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DENR

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GOTCHA

JARIUS BONDOC

DENR clarifications needed pronto on bay landfilling, watershed quarrying



"I'm no fan of landfilling at Manila Bay," a former Philippine Reclamation Authority bigwig confided. "But after many years of applying, studying, complying with a million reclamation requirements, all 22 projects suddenly are stopped, just like that, by the Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources."

He's got a point. Why put multibillion-peso investors through the wringer, notify them to proceed, then subject them to newer rules?

DENR presumably conducted environment-impact assessments on each of the 22 reclamations. Now Sec. Maria Antonia Yulo-Loyzaga says there's need for one cumulative impact assessment, as in how all 22 will affect the ecosystem.

Obviously DENR bureaucrats goofed. They gave reclamation authorities piecemeal go-signals for landfilling. They ignored environmentalists' warnings against arbitrary approvals.

Only when the US embassy complained that waters around its bayside compound was being dredged - by a China state company blacklisted by the U.S. State Department - did everyone at DENR start to look busy.

Yulo-Loyzaga must make their heads roll. More than that, she must rush forming the scientists team for the cumulative impact assessment.

Issues and risks for the scientists to determine:

- Collapse of unstable reclamation edges due to earth tremors. Is soft soil being replaced with sand for geotechnically stable foundation?
- Settlement, stability and bearing capacity for the land expansion. Is sand filling layered, not rushed?
- Uneven and uncontrolled settlement during its lifetime. Are vertical drains embedded to release subsoil overpressure?
- Earthquake liquefaction due to insufficient bearing capacity. Is the sand densified by compacting to prevent collapse?
- Flooding and erosion during typhoons. Are reclamation edges protected by revetments constructed from rock armor and topped with a wave wall to minimize overtopping sea swells?
- Will there be ongoing and post-construction monitoring and soil sampling for settlement or instability?

Yulo-Loyzaga also needs to review the history of Manila Bay reclamations.

Only one of the projects, that of Pasay City Hall, was proposed as far back as 2013. Master planning and concept design were finished by 2016. Site surveys and schematic designs followed in 2017. Pasay City's submission of detailed engineering plans kicked off Reclamation Authority's review process in 2018. Project approval came in 2019, and contract signing in 2020. Construction commenced 2021.

The 21 others rushed their papers and got approvals during the Duterte admin, 2016-2022.

Pasay City's project manager is Royal HaskoningDHV. Investor SM Prime Holding hired the 140-year-old Dutch firm. The global engineering consultancy



has 6,000 specialists of 95 nationalities operating in 25 countries.

* * *

Has DENR shut down three rock quarries at Upper Marikina Watershed? Or was it just press release?

A coalition of more than 80 environment, safety and youth NGOs are asking Yulo-Loyzaga for a definitive reply. That's because of DENR's contradictory actions.

At a Senate environment committee hearing on Nov. 26, 2022 Yulo-Loyzaga claimed that she has cancelled the quarries. That was good news for millions of residents and shopkeepers in a dozen cities below the watershed.

She repeated the claim on March 13, 2023 at a counterpart committee hearing of the House of Reps. That should've closed the matter.

But the Upper Marikina Watershed Coalition was suspicious. Fifteen quarries, the biggest owned by an ex-DENR secretary, were still operating in adjacent Montalban, part of the mountain ecosystem. They pressed DENR for copies of the cancellations.

Three orders, all dated Dec. 19, 2022 from Usec Juan Miguel Cuna, were shown to the coalition. Supposedly the 25-year mineral production sharing agreements (MPSAs) of Quimson Limestone Inc., Quarry Rock Group and Rapid City Realty Development Corp. had lapsed; thus cancelled.

Here's the catch. There were no dates or signatures acknowledging receipt by the three quarries.

Moreover, the orders were not posted as required in the Mines and Geosciences Bureau Portal. Then the file for Calabarzon Region IV-A, which covers the Upper Marikina Watershed in Baras and Tanay towns, Rizal province, was taken down. It has not been restored to date.

