



Role of Sea Patrols in Marine Environmental Protection and Conservation in the Philippines

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Abstract: This paper describes the role of the sea patrols (*bantay dagat* in the local language) in protecting and conserving the marine ecosystem in two coastal communities in the Philippines. As harbingers of the marine environment, sea patrols play an important role in safeguarding municipal waters and marine protected areas. This paper is based on seven key informant interviews with sea patrols and four focus group discussions with local community residents in Calapan, Oriental Mindoro and in the Municipality of Garchitorena in Camarines Sur. A review of related literature, marine-related policies, and newspaper articles was also done to supplement the primary data. Findings reveal that sea patrols in the two research areas face challenges as they enforce environmental laws (blue laws) in the Philippines due to limited resources such as transportation and other personal protective paraphernalia. The inability of sea patrols to effectively enforce law in some situation is also partly due to limited or if not absent police powers. This paper concludes that the challenges, difficulties, and shortcomings face by the sea patrols may be resolved once the government professionalizes the work of sea patrols not just as a volunteer work but a permanent and professional job that equally deserves modest compensation and benefits. Provision of safety-related tools can motivate sea patrols to be more vigilant of illegal fishing activities.

Key Words: Sea patrols; marine environment; environmental protection; environmental conservation; marine environment management

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper looks into the role of sea patrols or known locally as *bantay* (guard) *dagat* (sea) in two coastal communities in the Philippines. Founded in 1994 (Philippine Navy Website), the sea patrols have been called by various titles. The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) call them as “bantay laot.” Other epithaphs they are known for include fish wardens

(LGU of Bogo Website; Catedrilla, 2012), guardians of the sea (Irby, 2018), sea watchers (BFAR), sea rangers, sea task force, and marine patrols (Chavez, 2020).

In its website, BFAR (n.d.) introduced “bantay laot” (*bantay* means guard and *laot* means in the middle of the ocean; open sea) as an “initiative to deter illegal fishing activities and to protect threatened marine and aquatic species in the municipal waters by capacitating



subsistence fishers, particularly the Indigenous Peoples (IPs) as sea guardians or sea watchers during closed season in nationally- declared Fishery Management Areas (FMAs).”

The bantay dagat may be appointed or deputized by the BFAR or the Local Government Units (LGUs). Through the years, despite limitations in resources of sorts, the bantay dagat effectively served as harbingers of the marine environment by reporting illegal and destructive fishing within the marine protected areas and reserves. For example, in the study of Rawlins (2009), village participants acknowledged how the sea patrols were instrumental in decreasing illegal and destructive fishing cases within their areas.

The role of the bantay dagat has also evolved over the years. In the past, their main role is safeguarding the marine ecosystem from illegal fishing activities. However, their role has now expanded to marine environment conservation and preservation including management of solid waste in the seascapes. This paper examines the experiences of sea patrols in safeguarding and conserving the marine ecosystems in two coastal areas in the Philippines. Specifically, it describes the difficulties and challenges they face as they perform their role as sea patrols.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a qualitative study on marine environment specifically in relation to plastics or solid wastes. The said study was conducted in order to elicit life stories about people who are directly in contact with the marine environment including the sea patrols or bantay dagat. It also involved residents of coastal communities. Originally, the study was conducted to better understand the issues and concerns regarding the human-marine ecology nexus including problems of plastics and other human-induced destruction of marine resources. The said study was conducted to produce a story line for a marine environment-themed soap opera.

The focus group discussions and the key informant interviews were conducted in Calapan, Oriental Mindoro (183 kilometers away from Manila) and in Garchitorena in Camarines Sur (303 kilometers away from Manila). These areas were

chosen because of its proximity to municipal waters. In each area, one FGD was conducted for younger participants (18-34 years old) and another one was conducted for older participants (35-60 years old.) For the key informant interviews, a total of 7 sea patrols participated. All the sea patrols are men and within the age range of 40 to 55 years old.

The FGDs and KIIs primarily focused on perception on marine environment, problems associated with marine environment, and ways to conserve and protect the marine environment. This paper however focuses only on the role of bantay dagat or sea patrols in the protection and conservation of the marine ecosystem. Aside from primary data, this paper also made use of secondary sources such as legal documents, newspaper reports, and journal articles.

FGDs and key informant interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into the English language for analysis. The research team used the coding process using NVIVO software to identify common and unique themes and patterns. The FGDs ran for at least 1.5 hours while the interviews ran for 1 hour on the average.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Prevailing Illegal Fishing Activities

Despite existing fishery and marine-related laws as described in the earlier section of this paper, illegal fishing activities are still thriving up to these days. In 2017, for instance, BFAR Regional Office 6 reported to have the most number of illegal fishing litigation cases of the 16 regions of the country (French, 2017). According to an online news (Philippines News Agency), a total of 863 cases were filed against fishing operators due to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities all over the country. Of that number, 283 were in Region 6. Specifically, many of the cases involve “use of active gears in municipal waters, use of fine mesh nets, use of destructive fishing gears and methods,



blast fishing, and electrofishing and use of noxious substances.”

