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REPORTS on the Philippine decision to import fish shine light on the need for better, more effective administration of coastal areas and municipal waters. The Department of Agriculture recently issued guidelines for importing 25,000 metric tons of frozen fish species, including round scad or galunggong. The guidelines also cover the importation of bigeye scad, mackerel, bonito and moonfish for wet or public markets during the closed fishing season that stretches from this month to January 2023.

Most Filipinos likely feel disappointed about importing fish like galunggong, which locals have dubbed "the poor man's fish." Indeed, round scads used to be plentiful in local waters, and the abundant supply kept prices low. Earlier this year, President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. even told journalists that the need to import round scads was "unacceptable." As part of the remedy, the government hopes to invest in fish ports and other infrastructure. About P5.1 billion was included in the proposed 2023 budget, which will soon be finalized by Congress.

Regrettably, this program does not address the more fundamental issues that are blamed for dwindling aquatic resources — destructive fishing methods, poorly enforced laws and negative impact of climate change. For now, importation is necessary for food security. But more needs to be done to address the problem in the long run.

In addition to hard engineering planned by the government, programs to rehabilitate coral reefs and mangrove forests across the country should also be considered. Together, they create an ecosystem that protects fish and other marine wildlife and enables them to thrive.

Unfortunately, coral reefs and mangroves are rapidly disappearing. Citing a 2017 study by the Department of Science and Technology, Anna Varona of Haribon Foundation said in a forum that only 2 percent of the country's coral reefs were "healthy." She blamed plastic pollution and dynamite fishing, which persists despite laws prohibiting it.

As for mangroves, about 500,000 hectares of coastal areas spanned across the country in 1918. By 1994, that had shrunk to some 120,000 hectares. But thanks to replanting programs, mangrove forests recovered somewhat, but they only covered 250,000 hectares, according to a 2020 report. Because the Philippines is an archipelago, it has a long coastline that could be planted to more mangroves.

Some of the reasons for the loss of mangrove forests include clearing coastal areas for shrimp farms, as well as tourism and residential development. Granted, those also generate economic returns, but there should be a balance because a healthy mangrove forest has many advantages.

Added benefits

Protecting and rehabilitating coral reefs and mangrove forests can potentially do more than address the dwindling fish supply. For one, these programs can be a job-generating project for people living in coastal areas. That can also have a great impact on reversing poverty, because fisherfolk are among the poorest of the poor Filipinos.

Creating job opportunities for them could help discourage dynamite fishing and similar destructive methods. If fishermen and others in their family have alternative means of livelihood, perhaps they will be less prone to resort to illegal means of supporting their families. Also, tapping them to rehabilitate coral reefs and mangrove forests might keep them from destroying those precious resources.

The second point is about the special powers of mangroves, which are particularly helpful against climate change. Mangroves capture more carbon emissions than terrestrial forests. Mangroves also perform better than concrete seawalls in protecting coastal communities from tidal surges and severe weather caused by climate change.

More to the point of this editorial, mangroves help protect coral reefs by stabilizing shorelines, remove plastics and other pollutants, and improve the quality of the water. And like corals, mangroves provide nursery habitat that maintain fish stock.

In the long term when coral reefs and mangrove forests are nursed back to health, local fishermen might not need to venture too far out to the open sea to catch enough fish to support their families. And for the rest of the country, there should be more than enough local supply of fish like galunggong and others like it.