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**95% of RP reefs ruined, says group**

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By Blanche S. Rivera

Inquirer News Service

**ANILAO, BATANGAS-Philippine coral reefs, renowned for being home to amazing marine resources, are in terrible condition, according to the world's biggest reef conservation organization.**

**Blast fishing and an unregulated marine aquarium trade have destroyed much of the country's coral reefs over the years, said Reef Check, an international organization assessing the health of reefs in 82 countries.**

**"Despite its high biodiversity, the Philippines' reefs are very badly damaged. It's one of the worst damaged in the world, on the average. Most of the reefs are very badly overfished," California-based Reef Check founder George Hodgson said at a press conference here on Saturday.**

**He said the growing population of the Philippines had put pressure on marine resources as coastal communities continued to resort to cyanide fishing to meet the demand for fish.**

**"The human demand for fish is just way beyond the supply," Hodgson said.**

**An unregulated marine aquarium trade has also put pressure on the coral reefs, which are destroyed by blast fishing to catch the most popular aquarium fish species.**

**The Philippines and Indonesia supply about 85 percent of the world's aquarium fishes, Reef Check-Philippine country director Domingo Ochavillo said.**

### Hot spots

**The two countries are among the 18 megadiversity nations in the world, which together account for 80 percent of the earth's biodiversity. They are also among the top biodiversity hot spots, with the Philippines ranked fifth in the world last year.**

**"About 95 percent of the reefs in the Philippines have been badly damaged, but with just a little bit of effort, you can allow them to recover," Hodgson said.**

**The Philippines has more than 400 of some 500 known species of corals all over the world, but more than 90 percent of these are considered "highly threatened," according to the World Bank environment monitor.**

**Ochavillo said climate change would also significantly affect the recovery of the country's coral reefs, citing the death of 10 percent of the world's reefs in 1998, the hottest year since 1880.**

**"Reefs that are really devastated may not recover because of natural disturbances," he said.**

**Reef Check is pushing for the protection and conservation of 20 to 30 percent of coral reef areas to allow the corals to grow and repair themselves.**

### Sustainable fishing

**Ochavillo said Hilutungan Island off Mactan was a good example that sustainable fishing could be done. The island had allotted 500 square meters of its reefs as an off-limits area two years ago to allow the reefs to recover.**

**Conservation has yielded fruit. The reefs have recovered and have become a major source of income for**

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the barangay, which charges divers \$1 each for exploring the reef. The island made \$80,000 from tourism last year, boosting the fishermen's income.

"The key is offering them alternative livelihood. You can't just tell the fishermen that they can't fish anymore because you want to conserve the area," Ochavillo said.

Reef Check is eyeing other popular tourist areas in the country for reef conservation. The group said developing the tourism potential of reef-rich areas would encourage the fishermen to participate in reef conservation.

While fishing for food and the marine aquarium trade would not be halted, the fishing habits would have to change if coastal communities are to harvest more resources from the coral reefs in the coming years.

"We are transforming the trade. They are doing it in a damaging way, and we want to teach them how to do it sustainably and without harming the coral reefs," Hodgson said.

He said numerous marine protected parks in the country had hardly helped in reef conservation because only five out of about 100 marine parks were actually working.

These are the Tubbataha marine park in Palawan, Apo Island in Negros Oriental, Apo Reef in Oriental Mindoro, Hilutungan, and Anilao in Batangas.

"Unfortunately there are marine parks in paper but not in effect," Hodgson said.

He said the Philippines, which he described as "a very important country because diversity is high," should focus on conservation.

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