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MANILA – Southeast Asian countries must act now to protect the region's biodiversity in the face of those who want to plunder its resources for a quick profit, the Philippine president said on Monday.

As an example of the threat, President Benigno Aquino cited the discovery this month of a huge shipment of illegally harvested corals and preserved sea turtles, seized at Manila's port before they could be smuggled abroad.

"This single act of environmental pillage is only symptomatic of a larger problem," Aquino said at an event for the launch of the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity.

"Our region is on the brink of losing a significant number of endangered species due to multiple cases of deforestation, wildlife hunting, climate change, pollution and population growth," the president said.

Aquino said the region's biodiversity should be considered a competitive advantage that can be sustainably exploited.

"Unfortunately, there are those who still see the environment as nothing more than a means to make an easy and quick profit without regard for the long-term consequences," he said.

Although the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) only occupy three percent of the world's surface, the region is home to more than 18 percent of all known plant and animal species, making it one of the planet's richest and most diverse regions, Aquino said.

Anger has risen over the plundering of the Philippine environment since 124,000 pieces of illicitly harvested sea fan and sea whip corals and 158 stuffed sea turtles were found at the port on May 11.

The amount of coral recovered could mean that an area ranging from 7,000 to 21,000 hectares (17,290 to 51,870 acres) of the sea floor had been plundered, officials of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources said.

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