

Toward a ‘bluer normal’

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The Southeast Asian region, home to a third of the world’s coastal and marine habitats, plays a significant role in achieving the “30by30 ambition.”

Impacted by the 2019 coronavirus disease (Covid-19), fishermen can play a crucial role in coastal and marine biodiversity protection and conservation. But they will need all the assistance that they could get.

As the community quarantine remains in effect in many areas of the country to help fight the spread of Covid-19, Filipino fishermen, who belong to the poorest of the poor sector of society, remain highly vulnerable.



A tourist guide does a balancing act as their motorized boat loaded with passengers approach the mouth of the Big Lagoon in El Nido, Palawan. El Nido's tourism is managed by coastal communities that also act as the ocean's protectors.

Nevertheless, experts believe that the fishery sector could bounce back and boost the recovery efforts given the right support and a wider role in the government's national recovery strategy.

Production setback

Participants in the online forum, dubbed "Tungo sa Mas Bughaw na Pangkaraniwan," or simply "Toward a Bluer Normal," believed that the stringent quarantine measures put in place since March have reduced fish production.

It also created logistical challenges in delivering the produce, including fish, whether produced via aquaculture or caught in open waters, potentially posing problems to national food security and nutrition.

Fish remains the most abundant protein source for most Filipinos, accounting for 31.2 kilos of consumption per person each year.

While small fishermen were unable to go out fishing, or bring their catch to designated trading centers because of the reduced mobility, illegal fishing continued due to reduced marine patrols during the lockdown.

Fish Right

The forum series, held on July 16, 20 and 22, was part of the activities of the ongoing USAID Fish Right Program, a partnership between the Philippine government and the US Agency for International Development to help improve the country's marine biodiversity and the fisheries sector.

Among the participants were experts from various sectors, including the government and the private sector.

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The resource speakers were Dr. Cielito Habito, professor of Economics; Dr. Joan Castro, executive vice president of PATH Foundation; and Juju Tan, managing trustee of the Center for Empowerment and Resource Development (CERD) and trustee of the NGOs for Fisheries Reform.

“The objective of the program is to reduce the risk of biodiversity,” said Nygiel Armada, chief of party of the Fish Right Program, during a Zoom meeting with the BusinessMirror on August 11.

The USAID Fish Right Program is being implemented in the Philippines by the University of Rhode Island in partnership with a consortium of Philippine universities and nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

This five-year project aims to address biodiversity threats, improve marine ecosystem governance, and increase fish biomass in three marine key biodiversity areas (MKBA) of Calamianes Island Group, South Negros and the Visayan Sea.

During the last two-and-a-half years of implementation, the proponents of the program worked with the Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DA-BFAR) and local government units in 48 municipalities in Calamianes Island Group, Visayan Sea and South Negros.

Various activities under the program, at various levels enhanced the capacities of various stakeholders in coastal communities.

Among these were local governance, community management of local resources, identifying economically important natural wealth or assets, and protecting and conserving coastal and marine biodiversity.

Economic opportunity

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Despite the degradation and overexploitation, including overfishing, it was found that sustainable management of the country's biodiversity-rich coastal and marine ecosystems could still provide an abundance of seafood and create "blue jobs" that could spur economic activities under the so-called blue economy.

In a statement, Habito pronounced the economic opportunities of sustainably managing the country's coastal and marine resources.

"The economic activities that can possibly be generated from the waters of our territory could contribute more than the current 1.5 percent to the GDP," Habito said.

For his part, John Edgar, Environment Office chief of USAID-Philippines, said that the country's vast natural wealth, as well as strong social capital, are key foundations that can anchor a steady and sustainable recovery.

Sad plight

Castro told the BusinessMirror during the Zoom meeting on Tuesday about the sad plight of small fishermen.

“Our assessment before and after, or during the pandemic, is that the fishers are already marginalized and vulnerable as they were. They are the poorest of the poor sector. They were more compromised than ever. The threats, the challenges that they have been experiencing has been more pronounced during the pandemic, particularly during the lockdown wherein they lack the mobility to go on their daily lives,” Castro explained.

Worse, she said there were no markets available even when they went out fishing.

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She noted that highly affected were the women in fishing communities who would sell the fish that their husbands catch.

“It was double jeopardy for the family, the households. How difficult it was. The longer the lockdown, the more pronounced were the challenges,” Castro said.

Needed: Financial support

Tan, for his part, said additional funds are needed from the government more than ever.

“I believe that is the case. There are not enough funds from the government, especially for local governments. Local governments have limited budget for coastal resource management and they do not have the technical capacities to assess what good MPAs [marine protected areas] will be,” he said.

Tan said that national government agencies like the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and DA have a budget for coastal and marine resource conservation and protection, “which is good”

However, he said, because of the pandemic, the activities slowed down.

Biodiversity conservation opportunity

On a positive note, Tan said the community lockdowns were opportunities to step up biodiversity conservation and protection efforts in coastal communities.

“There were more reasons for us to go for conservation because there’s no incentive to go fishing since the market demand was limited and transportation was also limited,” he pointed out.

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“I think this is the best time to push more conservation like building more MPAs and networking them to be more effective in the medium and long term,” he added.

Fisherfolk involvement

In providing financial support, Tan underscored the need to involve fisherfolk in identifying new MPAs or network of MPAs to cover the other ecosystems, such as mangroves and seagrasses that they need to conserve and protect.

“It is important that they be involved, and the money to be used for them to understand and for them to [campaign] among fisherfolk. What is more convincing than fisherfolk convincing fellow fisherfolk,” Tan said.

He said even those who engage in illegal fishing will be enlightened and will have a change of heart.

“I have known a lot of fishermen who were once engaged in illegal [activities]. When they were enlightened, they willingly changed their ways and they became effective enforcers,” he said.

Alternative livelihood

Both Tan and Castro believe that providing alternative livelihood will be an effective way to reduce the pressure on coastal environments.

“We need to look at developing the value chains. For example, in post harvest. There is a lot of wastage because there are no post harvest facilities,” Tan said.

He said jobs can also be generated through the processing of fish.

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“Because the value chain is big, it is regional or national, we have to create a shorter value chain that will employ fishers or those who were once fishers. We can employ fishers in protection activities,” he said.

Castro, for her part, said women can also play a crucial role in transitioning to a “bluer economy.”

“They got to be involved in home-based livelihood. Some of the communities with the women [in project sites] that we worked with started to make masks,” she said.

Time for a bluer normal

According to Tan, the time is ripe to push for a bluer normal. He said it is high time for the blue economy to get the much-needed attention.

In terms of prioritization, he said the bulk of government budget is going to the green or agriculture. However, despite its small contribution to the GDP, investing in coastal and marine biodiversity conservation is very important “because we are protecting our natural assets.”

“It is important that the bluer normal has more protection and conservation activities by the communities themselves supported by the national and local government,” he said,

acknowledging that to some degrees, many national government agencies are already looking at how to help coastal communities

“Our marine resources have a lot of potential but we need to ensure that they will serve future and present generation,” he said.

Castro, for her part, said the fishermen are frontliners, in their own right. As such, she said they need a lot of support, understanding the fact that the pandemic has affected them severely.

“It is a great opportunity for us to put them at the center and recognize the effort that they do for the communities and to us as a citizenry for reasons that it will be hard for them to bounce back with the challenges that they experienced during the pandemic,” she said.

Putting the right programs and the right support, investing in nature-based solutions that will include the fishermen as decision-makers and by looking at their alternative livelihood, “then we are not just helping them now but we are making them more resilient to future pandemics and other crises,” Castro added.

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