

Tubbataha Reefs among five candidate sites for ASEAN marine protected area management project

By: Manila Standard September 21, 2022

<https://manilastandard.net/lgu/314262029/tubbataha-reefs-among-five-candidate-sites-for-asean-marine-protected-area-management-project.html>

Five sites in the Philippines including the Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park (TRNP) have been named candidates for a marine protected area (MPA) management project in the ASEAN to be implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Aside from TRNP in Sulu-Celebes Sea, the other candidates are the Ticao-Burias Pass Protected Seascape (TBPPS); Agoo Damortis Protected Landscape & Seascape (ADPLS); Bani-Bolinao-Burgos-Infanta, Dasol-Agno MPAN (MPA Network); and Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary (TIWS).

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has just convened stakeholders of the project “Effectively Managing Networks of Marine Protected Areas in Large Marine Ecosystems (LME) in ASEAN” (ENMAPS).

This is to gather and consolidate data as it is scheduled to submit its project proposal to its funder—the Global Environment Facility (GEF) by March 2023.

The sites being chosen for ENMAPS are biodiversity-rich sites that also face threats of environmental degradation. Beneficiaries of the project are Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Other ASEAN Large Marine Ecosystems (LME) sites under the project are the Gulf of Thailand/Andaman Sea of Bay of Bengal, Indonesian Seas, and the South China Sea.

The Coastal and Marine Biodiversity of ASEAN is known to have 20% of the world’s seagrass beds, a third of the world’s mangrove forests with 45 to 75 true species, and a third of the world’s coral reefs with more than 75% of species of coral and 40% of fish species.

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) has been concerned that the world’s oceans have been reaching their ecological carrying capacity, a limit to their ability to produce fish for food.

“More than 75% of world fish stocks are already fully exploited, overexploited, depleted or recovering from depletion,” according to the GEF website.

ENMAPS aims to develop and improve the management of networks of MPAs and marine corridors within selected LMEs in the ASEAN region. It aims to conserve globally significant biodiversity and support sustainable fisheries for people’s livelihood and other ecosystem goods and services.

The ASEAN ENMAPS project will also be executed by the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) in collaboration with the DENR’s Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB).

It also includes national technical working groups from DENR's Foreign Assisted & Special Projects Services (FASPS); Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, National Fisheries Research & Devt. Institute, and PEMSEA (Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia).

GEF has supported sustainable governance of 23 large marine ecosystems (LMEs) involving the collaborative work of many countries. The world's oceans are known to be divided into 66 LMEs. This area covers 7.7 million square kilometers with 173,000 kilometers of coastline.

LMEs are huge marine areas extending beyond boundaries among countries which is why collaboration is important here. ENMAPS has a cost of \$77.596 million. Of this, \$12.548 million consists of a GEF grant.

The procedure of UNDP aligns with the Social and Environmental Standards or SES. This means that the project will integrate SES principles as it undertakes the project. Such principles include human rights protection, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. It will assess social and environmental issues in order to address risks.

The Ticao-Burias Pass Seascape has earlier been proposed to be an MPA with its plankton-rich waters.

“Species found there include whale sharks, thresher sharks, hammerhead sharks, tiger sharks, manta rays, dugong, various species of sea turtles, coral reefs, and the globally rare megamouth shark, but the pass also suffers from massive overfishing and poaching, as well as destructive blast fishing,” according to reports from Philippine News Agency.

The Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary has been proposed in 2015 to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is known to be the only “major nesting habitat of Green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) in the Philippines and the only major nesting ground in the whole ASEAN Region.”

The Agoo-Damortis Landscape and Seascape is known to have mangroves in the foreshore area which provide spawning and nursery grounds for fishes and crustaceans, and a habitat for both local and migratory birds.