Catedrilla et al. (2012), in their article, identified three common types of violations of fishery-related laws from 2000 to 2010 in District 1 of Iloilo Province. These are use of active gears in municipal waters, unauthorized fishing or engaging in other unauthorized fishing activities, and involvement of unlicensed fishers or fish workers in commercial fishing vessel operations.

Even recently, illegal fishing activities are still being reported from time to time. In fact, reports reveal that there has been a spike in the number of commercial fishing vessels operating within municipal waters as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is partly due to the fact that “marine patrols” are unable to monitor fishing activities due to the lockdowns. Chavez (2020) relayed in an online news that Masbate, Palawan, and Quezon are the provinces with the most number of illegal commercial fishing activities within the municipal waters. Under the law, large scale commercial fishing activities are not allowed to operate within the municipal waters of 15 kilometers from the shoreline.

3.2 The Role of the Sea Patrols

Given the prevailing illegal fishing activities particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the sea patrols is very relevant more than ever. The primary duty of sea patrols is to watch over illegal fishing and other destructive activities within the municipal waters and in marine protected areas. Besides their role as guards, the sea patrols with assistance from other authorities are also tasked to collect pieces of evidence needed for possible litigation against persons who have committed prohibited acts related to the fishery laws, rules, and regulations. These includes preparation of reports, taking photographs, assessing fish catch or samples, and preparing witness affidavit.

The sea patrols may be deputized by the governor, mayor, or by the BFAR. Before deputation, sea patrols are required to complete a training on

fishery law enforcement specifically the Fishery Law Enforcement Enhancement Training (FLEET). According to Petinglay (2020), FLEET is a BFAR-initiated training which strengthens resource protection and enforcement of coastal fishery law.

Aside from patrolling the seas, some bantay dagat also serve as conduits in disaster response. For example, in the province of Iloilo, some provincial bantay dagat participated in training on first aid, basic life support, and water search and rescue as they are part of the Sea Ambulance Operations Team (SAOT). This team was organized to manage two “bantay dagat patrol boats cum sea ambulances” of the provinces (Garcia, 2016).

As noted in the key informant interviews, the bantay dagats shared that they are actively involved in planting mangroves and imposing rules related to the plastics and solid waste management. They also watch over fish sanctuaries, monitor illegal fishing activities, safeguarding coral reefs, secure mangrove reserves, and impose restrictions such as the prohibition of using smaller nets to avoid catching small fish. They are also active in conserving the marine environment.

3.3 Challenges and Difficulties that Sea Patrols Face

Results of the key informant interviews reveal a few challenges that bantay dagat face in their work. One of which is managing plastic waste in the municipal shorelines. One informant, for instance, mentioned that whenever he finds a neighbor or someone from the village indiscriminately throwing garbage in the ocean or in the shoreline, he would usually report the case to the barangay for proper intervention. However, as another informant recalled, some of community residents do not receive well the reprimand. As one mentioned, some barangay bantay dagat would get sparring invites from people as a result of such reprimand.

The key informant interviews also elicited responses relating to other challenges and difficulties that sea patrols face in their line of duty. These challenges pertain to their inability to arrest



perpetuators, safety hazard, lack of resources, and issue of sustainability.

Another problem that the sea patrols mentioned is the lack of resources which incapacitated them from enforcing the law to the fullest extent. They mentioned that they have limited transportation facilities, lack of equipment, and limited financial resources to attending relevant training and capacity building and professional development related activities. One sea patrol mentioned that sometimes they are unable to get their reimbursement after attending trainings.

While they are deputized, the sea patrols noted that they cannot really directly arrest perpetrators as they do not have guns and other equipment and they are not in the position to enjoy police power. As noted by one of the sea patrols, the perpetrators are not afraid of them because they are being viewed as volunteers only and that they do not have paraphernalia that could make perpetrators retreat from their illegal activities.

The bantay dagat informants attest to the perennial problem of plastic in the marine ecosystem. As one of them noted, it is now the role of the bantay dagat volunteers to clean the shorelines and the surroundings and to remind people not to throw their garbage anywhere.

Similarly, the issue of plastics was also discussed during the focus group discussion. Many participants immediately responded that the plastic is the cause of environmental destruction. The participant sees this to be destructive because plastics are non-biodegradable and its effect is going to be long lasting. Many of them regarded plastics as the cause of marine environment pollution.

