

The UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development

Keynote Remarks

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Undersecretary Maria Theresa Lazaro, Undersecretary Eduardo Jose de Vega, Assistant Secretary Maria Angela Ponce, Secretary General Ivan Henares, Honorable officials of the Department of Foreign Affairs, esteemed guests, and fellow ocean advocates, magandang umaga sa ating lahat.

As we gather today to launch Maritime and Archipelagic Nation Awareness Month, I am reminded of my younger days as a marine scientist and instructor at the Marine Sciences Institute, UP Diliman. The workshop series on Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea that a number of us participated in alongside officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs in the 1990s and at the start of this millennium, and the Joint Oceanographic and Marine Scientific Research Expeditions in the South China Sea or JOMSRE-SCS between the Philippines and Vietnam come to mind – the diplomacy of marine scientific research, so to speak. I also recall with unease how, during the first meeting of the Introduction to Oceanography classes that I taught at MSI, I would ask the students with diverse backgrounds if they could visualize a map of the Philippines and the Kalayaan Islands Group in their minds. Many would sadly and candidly respond, "No." But I fondly remember the many field trips I took with undergraduate and graduate students. These opportunities provided lasting experiences and learning about the sea and the ocean outside of the classroom that they would remember long after graduation.

It is in this spirit that I wish to share with you a global initiative that holds immense promise for our archipelagic nation: The UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development.

Our oceans, as vast and mysterious as they are, have always been a source of sustenance, wonder, and identity for our people. Yet, beneath their shimmering

surface lies a world that, despite its profound significance, remains largely uncharted and misunderstood. The UN Decade of Ocean Science, spanning from 2021 to 2030, is a clarion call for nations worldwide. It beckons us to unite, to reverse the decline in ocean health, and to harness the transformative power of ocean science for a sustainable future.

But why is this initiative so close to my heart, and why should it matter deeply to an archipelagic developing country like ours, the Philippines?

Firstly, our marine biodiversity is nothing short of a living testament to nature's wonders. From the vibrant coral reefs to the elusive marine species, our waters are teeming with life and opportunities to save lives. Yet, they face unprecedented threats - overfishing, pollution, and the devastating effects of climate change. The Decade of Ocean Science offers us the tools, knowledge, and collaborative platforms to conserve and sustainably use these invaluable resources. It's not just about preservation; it's about ensuring that our children and their children inherit an ocean as bountiful as the one we once knew – our pamana!

Secondly, our relationship with the ocean is one of reverence but also vulnerability. As an archipelago frequently at the mercy of typhoons, tsunamis, rising sea levels, and other natural calamities, understanding our oceans is not just scientific curiosity—it's a matter of survival. Through this initiative, we can develop and improve early warning systems, resilient infrastructures, and community-based strategies to mitigate the impacts of these challenges, ensuring that our islands remain safe havens for all who call them home.

Our oceans are also the lifeblood of our economy. I've seen firsthand the dedication of our fisherfolk, the entrepreneurs who rely on marine products and tourism, and the communities that thrive because of our marine resources. Embracing the Decade of Ocean Science ensures that these industries not only survive but thrive, driving our nation's economic growth while preserving the delicate balance of our marine ecosystems.

Furthermore, our seas are storytellers. They've borne witness to our ancestors' voyages, our struggles for independence, and our dreams for a brighter future. This initiative helps us preserve these narratives, promoting sustainable practices that resonate with our traditions and honor our history.

Lastly, collaboration is at the heart of the Decade of Ocean Science. As the Philippines' focal person for the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission, I've been privileged to witness the power of shared knowledge and resources. This initiative paves the way for us to collaborate on a global scale, ensuring that our local efforts are amplified by international expertise and support.

In line with our sub-theme, "Setting Sails Towards Sustainability: Ocean Science for Archipelagic Philippines," I urge each of you to embrace the promise of the UN Decade of Ocean Science. Let's harness its potential to steer a course towards a sustainable and prosperous future for our beloved archipelago.

From a practical standpoint, I sincerely hope that we can finally establish the Philippines' National Decade Committee this year with the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs, the UNESCO National Commission of the Philippines, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Department of Science and Technology, the University of the Philippines, and other members of the National Committee on Marine Sciences.

As we embark on this year's MANA Mo, let us remember that our oceans are not just vast expanses of blue; they are the heart and soul of our nation. With science as our compass and our shared heritage as our anchor, we can navigate the challenges ahead and ensure that our seas remain a source of life, identity, and hope for generations to come.

Maraming salamat po.