# More reason to protect WPS

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A new study has given the country another compelling reason to protect the West Philippine Sea (WPS) and Benham Bank from China’s aggression. These two areas, as the paper revealed, host a wide variety of soft coral species. But researchers said that many of the resources found there are likely still undiscovered.

The study, “Biodiversity and biogeography of zooxanthellate soft corals across the Indo-Pacific,” pooled specimens from over 40 countries and territories spanning from 1998 to 2023. It was published in Nature Scientific Reports last May.

Philippine samples were collected from the Kalayaan Island Group, Western Palawan, Pangasinan, Puerto Galera, northeastern Philippines, and Benham Bank in the Philippine Rise during various projects from 2019 to 2021.

“The samples from the Philippines were major representatives for the Coral Triangle region. The paper shows that the Philippines, including the West Philippine Sea and Benham Bank in northeastern Philippines, is part of one of the centers of zooxanthellate soft coral diversity,” said Dr. Jue Lalas, one of the two Filipino co-authors.

## Vast resources

The WPS, a rich fishing ground and host to significant natural resources, including oil and gas, is being claimed by China despite a 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration nullifying China’s nine-dash line and upholding Philippine sovereign rights over the area.

Benham Bank, the shallowest part of the Philippine Rise, on the other hand, is not under dispute but is near parts of the South China Sea that Beijing claims. It is part of the country’s continental shelf awarded by the United Nations in 2012, giving Manila exclusive sovereign rights over it.

In 2017, a controversy erupted after Chinese vessels were spotted in the area said to be rich with minerals and natural gas. The Department of Foreign Affairs later told a Senate investigating panel that China had surveyed the Rise without any Philippine-issued permit.

The release of this recent study only confirms why countries like China would be interested in these areas—because of the vast resources that are potentially underneath them.

## Potential treatment for cancer

According to the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute (UPMSI), soft corals, which are members of the class Octocorallia, are major components of marine ecosystems, including coral reefs. Aside from serving as habitats for many organisms, the medical field is also discovering their use. “They also have potential economic benefits, such as being sources of compounds that can be used for making medicine,” UPMSI said.

In 2022, researchers at the University of Utah found that soft corals can be a source of a natural chemical that earlier studies had cited as a potential treatment for cancer. “Soft corals have thousands of drug-like compounds that could work as anti-inflammatory agents, antibiotics, and more,” an article published in May 2022 on the university’s website stated. “But getting enough of these compounds has been a major barrier to developing them into drugs for clinical use.”

It quoted Dr. Eric Schmidt, professor of medicinal chemistry at the university, as saying that compounds from soft corals “offer distinctive advantages for drug development.” Schmidt said that other animals like snakes and spiders carry chemicals with healing properties, but these need to be injected. Soft corals, on the other hand, are easily digestible and could be given as pills. “These compounds are harder to find, but they’re easier to make in the lab and easier to take as medicine,” he said.

## Hot spot for diversity

Despite being a hot spot for diversity for soft corals, however, Lalas said there are only a few studies on the subject in the Philippines. He cited the lack of people working on soft corals, compared to hard corals, as one of the reasons. Funds, therefore, tend to be funneled more into research for hard corals.

The government should view recent discoveries on the medical benefits of soft corals as a huge opportunity for the country to lead research work in this field. As Lalas himself admitted, there is still so much more that local scientists haven’t explored yet. “If you look at the study more closely, and the literature on Philippine soft corals, we have yet to explore their diversity in most of the Philippine seas,” he said.

The government must therefore pour more resources into this area. At the same time, it must be prudent in granting access to the country’s territories. While collaboration with scientists from other countries is essential in knowledge exchange and sharing, it must not compromise the country’s sovereign rights over its resource-rich waters. Equally important is that the gains must benefit the country and Filipinos, not some foreign entity.

This makes the protection of WPS and Benham Bank, among the world’s critically important centers of marine biodiversity, an imperative undertaking.