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PRESS RELEASE

02 July 2019

Official Statement of the UP Marine Science Institute on the West Philippine Sea

The West Philippine Sea is for Filipinos

The UP Marine Science Institute (UP MSI) believes that our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) should be actively protected and cared for to safeguard the economic, ecological, and food security of current and future Filipino generations.

The EEZ is the area surrounding the Philippines up to 200 nautical miles (370km) from the shore. A rich fishing ground plentiful in marine life, the WPS EEZ stretches from Batanes to the south of Balabac in Southern Palawan, including the Kalayaan Island Group (KIG) in the Spratlys. While the municipal waters, which are nearer to shore are more productive in terms of fish catch per unit area, the WPS EEZ, which contains around 40% of the Philippines' EEZ, has higher total fisheries production than the WPS municipal waters combined. Dr. Jay Batongbacal and Assoc. Justice Antonio Carpio discussed the legality and constitutionality of inclinations towards opening the WPS EEZ to foreign entities; **UP MSI would then like to shed light and share information on the ecological implications and social consequences of tolerating foreign access.**

Fisheries production of both municipal and EEZ waters of the country has declined over the past decades, and is predicted to drop further by 25-50% in a few years' time. Part of solving the problem is understanding the processes and interconnectivity of oceans and seas. For example, eggs, larvae, and small fishes born in the WPS and the larger Spratly Islands drift along ocean currents and settle in the coastal areas of Western Palawan and Northwestern Luzon. Such information is important in crafting effective and appropriate management strategies that will help us sustain local stocks, securing food for current and future generations of Filipinos.

The key to utilizing and protecting resources in the WPS EEZ is EXCLUSIVE ACCESS. Allowing foreign entities to occupy and exploit these waters would be tantamount to denying Filipino fisherfolks access to their own food and resources.

Our exclusive economic rights also come with equal responsibility to protect, manage, and sustainably use the resources in our WPS EEZ – **a responsibility enshrined in our constitution and national laws.** As stewards of WPS, we are responsible for deterring ongoing and future activities and practices that endanger or damage our resources. **These laws that apply to Filipinos should also apply to ALL, with no exemptions.** Reported activities of foreign vessels, such as the Chinese fishing fleets in our EEZ violate both local and international standards. Harvesting of clams and corals, dead or alive, results in significant physical damages and ultimate demise of the habitats from where they were taken. These are the same habitats that serve as home and breeding grounds of most marine life, and source of food of many Filipinos.

Damages to marine habitats and resources will affect ecosystem services. These include fundamental (e.g., foods, habitats, novel products), regulatory (e.g., climate, biogeochemical cycles), environmental (e.g., biogeography, genetic diversity), and cultural (e.g., disaster reduction) services. Alarmingly, we are losing these services at a rate faster than we are understanding them. Aside from corals and clams, WPS is also rich in seaweeds, seagrasses, other animals, and even microorganisms. Some of these marine microbes may

become sources of new drugs, medicines, and other biotechnological products. Emerging issues such as trash and plastics have already been found accumulating in these environments, but there is no clear understanding of their impact yet. Losing these habitats and ecosystems would mean losing many resources that could benefit future generations of Filipinos.

Given recent issues related to the WPS, the UP MSI would like to reiterate our following calls in order to move forward:

1. We call for all parties to stop, deter and avoid activities that may further compromise the status and health of these resources, and to strictly implement laws and policies that are already in place;
2. We call for the establishment of multilateral marine protected areas (MPAs), along with international scientific cooperation on joint studies and expeditions in South China Sea. Recognizing the sensitivity of this issue, we call on the governments of the Philippines, China, and ASEAN states to seriously discuss these possibilities by acknowledging the SCS as a shared heritage that we will bestow on future generations;
3. Knowing the importance of scientific information in crafting appropriate and effective management strategies, we call on the national agencies to invest more on Science and Technology (S&T) in our EEZ by equipping and empowering our local scientists through infrastructure and human resources developments;
4. As the Philippines transitions to blue economy, we call on the creation of a separate Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) that will be mandated to study, utilize, manage and protect the largest ecosystem and future biggest contributor to Philippine economy - **Our Oceans and Seas**;
5. We call on the public to become more aware and be part of a **MOVEMENT** for **RESPONSIBLE STEWARDSHIP** not only for WPS but all the seas surrounding the country, and we hope that such involvement would not stop in shares, likes and comments in social media. Ordinary citizens can become involved by educating people and improving the level of discourse with use of scientific facts and data, and by stopping disinformation and misinformation.
6. We call on ourselves, other academic and research institutions, and related NGOs to educate the public on the importance of the WPS and other waters surrounding the Philippines, and the urgency of its protection.

Filipinos, proud protectors of the West Philippine Sea! Padayon!
