

Headline: 'Esperanza' for our oceans—and us

Byline: Rina Jimenez-David

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Since last month, the Greenpeace ship Esperanza (Spanish for “hope”) has been in Thailand; it will next sail to the Philippines, reaching port in Dumaguete on July 9. At about the same time, the Rainbow Warrior 2, a new Greenpeace ship named after a vessel that sank off New Zealand after being bombed by French intelligence agents in 1985, was in Indonesia.

The arrival and tour of the two Greenpeace ships are all part of a campaign to call the world's attention to the state of our oceans—in this case the vast Pacific Ocean—working with local partners “in exposing the threats confronting the health of our oceans such as overfishing and destructive fishing, pollution and climate change.”

The Philippines is an “ocean nation under threat,” says Greenpeace Philippine program manager Ira Beau Bacongus. “Some 70 percent of the population rely on the seas for their food,” and if the rate of overfishing, pollution and changes wrought by climate change continues unchecked, she says, “our food security will be put at risk.”

Recent events have shown that it's not just food security that's threatened. Territorial claims have placed the Philippines in conflict with our neighbors—specifically China and Taiwan—over disputed borders and supplies of seafood and resources like oil and gas believed to lie beneath the ocean floor. Disputed sea borders and the race to exploit possible resources can very well trigger wider regional conflicts. Disputed oceans as a threat to world peace? That can very well hold true, if we do not act faster to protect the waters around us, including initiating changes in our behavior and consumption to reduce the threat to our oceans, and working with other peoples and governments to work out arrangements on our shared use of the ocean's resources.

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While in Dumaguete, the Esperanza will focus attention on the “climate change impacts” on our oceans, says Bacongus. Some Greenpeace activists, joined by local divers, will explore the Apo Island Reef, a marine sanctuary that is under threat, to check on the health of the reef system.

Among the possible threats: destruction of the reef wrought by “wave action” as a consequence of frequent and intense weather disturbances; coral bleaching as a consequence of carbon dioxide absorption (bleached corals can no longer sustain fish and other forms of life); and “ocean acidification,” the result of marine pollution that, says Bacongus, “limits reef-building activities of coral.”

The Esperanza then moves on to Bicol, where it hopes to draw attention to the issues of overfishing and destructive fishing methods. A briefer on the issue by Greenpeace says the Philippines “is among the largest fish producers in the world.” About 2-4 percent of the country's gross domestic product is derived from fisheries, with more than 1.5 million Filipinos directly benefiting from fishing.

But it's been recognized, says the document, that “Philippine fisheries are in bad shape,” with studies proving that “the Philippines' main marine species are showing severe signs of overfishing.”

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The Esperanza will reach Manila by July 25, anchoring off Manila Bay and calling attention to the issue of pollution of our seas. Among the activities to mark the ship's stay in Manila is a "demo sampling" of Manila Bay waters by scientists with the UP Marine Science Institute, although to my mind, one needn't rely on scientific samples to determine the level of pollution in Manila Bay. The stench alone should tell them how bad the situation has become.

On July 27 and 28, the Esperanza will also hold "open boat days," inviting Greenpeace supporters and the public to board the ship and take a look at the facilities and meet its international crew.

Toward the end of the Esperanza's stay, Greenpeace plans to hand over the results of its study-tour of the major issues involving ocean health—to be called "Road to Recovery"—to government officials, specifically P-Noy.

But is there indeed a "road to recovery"? Greenpeace cites evidence from around the world "that the creation of marine reserves—areas of ocean set aside as off-limits to fishing, fossil fuel extraction and other industrial activities—can protect and restore ocean ecosystems." Also, by implementing sustainable management and fisheries, "not only can we conserve marine species and habitats but also ensure fish for the future."

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A note on the Esperanza itself.

Launched in 2002, it is the largest of Greenpeace's three ships (the other two are the Rainbow Warrior 2 and the Arctic Sunrise), and named thus following an online vote by Greenpeace supporters.

The ship was built in the "world-famous Polish shipyard" of Gdansk in 1984, and used by the Russian navy as a fire-fighting ship. It was later sold and used as a supply vessel in Norway before it fell into the hands of Greenpeace.

The Esperanza usually carries a 19-person international crew but has berths for up to 35. Before embarking on its new mission, the ship received a blessing in Cape Town from Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Says Greenpeace: "The Esperanza is home, office, workshop and platform for actions for a wide variety of people—activists, sailors, scientists, journalists and campaigners—each with a role to play and a story to tell."

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But really, we don't have to be crew members, or even board a Greenpeace ship, to play a role—and tell a story—in the global effort to save Earth. Changing our own consumption habits, the way we use resources and dispose of trash, all these taken together can very well bring hope—esperanza—not just for us but even for generations in our wake.