On Aug. 2, 2023 the coalition wrote Yulo-Loyzaga to clarify things once and for all. MPSAs were forbidden in watersheds to begin with, the members said. They cited four laws:

- 1975 Forestry Code, P.D. 705;
- 1977 P.P. 1636 "Declaring as National Park, Wildlife Sanctuary and Game Preserve" the mountains of Rizal, Bulacan, Laguna and Quezon -- including Marikina Montalban Watersheds;
- 1992 National Integrated Protected Areas System Law and
- 1995 Mining Act.

Yulo-Loyzaga has not responded.

Word spread during the House hearing last week on DENR's 2024 budget: the reason why no cancellation document has been served is because of politicians' lobby.

Will the MPSAs be renewed or re-awarded to others? If so, watershed forest denudation will go on. The 60-million-year-old limestone relics at Masungi area will be crushed. More floodwaters will cascade down to Marikina, San Mateo, Montalban, Cainta, Pasig, Pateros, Taguig, San Juan, Quezon City.

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Catch *Sapol* radio show, Saturdays, 8 to 10 a.m., DWIZ (882-AM).

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IN BRIEF

'Careful in moving those age-old trees,' says Goma

LEYTE Rep. Richard Gomez on Thursday batted for the conservation of age-old trees as he called for an upgrade of the government's antiquated earth-balling system being used to transplant full-grown trees from one place to another.

Gomez said better technology for the transfer of full-grown trees is needed amid the growing risks of climate change.

Gomez's proposal was contained in House Bill 9124.

The bill mandates the annual appropriation of funds for the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) for the procurement, maintenance, and use of at least one set of machinery known as "earth balling equipment" per region to be used in road improvement and other developmental projects.

It defines an earth-balling machine as a mechanized apparatus specifically designed to relocate trees that obstruct road-widening efforts.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) define earth balling as "the process of moving trees by digging out the earth and the roots in a circular shape, leaving most of the root system undisturbed and intact." **Maricel V. Cruz**



Mercury being sold online to fight witchcraft—toxic waste watchdog

BY JONATHAN L. MAYUGA

[@jonlmayuga](#)

TOXIC waste watchdog EcoWaste Coalition (Ecowaste) alerted authorities on Wednesday that liquid mercury products are now being marketed online as an "antidote" against witchcraft.

According to the group, individuals who sell and those who use mercury for such a purpose should be warned about the health hazard of direct exposure to mercury, stressing that "there is no known safe level of exposure" to the highly toxic element.

The group's warning was prompted by its discovery of online product listings for mercury packed in a small bottle that is being touted to thwart the effects of black magic. "Asogi pangontra sa kulam, barang at iba pa; pwede din itanim sa balat," one listing reportedly states.

The group likewise saw local videos and photos on Facebook and YouTube promoting the use of mercury to protect oneself from "kulam."

"People should not be lured into using such a poisonous substance, including 'planting' mercury into the skin, as a 'pamatay-bisa' or antidote to acts of witchery," said Aileen Lucero, National Coordinator, EcoWaste Coalition. "Toxic mercury has no known function in the human body and there is no level of mercury in the body that is deemed safe."

As part of its advocacy to make e-commerce mercury-free, the EcoWaste Coalition has been urging online shopping platforms and others to stop the unlawful trade of mercury and mercury-added products such as those marked for global phase out in 2020 under Article 4 of

the Minamata Convention on Mercury.

"We urge all e-commerce platforms to take concrete steps to make their sites safe from mercury and other regulated chemicals and products that can put the health of their clients and their families at risk," Lucero said. "We likewise urge the authorities to look into the 'cultural' uses of mercury in the country and curb their impacts."

While the Minamata Convention does not cover "products used in traditional or religious practices," DENR Administrative Order No. 2019-20 excludes such use among the allowable uses of mercury.

Governments are not prevented by the treaty from taking additional measures to protect public health and the environment from mercury exposure, the EcoWaste Coalition said.

Also known as the revised Chemical Control Order (CCO), the directive aims to "reduce hazards to health and the environment from the production, manufacture, use, handling, management, transport, interim storage, and disposal of mercury, mercury compounds and mercury-added products."

