

# Ocean conservation gains momentum in Tañon Strait

By Jonathan L. Mayuga | BusinessMirror

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In Photo: A mangrove area in Barangay San Juan on Sipaway Island in San Carlos City, Negros Province, protects the coastal communities, including the San Juan Elementary School.

Ocean conservation and protection is gaining momentum in the Visayas, with various stakeholders coming together to stop illegal fishing in Tañon Strait, one of the country's major fishing grounds and home to amazing creatures of the sea.



Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim (left) of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources's Biodiversity Management Bureau and Oceana's Andy Sharpless (second from left) join stakeholders in painting a mural using the walls of San Juan Elementary School as canvass to heighten awareness about the importance of ocean-biodiversity conservation.

Pitching the call for stronger protection measures for the Tañon Strait Protected Seascape (TSPS), Oceana led a three-day event starting on February 28 in Negros and Cebu provinces highlighting the benefits and people's appreciation of the ocean's bounty and conservation efforts in the strait.

Oceana's 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.

Tañon Strait, a narrow strait that divides Negros and Cebu, is threatened by overfishing, with foreign and local commercial fishing vessels encroaching on municipal fishing grounds while erring fishermen continue to use dynamite and cyanide to boost daily fish catch.

During the event, Oceana's leaders, led by CEO Andrew Sharpless; Mike Hirshfield, chief scientist and strategy officer; Gloria Estenzo Ramos, Oceana vice president in the Philippines; and Rocky Sanchez Tirona, vice president of Rare in the Philippines, met with officials of the two provinces, which boasts of best practices in the fight against illegal fishing.

### **Multistakeholder**



Gov. Alfredo Marañon Jr. (left) gives Oceana and Rare executives a briefing about the province's efforts to fight illegal fishing and to conserve the ocean in its territory within the Tanon Strait.

Oceana's advocacy in Tañon Strait has generated strong support from various stakeholders.

On March 10, 2016, closing ranks with concerned government agencies, civil-society organizations working in Tañon Strait, they have affirmed support for the protection and sustainable management of the TSPS.

In partnership with various national government agencies and concerned local government units, Oceana launched the search for Ocean Heroes and best locally managed marine protected areas (NPAs) in Tañon Strait.

The advocacy for stronger-protection measure in the TSPS also pushed the passage of a resolution by the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) mandating that all fishing vessels entering the Tañon Strait should install vessel-monitoring device.

“It is in the law but it is not being implemented because there is no implementing rules and regulations. Now, under a new leadership, the DA-BFAR [Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources] has created a technical working group that will draft the implementing rules and regulations,” she said.

### **Sardines capital**



A parrot-fish mascot is swarmed by schoolchildren at the San Juan Elementary School on Sipaway Island in San Carlos City, Negros Occidental.

On February 28 Negros Occidental Gov. Alfredo Marañon Jr. met with Oceana and Rare executives in the provincial capitol in Bacolod City, where he underscored the importance of protecting the Tañon Strait. Marañon said partnership with communities is a key ingredient in the success of the province's initiatives.

"The Visayan Sea is rich in sardines," he noted, underscoring the need to protect Visayan Sea's most treasured fish. From November to February, fishing of sardines is banned to allow the fish to breed and replenish the ocean, Marañon said.

Jimely O. Flores, senior marine scientist of Oceana, said there are nine species of sardines that can be found in the Visayan Seas, including the one that is being dried and sold as *tuyo* (dried fish), a favorite breakfast among Filipinos.

Besides sardines, Flores said the Visayan Seas is rich in commercial fish, like tuna, and other seafoods like prawn and shrimp, which are exported by the Philippines.

"That is why it is important to protect Tañon Strait, because in these areas, they are being overfished, threatening sustainable fisheries," Flores, a fishery expert, said in Filipino.

### **Model against illegal fishing**

In March 2014 Marañon created Task Force Lawod, which led to a 90-percent drop in illegal fishing in the province. Lawod is the Visayan word for the Filipino term *laot*, or ocean in English.

The initiative also led to the decrease in the use of dynamite and cyanide. Marañon backs efforts to integrate ocean conservation and protection in the

elementary and high-school curricula in the province to increase awareness among his constituents.

### **Marine protected areas**

Mayor Araceli Somosa of the municipality of Calatrava, who is also the chairman of the TSPS Protected Area Management Board Site Management Unit (SMU1) in the first district of Negros Occidental, said from an alliance of North Negros Aquatic Resource Area, Calatrava is happy to be part of TSPS.

