

Copenhagen deal: The Coral Triangle's chance to survive

Water covers almost 71 percent of the surface of our planet Earth, with our five oceans — including the Indian and Pacific — containing 97.2 percent of the Earth's water.

Unfortunately, scientists report that climate change is rapidly transforming these oceans and may result in devastating impacts on people and marine species.

The Coral Triangle (CT), the world's center of marine life located along the equator at the confluence of the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean, is now under extreme threat from climate change as well as escalating local and regional environmental pressures.

Not only is the region one of the world's most amazing natural marvels comprising valuable marine environments as well as a much sought-after tourist destination, it also provides a daily income to hundreds of millions of people in Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Timor Leste.

The CT — renowned as the “nursery of the seas” that covers barely one percent of the globe's surface — is home to 30 percent of the world's coral reefs and more than 35 percent

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of its coral reef fish species.

Much of the tuna eaten around the world comes from the CT, an important contribution to the economies of Indonesia and our neighbors with whom we share this precious area. The region's cultural significance cannot be overstated, nor its importance for rare species, such as the six species of marine turtles swimming its waters.

Fast-forward a few years into the future. As a result of climate change, seas will warm up and large areas of once iridescent coral will be bleached and rendered lifeless.

A massive breakdown of the ecosystem will limit the Coral Triangle's ability to support the people living on its coasts, and the effects will be felt wherever people make a living from the sea — from small coastal settlements to mega cities.

The truly frightening part is that

many people are already witnessing these changes — such as more intense storm surges, or tropical cyclones, shifts in weather patterns and changes in the behavior of marine species. These observations are backed by solid science.

According to a panel of scientists at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), climate change is increasing the temperature and acidity of seawater — leading to coral bleaching — and altering atmospheric and oceanic circulation.

At the May 2009 World Oceans Conference in the North Sulawesi capital of Manado, the WWF released a report about the impact of climate change on the Coral Triangle. The report showed more intense cyclones and typhoons, increased acidity of oceans, rising sea levels and the destruction of coral reefs were likely to occur if the world continued to emit greenhouse gases at its current rate.

If we don't halt this growth rate, the cost our children will have to bear will be massive. By 2050, the Coral Triangle will provide 50 percent less protein than it does now and 80 percent less by the end of the century.

In other words, we're talking about a massive threat to food security. In Indonesia alone, where fish account for more than 60 percent of the animal protein consumed, the impacts on people's livelihoods will be catastrophic.

However, there are reasons to be optimistic. The impact climate change has on the CT and its people has finally begun to receive the attention it needs. Regional and international measures are gradually emerging to avoid an ecological and human catastrophe in this region.

The leaders of the six countries that make up the Coral Triangle — Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste and the Solomon Islands — have identified the urgent need to shield some of poorer communities living along the coast from the devastating impacts of climate change.

Some of these impacts are unavoidable but we can reduce their scale and severity by introducing and mainstreaming climate change adaptation, which will lead to an increase in the resilience and resistance of people and ecosystems.

For instance, working as part of the Coral Triangle Initiative, the WWF is in the process of identify-

ing pockets of marine diversity that are more naturally resistant to coral bleaching.

By establishing a solid network of well-managed and sustainably financed marine protected areas through partnerships with governments, communities and businesses, we can help defend these vital areas against a changing climate.

World leaders must support Coral Triangle countries in their efforts to protect their most vulnerable communities from rising sea levels, loss of food and livelihoods.

This help must come in the form of improved stewardship of marine resources to reduce stresses on the local environmental caused by overfishing, pollution and declining coastal water quality and health.

Without a global agreement at the UN Climate Conference at Copenhagen in December to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, efforts to sustainably manage the Coral Triangle's marine resources for the millions of people that depend on them will be in vain.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize ocean- and coastal-related dimensions — promoted in the Manado Ocean Declaration — as part of the negotiation text and eventu-

ally as elements of the outcomes derived from the 15th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen in December.

The ocean and coastal dimensions cover issues of vulnerable coastal communities, subsistence fishing, capacity-building enhancement, the importance of marine and fisheries research to support policy implementation and adaptation as well as mitigation strategies.

In one month's time, negotiators and world leaders at Copenhagen will have the opportunity to give some of the most vulnerable areas on Earth a chance to survive.

It is time our leaders endorsed tough but crucial decisions to safeguard the Coral Triangle, so that we can survive in the long term.

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