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Defending Our Oceans

"Greenpeace is committed to defending the health of the world's oceans and the plants, animals and people that depend upon them."

The community-managed marine reserve of Apo Island

"We are facing a gathering wave of ocean extinction...
the seas have reached a tipping point, with scores of species of ocean-dwelling fish, birds and mammals edging toward extinction."

Pew Institute for Ocean Science 2005

Unlike many of the marine protected areas in the Philippines, Apo Island is more than just a paper park. Studies have demonstrated the benefits of the reserve for conservation and for local community livelihood. Apo Island has also become a model for community-managed marine reserves.

Known around the world as one of the best examples of a community-managed marine reserve, Apo Island in Dauin, Negros Oriental in the Philippines is a small, steep volcanic island surrounded by narrow fringing coral reefs. The waters around the island are home to 650 species of fish and 400 species of corals.

Fishing is the major source of livelihood for the island's 760 people who benefit from the abundant marine life teeming in the waters around the reserve.

There was a time, however, when fish had not always been abundant. Eking out a living through fishing had become more and more difficult. Three decades ago, unsustainable fishing practices had almost finished off what was left of the area's fish stocks.

Years before Apo Island became the earliest community-based marine reserve in the Philippines, fishermen in the island were involved in destructive and illegal fishing methods such as muro-ami and dynamite fishing. The situation in Apo Island before is indicative of the rampant illegal and destructive fishing practices still prevailing in many parts of the country.

Coral reef protection in Apo Island began informally in 1982 under a Marine Conservation Development Program begun by Siliman University in the Philippines. The University had already started several coral reef conservation projects in 1978 in response to the rapid degradation of the country's coastal waters. In a visit to Apo Island, project staff broached the idea of protecting the reefs to address the problem of dwindling fish catch in the area.

The establishment of a sanctuary where all fishing was prohibited was initially met with a lot of resistance. The project therefore started small and its progress was closely monitored. Fish catch was routinely recorded and the townsfolk were regularly shown photographs of what was under their sea to show them the benefits of the project.

The marked improvement in fish catch caught the interest of the fishermen so that in 1985 the island community and local council formalized the sanctuary, declaring waters surrounding the island up 500 metres from the shore a marine reserve and a portion of the coast in the south-eastern part of the island a no-take fish sanctuary. The community, who were once sceptical of the sanctuary, were now participating in guarding and defending their marine resources.

Later in the 1990s, the protection of Apo Island was elevated to the national level under the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS), and the entire island eventually became a protected area.

The primary benefit the local community gets from the marine reserve is increased fish catch in less fishing time (more catch per unit effort). Biomass of large predatory fish have increased 8-fold in the reserve, and biomass and species diversity have also increased. Nesting turtles have been observed in the island's shores, and the Green Sea and Hawksbill turtles in fact frequent the sanctuary. Bumphead parrotfish also visit these waters, as well as the occasional whale shark. The island is home to several species of giant clams and famous for huge schools of jacks in its fish sanctuary.

It is worth noting that neighbouring towns have also benefited from the success of Apo Island in terms of increase in fish biomass and that many "new and emerging marine reserves" in the rest of the Philippines have also learned from its accomplishment.

Siliman University's centre of excellence in coastal resources management has adopted key criteria to ensure that Apo Island is a good example of marine reserve management.

The entire marine habitat around Apo Island, from the high tide mark to a distance of 500 m off shore is protected from all fishing methods or other uses destructive to the coral reef habitat. These fishing methods include: dynamite fishing, "muro-ami" type of fishing or related methods using weighted scare lines or poles, spearfishing using SCUBA, cyanide or other strong poisons and very small mesh gill nets.

A coral reef "fish sanctuary" and breeding area is located on the southeast corner of the island extending from the southern tip of the island to the middle of the southeast beach. No fishing or collecting is permitted, anchoring of large motorized boats is not permitted without an anchor buoy and breeding stock for giant Tridacna clams placed in the area are strictly protected from collection.

The marine habitat outside of the "fish sanctuary" but within the marine reserve is called a traditional fishing area where all destructive fishing methods and uses are prohibited but where the traditional fishing methods such as hook and line, bamboo traps, gill nets, spearfishing without SCUBA and traditional gleaning are permitted.

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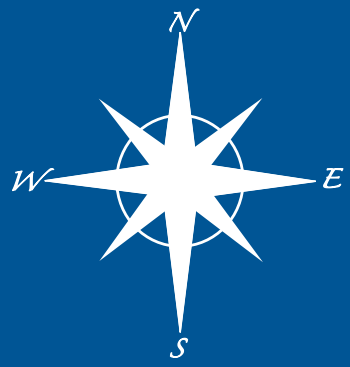

Greenpeace is an independent, campaigning organisation, which uses non-violent, creative confrontation to expose global environmental problems, and to force solutions essential to a green and peaceful future

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