

By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

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The Philippines Should Turn Attention to Spratlys, Says RP's Ex-DENR Chief

CHICAGO (JGLI) – The Philippine government should re-assert its ownership or “co-ownership” claims on the Spratly Islands by strengthening its “managing environment of the coral reefs, plenty of fish that reproduce in the reefs and atolls and their larvae that may reach the Philippines to reseed our depleted fish resources.”

Former Secretary Angel C. Alcala of the Philippine Department of Environment and Natural Resources under the Ramos Administration told this reporter in an interview that the Philippines should do its part of the “not heavily protected area we claim in terms of managing correctly the environment of the fish that has been used” since the late 1990s, when biomass was reduced.

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A world-renowned marine biologist and “father of Philippine rainforest,” Dr. Alcala is credited with establishing the Apo Marine Sanctuary in Dumaguete City in the Philippines. It is home to over 650 documented species of fish and estimated to have over 400 species of corals. Visitors and tourists pay a fee to enter

Apo

Island

and to snorkel or dive in the marine sanctuary there, these fees are used to keep the sanctuary clean and in good condition.

In 2003, Chicago's Shedd Aquarium opened a Wild Reef exhibit based on Apo Island's surrounding reef and marine sanctuary. In 2008, Sport Diver Magazine listed

Apo

Island

as one of the top 100 diving spots in the world.

The Apo Marine Sanctuary has 1,000 marine protected areas (MPA's) maintained by the Philippine government and non-government organizations.

Mr. Alcala, 81, was the chief of the joint oceanographic, marine and biology expedition composed of 20 people from the Philippines and Vietnam for ten days between April and May 2007 who sailed and explored the Spr
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Islands
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Because they are huge reservoir of fish, Spratly Islands that are located west of Luzon and Palawan Islands with an area bigger than the size of Luzon in sea area, the Philippines should never take them for granted.

The Spratlys were discovered by Filipino adventurer Tomas Cloma in 1947 and renamed them Kalayaan Islands . He later ceded the islands to the Philippine government under President Marcos.

RP HAS STRONGEST CLAIM

A side from Vietnam and the Philippines, there are other countries laying claim on the Spratly Islands . But the Philippines has the strongest claim for their ownership based on the Roman Law that says that whoever abuts closest to an island is the owner of that island. The Spratly Islands are 230 nautical miles west of Palawan

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. Other claiming countries are much further. The islands are said to be also be rich in natural gas and oil deposits.

The fish biomass from Spratlys could be a big source of fishery production of the Philippines, which in 2001, had a total fishery production at 2,983 metric tons valued at 98.69 billion pesos (US\$2-B). About a million small-scale fishers are dependent directly on reefs for livelihood.

Over-fishing and destructive fishing practices are by far the greatest threats to the reefs, followed by coastal development and land-based activities.

Dr. Alcala, a marine biologist and herpetologist, dropped by Chicago, Illinois to meet with his fellow alumni at the Silliman University in Dumaguete City in the Philippines, including Elsie Sy-Niebar, who hosted him a lunch, and Luz Corsino Frost, a former faculty of Silliman, and his friends at the Field Museum, including Dr. Bob F. Inger and Dr. Larry Heaney, who have worked with him in the past.

His visit comes a week before the Philippine Consulate in Chicago hosts an afternoon of Philippine classical songs called "Kundiman" on Sunday, Aug. 29, at 4 p.m. at the Wild Reef of the Shedd Aquarium at 1200 South Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, according to Consul General Leo M. Herrera-Lim.

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The Kundiman will be headlined by Chicago-based international Filipino American artists Mesdames Emily Morales and Rica Goldyn, both sopranos, and Mr. Paul Aquino (baritone).

When asked if he will serve under the Aquino Administration, Dr. Alcala demurred, saying he will come to a decision only if he is offered a government position again.

EN ROUTE TO UNITED NATIONS

He is en route to the United Nations in New York and to New Jersey, where he is to going to give a lecture and meet with co-alumni. At the UN, Dr. Alcala will attend a six-day meeting, assessing marine biology with select group of marine biologists. He is going to give an input and critique on a document, assessing the status of marine environment all over the world as representative of the
pines

Philip

Dr. Alcala said during his 1992-1995 term as DENR secretary, he made lot of enemies when he ordered the confiscation of logs and timbers after he filed charges against illegal loggers. He said he donated the confiscated logs to the public buildings under construction.

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He said 75 percent of various animal species in the Philippines are now in the endangered list. The Philippines has 400 amphibians and reptiles; and 2,500 to 3,000 species of fish.

Mangroves or *bakawans* have been reduced from 500,000 to 100,000 hectares. Out of 50 mangroves worldwide, 30 plus of these are found in the Philippines.

Dr. Alcala also observed that authorities should do something about the City of Mactan in Cebu, which rests on a big rock. Mactan has no public toilets that make water polluted with blue green algae and is a serious-health hazard.

Dr. Alcala said regarding the oil spill at the Gulf of Mexico, one of the largest oil spills in the world, although oil seems to disappear from the surface of the sea, oil could go to specific sites and would continue under that condition. He said there is still a chance for the elements and components of oil to enter the food chain, when it is covered by algae and consumed by certain fish. So, there is a need for monitoring. # # #

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