

RP World Center of Marine Treasures

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OFF the coast of Batangas, only about 60 feet underwater, is a thriving, throbbing marine rainforest, a place experts call the world's blue water version of the Amazon River basin.

Familiar only to divers and local fishermen, the Verde Island passage has been found to have 1,736 overlapping marine species in a 10-km by 10-km area, the largest concentration of marine life in the world.

Concern over the need to protect the treasures beneath the waters of Verde Island has been raised in the wake of the recent massive oil spill that wrecked marine resources around Guimaras Island. Located between the province of Batangas and the island of Mindoro, the Verde Passage corridor is dubbed "the center of the center of the center of the world's marine shore fish biodiversity."



The worlds largest concentration of marine life in a 10-km by 10-km area is found in Verde Island Passage corridor located between Batangas and Mindoro. Experts dub it " the center of the center of the center of the world's marine life shore fish biodiversity." **Yvette Lee / Contributor**

"You have a very, very special marine natural heritage," American marine biologist Kent Carpenter, global marine species assessment coordinator of World Conservation Union, said in a forum on marine biodiversity in Makati on Friday.

Carpenter and fellow researcher Victor Springer of the Smithsonian Institution were the ones who discovered in 2004 that the Philippines, not Indonesia, was the center of the center of marine shore fish biodiversity in the world.

Straddling the Indo-Malaya-Philippines archipelago (IMPA), the Sulu Sulawesi Seascape occupies an area of 900,000 square kilometers and supports some 35 million people.

The seascape is at the heart of the coral triangle which accounts for 50 percent of the world's coral reefs and is recognized as the center of the highest concentration of marine biodiversity in the world.

Carpenter, who has been doing comparative studies of marine resource concentration in the IMPA, found that central Philippines is the center of that center of marine biodiversity. And at the heart of that is little-known Verde Island. The site with the second greatest number of species is in Palau Bintan in Indonesia, which has 1,670 species in a 10 by 10 km area.

"You really have this international obligation and responsibility to preserve this marine counterpart of the Amazon River basin... If you were to preserve this, the world would benefit as well," Carpenter said.

"But more important than that, you have something here that is a source of national pride," he said.

Regulating shipping

The Amazon River Basin—covering 40 percent of the entire South American continent—is home to the largest rainforest on earth. The Amazon rainforest has more species of plants and animals than any other terrestrial ecosystem, hosting around 30 percent of the world's species.

A single bush in the Amazon may have more species of ants than the entire British Isles, while one hectare of its forest may have more than 480 species of trees.

Speaking before environmentalists and government officials, Carpenter said the Philippines, which recently witnessed one of the worst oil spills that damaged vast marine resources in the Visayas, needed to exert more effort to take better care of its corals.

“The Philippines is in a crossroads. You need to take advantage of that in terms of economic support,” Carpenter said.

“I think what you need to do is to be more careful about the sort of shipping that goes through here. One of the proposals is to make the Verde Island passage a particularly sensitive shipping area, an international agreement,” he said.

Strict safety standards

The World Wide Fund for Nature-Philippines has already proposed the delineation of particularly sensitive shipping areas (PSSA), where stricter maritime safety standards will be imposed on vessels using the route.

A WWF map shows that international and domestic sea lanes overlap with priority marine conservation sites. The National Disaster Coordinating Council, however, has yet to act on the proposal.

Livelihood and heritage

A tripartite partnership of First Philippine Conservation Inc., Conservation International-Philippines and First Gen Corp. started the Verde Island Integrated Conservation and Development Program in 2004 to eliminate destructive activities in the sea and promote the area as a prime tourist destination.

Carpenter said the Philippines needed to strictly enforce the laws and heed the suggestions and recommendations of environmental experts to protect its marine life.

“You have some of the best marine scientists in the world here. You have over 400 marine parks. You have people that support you. Somehow, you just need to get the enforcement there,” he said.

He said that despite bans on illegal fishing, he was aware that this illegal activity was still going on in several places in the Philippines, which has nearly 900 coastal municipalities.

“You have to increase your efforts to come to a sort of balance between livelihood and preserving your natural heritage,” Carpenter said.