

Headline: Reef alert

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Sad news about our marine environment: Nearly all the reefs in the Coral Triangle, the waters that surround six countries in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific, are in decline. Even worse and sadder news: Among the countries, the Philippines is leading in reef degradation, endangering its economy and food supply.

The rather depressing findings are contained in *Reefs at Risk*, a study by the World Resources Institute (WRI) that was released at the International Coral Research Symposium in Cairns, Australia. According to the report, about 85 percent of the reefs in the Coral Triangle, a biodiversity hot spot, are in peril. The threats to the region—which covers the waters of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands—include overfishing, watershed pollution and coastal development. Factors such as climate change and ocean acidification increase the number of threatened reefs to 90 percent, the study said. Moreover, the decline of the region's coral cover is greater than the global rate of 60 percent.

Often overlooked, coral reefs are a key pillar in ecology. Coastal communities depend on coral reefs for food, livelihoods and even protection from huge waves during storms. "Reefs are resilient—they can recover from coral bleaching and other impacts—particularly if other threats are low," said Laretta Burke, senior associate at the WRI and lead author of the study. But pollution and overfishing are threatening to destroy the benefits that reefs provide. "Concerted action to mitigate threats to reefs across the Coral Triangle region is [very] important," Burke said.

The Coral Triangle was a major focus of the conference because it holds nearly 30 percent of the world's coral reefs and more than 3,000 species of fish—twice the number found anywhere else in the world. More than 130 million people living in the region rely on reef ecosystems for food, employment and revenue from tourism. Along with the report, a statement was signed by some 2,500 scientists and researchers who work on coral reefs and fisheries, calling for urgent action. The statement said 25-30 percent of the world's reef systems were severely degraded: "Coral reefs are important ecosystems of ecological, economic and cultural value yet they are in decline worldwide due to human activities. Land-based sources of pollution, sedimentation, overfishing and climate change are the major threats, and all of them are expected to increase in severity."

The situation is bound to get worse if local and global leaders fail to act, the statement warned.

The Philippines is gifted with the richest biodiversity in the world, which has been affirmed and reaffirmed by scientists and other researchers who can't help but be awed at their discoveries of the country's teeming flora and fauna. It can't afford to go the way of perdition. As it makes the eager rush toward progress and development, it should not forget that its drive has been fueled by its rich natural resources that, however, must be conserved and allowed to recover.

To some extent, this is the best time to renew the Philippines' commitment to environmental conservation and sustainable development. The incumbent administration is friendly to the environment, and President Aquino has issued, for example, Executive Order 79, which restricts mining exploration. While the Catholic bishops and certain groups believe that the order is not sufficiently restrictive, the gesture should show that there's momentum for sustainable development.

That momentum should be exploited to save the Coral Triangle. The government must declare more marine sanctuaries. It should prod the other Coral Triangle countries to build more and bigger marine protected areas. It should adopt the WRI suggestion of imposing closed seasons to check overfishing, establishing “no-take areas” where fishing is not allowed, and using safe fishing methods in order to help revive coral reefs and increase fish stocks.

The Philippines should lead the Coral Triangle countries in reviving the campaign to make the big industrialized countries commit to critical cuts in carbon emission so as to check climate change. In 2010, a widespread coral bleaching event, which is triggered by warmer ocean temperature, occurred in the Philippines. For us the issue should be clear and stark: Save the coral reefs and the environment—or face extinction.

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