When asked where they usually see plastic, many of the FGD participants mentioned that one can actually see them in the rivers, canals or drainages, in the ocean, and in the streets. Despite attempts to maintain cleanliness in public places, garbage like diapers is common trash one can see along the shorelines. The proliferation of garbage was

attributed by one participant to retail selling. Most of the garbage includes sachets of shampoo, plastic wrappers, and tetra packs. In the Philippines, small convenience shops (sari-sari stores) are available in almost every corner of a village. In sari-sari stores, one can buy coffee, shampoo, biscuits, milk, and other products in smaller serving or amounts.

Despite the challenges, the sea patrols themselves mentioned that fisherfolks in their communities must come together in order to collectively fight against illegal fishing activities. For them, collective efforts must be in place for them to be able to enforce environmental laws. The bantay dagat expressed that they really need to undergo training of sorts especially on fishery laws, use of equipment, and training on evidence building. A number of such training have already been implemented in the ground.

3.4 Job-Related Issues and Concerns

As presented in the earlier section of this paper, the sea patrols are called by many names. This creates confusion because calling them with different titles may connote different functions. Unlike other volunteer positions in the barangay (smallest political unit in the Philippines), the bantay dagat or sea patrol is the only one that is being addressed by different titles. Job titles are important as they become sources of identity (Grant, Berg, and Cable, 2014). It also defines individual contribution to the organization and are associated with human resource management including "selection, performance appraisals, and compensation (ibid). This means that using different titles for the sea patrols may have implications regarding role expectations. While both patrol and warden are somewhat synonymous terms, they carry with them nuanced characters. The former being a guard and the latter being a custodian or a steward.

Aside from differences in titles, formation of bantay dagat also varies depending on which entity is organizing them. The report of Maderazo et al., (2016) identified three variations. The first one is the commissioned type of bantay dagat (bantay dagat commission) created by local government units. Such



commission is expected not only to act as enforcer but also to development policies and programs related to the marine environment. The other type is created through the Municipal and Barangay Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Council (MFARMC). The last type is the community organized type of bantay dagat which is independent on the local government. These different modalities also in away pose difficulties in standardizing the professional practice of sea patrol given limitations and variations in human resources, financial resources, and physical resources of the different LGUs as well as community organizations.

In the Philippines, local government units employ volunteers (with modest honorarium) to be able to deliver basic services such as the barangay health worker, barangay nutrition scholar, community health teams, barangay population officer, barangay service point officers, child development workers, and the sea patrols. They work on voluntary basis but are given modest honorarium. Unlike in the United States where sea patrols are paid \$32,000 and \$88,000 per year (Roufa, 2019), sea patrols in the Philippines are given less than 5,000 pesos (roughly 100 dollars) a month depending on the local government unit.

Another issue relates to job permanency. Because many of them are often appointed by local chief executives, sea patrols' term as volunteer lasts until a new chief executive is elected (Catedrilla et al., 2012, Rawlins, 2009). This means that change of leadership at the local level may also mean change in the composition of the bantay dagat task force. The term of office of the local chief executive is three years. If fortunate, there cases when the term of office is extended following a successful re-election bid. In this instance, the sea patrols are able to extend their volunteer stint. However, when a new leader is elected, there is a greater chance that a new set of sea patrols are appointed. Given this volatile situation, local government units (LGUs) are necessitated to train new comers to the job as they may be unfamiliar with the work of the sea patrols.

The current competencies of sea patrols may not be enough to be able to carry out their roles. The eventual professionalization of the position will ultimately result to more professional training and capacity building activities. As suggested by Catedrilla (2012), bantay dagat or the sea patrols should be given para legal training "for them to be aware of the proper collection and documentation of evidences which could be used in the prosecution of the violators." Other training that must be provided include taking photographs as evidentiary materials, fish catch assessment, writing apprehension report, writing affidavit, on-site ocular inspection, and orientation on the different blue laws (marine laws) of the country (Philippine Judicial Academy, 2012).

4. CONCLUSIONS

As can be gleaned from the results, the sea patrols in the two research areas indeed face serious security threats as they protect the marine environment of the country. This is also the case in other areas of the country as evidenced by news reports. Such condition is partly due to their limited or if not unrecognized police power. Despite existing laws, illegal fishing activities of sorts are still prevalent. As noted, cases of illegal fishing have been most notable during the COVID-19 pandemic. The inability of sea patrols to fully enforce environmental laws is partly due to limited resources such as transportation and other paraphernalia needed to be able to make a good case against illegal fishers. To enhance the capacity and competencies of the sea patrols, gradual professionalization of the job position is so necessary for sustainability and effective management of the country's marine ecosystems. In addition, given the limited financial resources of the local government units, providing monetary and non-monetary incentives is a one big leap towards professionalization.

5. CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.



7. ETHICAL APPROVAL AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The research, which this study is based on, went through an expedite review and the Research and Advanced Studies Director (RASD) of the College of Liberal Arts of DLSU has granted ethical clearance dated July 16, 2016. The authors wish to acknowledge the Population Media Center (PMC) for the research funding.

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