"In the human body, mercury damages the central nervous system, thyroid, kidneys, lungs, immune system, eyes, gums and skin," the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) said. "Neurological damage to the brain caused by mercury cannot be reversed. There is no known safe exposure level for elemental mercury in humans, and effects can be seen even at very low levels."

"People using mercury for cultural uses are often unaware of mercury's toxicity and associated risks," UNEP pointed out.



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Malabon City Mayor Jeannie Sandoval, in coordination with the local police, leads the cleanup of the megadike in Barangay Dampalit as part of the observance of International Coastal Cleanup Day on Tuesday.

ERNIE PEÑAREDONDO



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A PERSON POINTS to a map of suggested priority areas to protect under a proposed Global Ocean Treaty on a Greenpeace ship docked at Rainbow Harbor in Long Beach, California, on Sept. 13, 2023. (AFP)

'Huge' overfishing problem shows need to ratify ocean treaty – Greenpeace

By ROMAIN FONSEGRIVES

LONG BEACH, United States (AFP) – Overfishing in international waters has surged in the past five years and demonstrates the need to ratify a recent global treaty to protect the high seas, a Greenpeace report said Wednesday.

The non-governmental network is calling on as many countries as possible to sign the treaty next week at the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

Finalized in June, the text was hailed as a "historic" accord with the potential to better safeguard the oceans.

A key element in the treaty is the creation of a legal framework to protect high seas marine areas – beyond 230 miles (370 kilometers) from coastlines – whose good health is vital to humanity.

But without enforcement of the accord, such protections are minimal, the report warned.

"Reality at sea is moving in the op-

posite direction from the ambition laid out in the Treaty," it said.

Governments must step up immediately, urged Greenpeace oceans campaigner Chris Thorne, aboard the group's ship Arctic Sunrise, which was docked Wednesday in Long Beach, California for an event marking the report's release.

To protect 30 percent of Earth's land and oceans by 2030, the target adopted last year by the COP15 convention on biological diversity, "there is no time to waste," he told AFP.

Fishing hours on the high seas increased by 8.5 percent between 2018 and 2022, according to the report, which compiles data from an organization capable of tracking boat movements via their transmitters.

Such intensification is especially pronounced in the ecologically sensitive areas identified by the UN as potential future marine sanctuaries. Greenpeace reported fishing there has increased by 22.5 percent over the same period.

"Overfishing is a huge problem," Thorne said.

"That fishing pressure is just absolutely unsustainable, and it's pushing our oceans to the brink."

Greenpeace's report notes that in the span of 30 years, stocks of Pacific bluefin tuna have collapsed by more than 90 percent.

It also draws attention to the damage caused in open seas by longline fishing, which uses cords fitted with thousands of baited hooks dozens of miles long.

The destructive method catches many sharks by mistake.

Given such dire situations, using

the treaty to create high seas sanctuaries is crucial, said Samantha Murray, a marine biodiversity specialist at the University of California San Diego.

"We have up to 670 percent greater biomass inside highly protected and fully protected reserves," she told reporters.

"When we sort of leave the ocean alone and let it be who she is and let her heal, we get more complex ecosystems that can be more resilient."

In order to come into force before the next UN Ocean Conference, in 2025, the treaty will need ratification from at least 60 nations. This would enable convening a conference of

the parties, empowered to create the marine sanctuaries.

Scientists and non-governmental organizations have already identified a dozen priority high seas zones needing protection.

They include the Costa Rica Thermal Dome, a nutrient-rich marine biodiversity hotspot hospitable to blue whales; the Emperor seamount chain of underwater mountains near Hawaii; and the Atlantic's Sargasso Sea region.

In addition, the Salas y Gomez and Nazca ridges off Chile's coast may be among the first sanctuaries to see the light of day.



Humanity deep in the danger zone of planetary boundaries – study

By MARLOWE HOOD

PARIS, France (AFP) – Human activity and appetites have weakened Earth's resilience, pushing it far beyond the "safe operating space" that keeps the world liveable for most species, including our own, a landmark study said Wednesday.

