



WOW Pilipinas

A recurrent series of articles about the Philippines and its people, places, events and heritage — presented by the **Filipino American Association of Greater Columbia, SC**



Anilao in Batangas :

A PRIME SHOWCASE OF PHILIPPINE MARINE BIODIVERSITY

by I. C. Go



People from all over the world visit the Philippines just to scuba dive. After all, the island nation is surrounded by water and consists of over 7,100 islands.

According to the Conservation International (CI), the Philippines' marine habitats, especially those within the Sulu-Sulawesi Seascape — a great expanse of biodiversity located between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines — are within the core of the world's marine biodiversity.

In addition, a study by Carpenter and Springer in 2005 identified the Verde Island Passage (VIP), a narrow corridor of tropical water found between Northern Mindoro and Batangas Province, as an area having the **highest** concentration of marine shorefish biodiversity on the planet.

Anilao

Located in the town of Mabini in the province of Batangas, Anilao is but 2.5 hours from Metro Manila by car and is a world-class scuba diving hot spot for locals and foreigners alike. It is easily accessible from Manila's international and domestic airports and is a prime showcase of the marine biodiversity found in the Philippines.

The shores of Mabini are lined with dive resorts where divers get to see a lot just by diving the house reef (*i.e.*, reef just in front of the dive resort). House reef diving is quite convenient because you can just enter the water from the shore and still be close to your resort, before and after the dive, day or night. Other offshore dive spots are just a boat ride away.

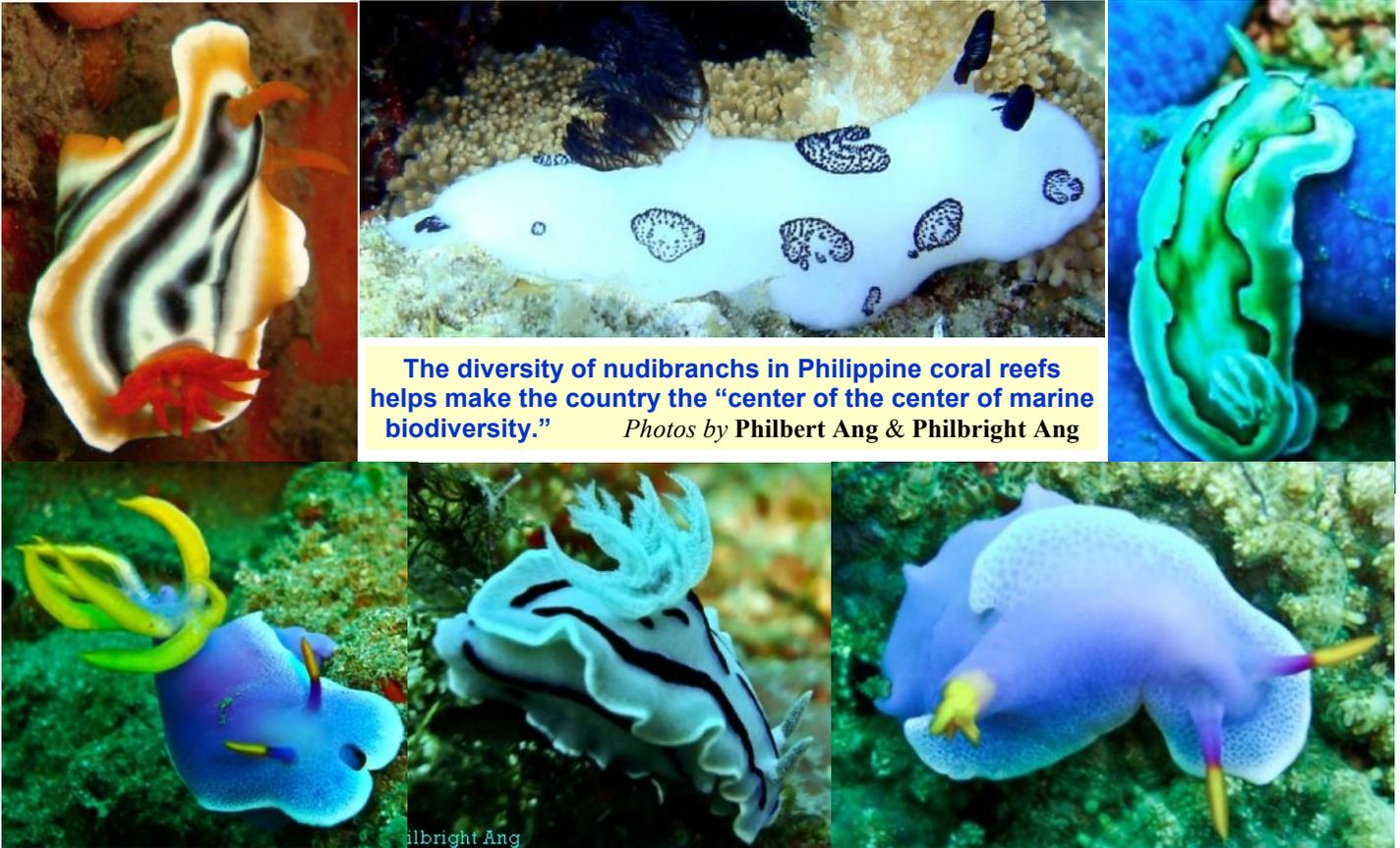
The most popular dive site is the Cathedral, which is known for its fish feeding. As one approaches the site, fish start to approach people. This area's fish instinctively know that people tend to bring food, such as bread crumbs or bananas, for them to eat. I once held a banana right in front of my mask and so many of them came at it. They kept nipping at the banana and my

fingers until even the peel was gone and the skin on my fingers became chapped. There were so many fish in front of me that I could not see anything but the bodies of colorful fish trying to approach the banana.

