

18 February 2013 - The Philippines' handling and care of the Tubbataha Reef, a World Heritage Site, in the wake of the damage it sustained as a result of the grounding of a navy ship on January 17, is a testament to its capability in upholding the values of the World Heritage Committee (WHC).

The Philippines' prompt and proficient response to the unfortunate incident was enabled by an exemplary law, hailed by environmental experts as a model piece of legislation in coral reef conservation, and the presence of effective institutional mechanisms. These mechanisms have since provided the accountable party clarity on its obligations under the law, as well as paved the way for efforts towards restoring the damaged area.

The incident has brought to fore the Philippines' capable stewardship of a World Heritage Site, and hopes to bring this competence to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Committee where it is seeking a seat for the term 2013 to 2017 at elections scheduled in November 2013 during the 38th Session of the UNESCO General Conference. The Philippines hopes that its experience in caring for World Heritage Sites will enhance the Committee's effectiveness as it carries out its mandate of conserving nature and cultural priorities.

The Philippines sat in the World Heritage Committee from 1991 to 1997, and served in the Committee Bureau from 1992 to 1996.

Tubbataha Reef was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1993. In 2009, the Philippine government enacted the Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park Act (Republic Act 10067). It declared Tubbataha a protected area and mandated its protection and conservation through a no-take policy. The law also created the Tubbataha Protected Area Management Board (TPAMB), which counts as its members stakeholders from the national and local governments, and groups from the academe, civil society and the private sector, including the Philippine chapters of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Conservation International. The park's day-to-day administration is supervised and directed by the Tubbataha Management Office (TMO).

The reef, which sits in the center of the Sulu Sea, 157 kilometers southeast of Puerto Princesa City in Palawan, is located within the Coral Triangle, an area of important biological and marine

diversity. Covering almost 97,030 hectares, it serves as a sanctuary for over 350 species of corals, almost 500 species of fish, and one of the few remaining colonies of breeding seabirds in the region.

Last January 17, Tubbataha reef was the site of the grounding of a United States (US) Navy ship, the USS Guardian. Since then, the TMO has been ensuring the enforcement of the relevant provisions of Republic Act (RA) 10067, including the payment of fines and compensation for damages. The TMO is also readying its resources, through its vast network of marine and conservation experts, for the assessment of the extent of the damage and subsequent restoration efforts. END