Six of nine planetary boundaries – climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss, synthetic chemicals including plastics, freshwater depletion, and nitrogen use – are already deep in the red zone, an international team of 29 scientists reported.

Two of the remaining three – ocean acidification along with the concentration of particle pollution and dust in the atmosphere – are borderline, with only ozone depletion comfortably within safe bounds.

The planetary boundaries identify "the important processes that keep the Earth within the kind of the living conditions that prevailed over the last 10,000 years, the period when humanity and modern civilization developed," said lead author Katherine Richardson, a professor at the University of Copenhagen's Globe Institute.

The study is the second major update of the concept, first unveiled in 2009 when only global warming, extinction rates, and nitrogen had transgressed their limits.

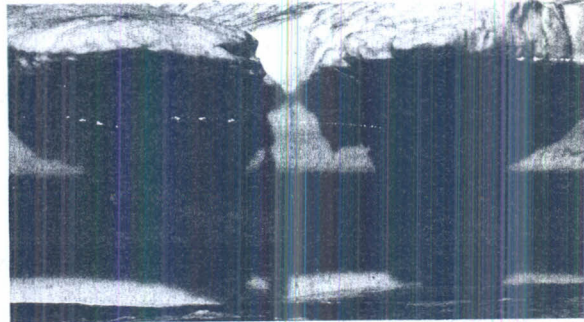
"We are still moving in the wrong direction," said co-author Johan Rockstrom, director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) and a co-creator of the schema.

"And there's no indications that any of the boundaries" – except the ozone layer, slowly on the mend since the chemicals destroying it were banned – "have started to bend in the right direction," he told journalists in a briefing.

"This means we are losing resilience, that we are putting the stability of the Earth system at risk."

The study quantifies boundaries for all nine interlocking facets of the Earth system.

For biodiversity, for example, if the rate at which species disappear



WATER FALLING from a melting iceberg drifting along the Scoresby Sound Fjord, in Eastern Greenland. (AFP)

is less than 10 times the average extinction rate over the last 10 million years, that is deemed acceptable.

In reality, however, extinctions are occurring at least 100 times faster than this so-called background rate, and 10 times faster than the planetary boundary limit.

For climate change, that threshold is keyed to the concentration of atmospheric CO₂, which remained very close to 280 parts per million (ppm) for at least 10,000 years prior to the industrial revolution.

That concentration is today 417 ppm, far above the safe boundary of 350 ppm.

"On climate, we're still following a pathway that takes us unequivocally to disaster," said Rockstrom. "We're headed for 2.5C, 2.6C or 2.7C – a place we haven't seen for the past four million years."

"There's no evidence whatsoever that humans can survive in that environment," he added.

Thousands upon thousands of chemical compounds created by humans – from micro-plastics and pesticides to nuclear waste and drugs that have leached into the environment – were quantified for the first time in the new research, and found to exceed safe limits.

Likewise for the depletion of "green" and "blue" water, freshwater coming from soil and plants on the one hand, and from rivers and lakes on the other.

An important finding of the new

update is that different boundaries feed off and amplify each other.

The study examines in particular the interaction between increasing CO₂ concentration and damage to the biosphere, especially forest loss, and projects temperature increases when one or both increase.

It shows that even if humanity rapidly draws down greenhouse gas emissions, unless destruction of carbon-absorbing forests is halted at the same time rising global temperatures could tip the planet onto a trajectory of additional warming that would be hard to stop.

"Next to climate change, integrity of the biosphere is the second pillar for our planet," said co-author Wolfgang Lucht, head of Earth System Analysis at PIK.

"We are currently destabilizing this pillar by taking out too much biomass, destroying too much habitat, deforesting too much land."

All the boundaries can be brought back into the safe operating space, the study concluded.

"It's just a question of setting limits for the amount of waste we put into the open environment and the amount of living and non-living raw materials we take out," said Richardson.

Hotly debated at first, the planetary boundaries framework quickly became a pillar of Earth system science, with its influence extending today into the realm of policy and even business.