Dr. Tim Sevilla is considered by many as the father of modern scuba diving in the Philippines. He passed away in 2008 and his ashes are buried in a concrete box under a cross at the underwater Cathedral sanctuary. His final resting place is close to the marine life he loved and the divers he helped throughout his lifetime.

I have many Anilao memories: carpets of soft coral as far as the eye can see; my first ever full-grown shark and adult green sea turtle sightings; the largest starfish and the largest lionfish I'd ever seen





The diversity of nudibranchs in Philippine coral reefs helps make the country the “center of the center of marine biodiversity.”
 Photos by Philbert Ang & Philbright Ang

anywhere; clusters of giant 3-foot clams; hills of hard coral with thousands of fish in the background; schools of small and large fish; and more fish. But there was an unexpected petite jewel among all these creatures — the nudibranch.

Nudibranchs

With over 3,000 known species, the nudibranch (*pronounced NEW-duh-branks*), a type of sea slug, can have fantastic colors and designs, which may serve as a warning to would-be predators that they are toxic. The Latin *nudus* means naked and the Greek *brankhia* means gills.

Nudibranchs are invertebrates that do not have shells and true gills. They have a long fleshy muscular foot, like land snails, and have tentacles on their head. They may have a cluster of gills toward their back for respiration, while others have tentacle-like appendages all over their body that can be used to breathe or to defend themselves.

Center of Marine Biodiversity

It wasn't until 2009 that I learned from **Mr. Romeo Trono**, CI's Executive Director for the Philippines, that the Philippines has been identified by scientists as the “**Center of the Center of Marine Shorefish Biodiversity**” on the planet. I examined for myself the academic publication (Carpenter & Springer, 2005)

responsible for the determination. They used a Geographic Information System (GIS) with available data on numbers of species and locations. The publication became the driving force behind the Philippines' claim to being the “*center of the center of marine biodiversity,*” surpassing even Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Obviously data on species is expensive and not easy to obtain. On land, people can spend hours, days, weeks, or longer in the same location waiting for wildlife to appear. Due to man's limitations underwater, sometimes the window of opportunity to see marine life is in seconds.

CI's recent studies on fish egg and larval distribution in Sulu Sea (2006 – 2008) show that the concentration of marine life within the VIP benefits from the inherent potential of the pass to entrain biological materials or the babies of marine life coming from within and outside of the passage. CI Philippines has therefore taken a huge stride in helping the Local Government Units bordering this important piece of the Earth's oceans to establish more than 16,000 hectares (*1 hectare = 2.47 acres*) of Marine Protected Areas — designated portions of the sea which are protected and conserved for the well-being of current and future generations.

Challenges

Scuba diving is a sport I took on very late in life, but while I can, I hope to dive as much as possible in the Philippines to see for myself the beautiful seascapes and marine life. The talk among a number of more seasoned

Filipino divers is that the seascapes have been degrading and that diving ten years ago was a lot better than diving today. It only makes sense that unregulated and mindless human encroachment has an impact on underwater habitats.

There are other areas in the world that could vie for or challenge the Philippines for the prestigious title of being the “center of the center of marine biodiversity.” Regardless of what place deserves the title, the fact remains that there are ever-increasing threats to marine ecosystems. Many of these threats are linked to man’s activities. The marine environment is resilient to a certain extent, but habitats have a breaking point when

there is no chance of recovery and damage is permanent. Unfortunately, the Philippines has relatively more challenges in preserving its marine resources than some of its other southeast Asian neighbors.

I would be lying if I said I felt that the marine beauty of the Philippines will last for many more generations. I think it is still possible, but the challenges are great. In researching the facts for this article, I felt a sense of loss and a deep regret that the earth’s waters and marine inhabitants are in trouble. If you treasure the sea and its inhabitants, please remain informed of the challenges and consider participating in marine conservation and preservation programs.

In 2009, the Philippines became the official host of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) Centre for Biodiversity.

The ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) has funding from the European Union and was officially launched in 2005. It is charged with the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity among its member nations.

The United Nations (UN) General Assembly declared 2010 as the *International Year of Biodiversity*. Biodiversity or biological diversity has been gaining more and more attention as a result of man’s impact on all forms of life on earth. An estimated 75% of fishing grounds are fully or over exploited. Scientists predict that ocean acidification and rising temperatures may lead to the total (100%) loss of coral reefs by 2050. Only an estimated 10% of all species on earth have been identified. An estimated 130 species go extinct each day, which is a rate over 1,000 greater than the natural extinction rate.

“Our lives depend on biological diversity. Species and ecosystems are disappearing at an unsustainable rate. We humans are the cause. The consequences for economies and people will be profound.”

Ban Ki-Moon, UN *Secretary General*

Biodiversity is life.
Biodiversity is our life.

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