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RP hosts Coral Triangle meet

By KATHERINE ADRANEDA

Government officials and technical experts from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands will hold a three-day meeting in Manila to find ways to undertake coordinated and sustained global action to protect the Coral Triangle, the world's richest marine region in the Western Pacific Ocean.

The Coral Triangle includes

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the marine regions of Sulu-Sulawesi, part of the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, and portions of Indonesia, Malaysia, Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and the Philippines at its apex.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) said the Coral Triangle, which spans 5.7 million square kilometers, contains 76 percent of all known coral species even if it only covers two percent of the world's ocean.

Delegates from the six governments of the Coral Triangle Region are expected to discuss starting on Oct. 21 the comprehensive Regional Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries, and Food Security (CTI-CFF) Plan of Action, which will be presented and affirmed by heads of state at the World Oceans Conference in Manado, Indonesia in May 2009.

"This meeting is very significant as it also aims to fire up world attention on the need to ease the impact of climate change on the country's marine and coastal ecosystems," said Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Lito Atienza.

Atienza said Philippine ecosystems play a crucial role in the preservation of the Coral Triangle, which contains more than 500 species of reef-building corals, as it is abundant in reef fish species, estimated at more than 3,000, including commercially valuable pelagic species like yellow fin tuna, big eye tuna, bump head parrot fish, and Napoleon wrasse (locally known as *ma-meng*).

"These marine biological resources are at risk, threatened by over-fishing and other destructive practices; pollution; and climate change. So this new initiative (CTI-CFF Plan of Action) would address these threats and ensure long-term benefits from the marine biological resources of the region," Atienza pointed out.

He said that like other marine ecosystems, the country's marine areas, including corals and the biodiversity of the oceans, are vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change.

Five initial goals were identified by the technical working group formed during the first Senior Officials Meeting, including the designation and effective management of priority seascapes, application of an ecosystem approach to the management of fisheries and other marine resources, effective management of marine protected areas (MPAs), achievement of climate change adaptation measures, and improvement of threatened species status.

The WWF said that the Coral Triangle is packed with an extraordinary variety of fish, and over 120 million people directly depend on the bounty of the area for their food and income.

"This area also supports the largest tuna fisheries in the world, which generate billions of dollars in global income every year," the WWF added. "Healthy reef systems also help buffer coastal communities from severe storms and tsunamis."

The CTI is an Indonesian-led multilateral partnership that aims to ensure long-term benefits from the sustainable management of marine and coastal resources across the Coral Triangle area.

A new CTI-CFF was launched in 2007 to help promote political commitments and action by governments of the Coral Triangle area, supported and carried forward by public funding institutions, non-government organizations, and the private sector.

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Aside from the DENR, the Department of Agriculture (DA), ASEAN Center for Biodiversity (ACB), German Development Agency (GTZED), World Fish Center, and Asian Development Bank (ADB), among others, also support the CTI.