaps, the next challenge is to effectively explain the significance of the CMS’s achievement. We don’t want to be viewed as shark lovers per se. Rather, we have to communicate that the reason we protect sharks is because they are a valuable part of the marine environment; that without sharks and other endangered species, the ecosystems could collapse and no longer provide us with the resources we need from nature. Often times we are viewed as animal lovers or tree huggers. But actually, we want to save the humans. We need the environment in a relatively good condition to survive,” he said.

Lim of the DENR-BMB said more works needs to be done to ensure that the parties to the CMS will translate the resolutions adopted during the COP12 CMS into national policies and actions.

She said working together, Range States will be in a better position communicating the importance of protecting and conserving these migratory species and their habitats to the communities.

“We will continue to work with the parties so that these adopted resolutions will be translated into national policies by the Range States or Parties,” she said.

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