“As a mayor, I learned to understand how to do these things. It is hard to support your coastal management program if you don’t know what is going on. I was so happy, being the chairman of SMU1, I was able to attend trainings and seminars being sponsored by Oceana and Rare,” Somosa said.

Calatrava is one of the 17 priority sites of the Fish Forever Flex Program of Rare under the Vibrant Oceans Initiatives of Bloomberg Philanthropies.

The municipality has a total of 313 hectares of MPAs in Calatrava established in 2010 through Municipal Ordinance 12 called the Calatrava Reef Complex.

“Our fishermen even used to connive with fishing vessels. They used to tip them whenever fishes start to gather near the *payaw* [fish-aggregating device]” she said. However, currently, she said fishermen in Calatrava have come to understand more the importance of protecting and conserving MPAs.

### **Island MPA**

In San Carlos City, also in Negros Occidental, Mayor Gerardo P. Valmayor Jr. said people have started to appreciate the bounty provided by the ocean and the gains in establishing MPAs.

One of its treasured territories, the Sipaway Island, is home to two MPAs—the barangay San Juan MPA, which has a total area of 90 hectares, and the Barangay Ermita MPA, which has over 300 hectares.

Poly Montano, president of Ermita Fisherfolks Association, said with the support of the mayor they are able to patrol the MPAs on Sipaway Island with ease and confidence.

“We rely on community support in patrolling our municipal fishing grounds, including the MPAs in our barangays, because they are very important to make sure that our fish stock is adequate,” he said partly in Tagalog and Ilonggo.

### **Starting them young**

On March 1 Valmayor joined Oceana and Rare officials in a ceremony highlighting the gains of ocean protection and conservation efforts on the island, with pupils of the Barangay San Juan Elementary School taking the lead.

In his speech, the mayor said protecting and conserving the ocean is one way of securing the future generations, emphasizing that everyone should do their part, including the young children, who will benefit from the endeavor. During the event, pupil of the elementary school put their best foot forward in rendering songs, dance and poems, highlighting the importance of the ocean as the key to human survival—for food, transportation and livelihood.

The schoolchildren later joined officials of Oceana and Rare in painting a mural on the school wall, showcasing the ocean’s bounty and rich biodiversity.

## **Ocean and biodiversity**

Director Theresa Mundita S. Lim of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources's Biodiversity Management Bureau, who joined Ocean and Rare during the visit in the area, was elated in the "buy-in" of local communities of the conservation effort in Tañon Strait.

"We are happy to see the buy-in of the local communities to the conservation efforts, and for them to be able to realize the linkage of protection to their livelihood—like fisheries and other livelihood," she said. "If we protect the ecosystem, we also provide the habitat for fish for their entire life cycle—from larvae up to the period when they are useful [for the community]," she said partly in Filipino.

## **Huge opportunity**

"The Philippines has a huge opportunity to make sure that there are a lot of fish in the Philippine ocean for people to catch and people to eat. But to make that happen, the Philippines needs to do what countries all over the world need to do. It needs to make sure the laws are enforced and there are protected areas where baby fish can grow," Oceana's Sharpless said.

He acknowledged that in the Philippines, such as in San Carlos City, policies are in place to make sure that good things will happen.

The Tañon Strait is supposed to be a place where there is no commercial fishing, he said.

"In the coming years, we are going to see lots and lots of fish. They are already seeing lots of fish right now and they are seeing bigger fish more than they used to," he added



## Success story

“This is a success story already. It can be a bigger success story. We want the whole region, the whole of Tañon Strait, to take the lead in this area, what this city has shown and then we want the world to do it. The world has the same problem. We have been overfishing, we are not protecting nursery areas. The Philippines, starting here, can show the way and Oceana will take the message to other countries and say ‘Look, the Philippines can rebuild their ocean,’” he said.

Sharpless said teaching the young generation is very crucial in protecting and conserving the ocean. “It is quite striking to me that the speeches that the children made were speeches that I would be proud to have an Oceana adult make. They were very eloquent, they were very clear. They understood the importance of key details—having science-based catch limits, having nurseries, enforcing the law. These children spoke of those points and they spoke forcefully. Their parents will learn from their children, but more important, the policy-makers here, the politicians and policemen who are here today, can take courage from the message that the children gave. And that is good. It gives the confidence and optimism we need today,” he said.

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