

January 22, 2023

HIS EXCELLENCY, FERDINAND ROMUALDEZ MARCOS, JR.

President, Republic of the Philippines

Malacañang Palace

J.P. Laurel Street, San Miguel

Manila, Philippines, 1005

Dear Mr. President Marcos,

Warm greetings!

We are a civil society organization of environmental advocates who support your fight against the threatening global climate change which endangers innumerable lives, ecosystems, and biodiversity. With your strong stance on protecting the environment, we found hope that our voices and pleas will be heard to stop the environmental degradation caused by the proliferation of illegal reclamation and massive quarrying activities and start the rehabilitation of the once beautiful but now devastated Coron, Palawan.

Palawan urgently calls our immediate attention as it suffers from an environmental crisis due to unregulated and destructive human activities. In 1981, the entire province was declared as the Mangrove Swamp Forest Reserve pursuant to Proclamation 2152 signed by your father, the late President Ferdinand E. Marcos, for *"conservation and protection purposes by reason of their ecological, scientific, educational and recreational values, including flora and fauna and marine life found therein and other values."* Moreover, as stated in the Coastal Fisheries Initiative of the Food and Agriculture of the United Nations, *"While mangroves cover just 0.1% of our planet's surface, they store up to 10 times more carbon per hectare than terrestrial forests, making them critical to combating climate change."* Palawan has extensive mangrove forests which protect coastal communities from storm surges and prevent coastal flooding but the Proclamation and related laws that prohibit the destruction of mangroves have been disregarded blatantly in Coron and other parts of Palawan. With illegal reclamation activities, mangrove trees were cut mindlessly making the coastal areas highly susceptible to the detrimental effects of changing climate.

Palawan has been also named by UNESCO in 1990 as one of the three Biosphere Reserves in the country as a *"learning place for sustainable development,"* where *"man and nature co-exist harmoniously."* After two years of the declaration, Republic Act No. 7611, or Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) for Palawan Act was signed into law to ensure that forests will be conserved and biodiversity will be protected, hence the creation of the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) as its management body. It is a council that only Palawan has in the country which proves that the province is unique and must be well protected because of its rich biodiversity that has to be managed sustainably as Palawenos, especially the indigenous peoples, rely on the environment. Every law and international recognition compels the national and local governments to enforce environmental laws strictly. Global campaigns are extensive to promote sound development plans in achieving sustainable development goals to ensure that the

present and future generations' ability to meet their basic needs is not compromised but most of these efforts have been ignored in Coron. Being a first-class municipality, social and economic inequalities are evident that increasingly weaken the adoption of pro-environmental practices resulting in an immense threat to the general welfare of future generations. The imbalance has a wide disparity that people let the ill-planned projects happen even if there is non-conformity in law which leads to unsustainable practices that are conflicting with its global recognition as a Biosphere Reserve.



(Before and after photos of the Coron bay reclamation area)

Our group, Sagip Coron Palawan, was organized in 2022 to generate awareness about the environmental issues in the municipality through information, education, and communication (IEC) campaigns. On behalf of the residents, we have requested the Coron local government unit to organize a public dialogue about the reclamation and quarrying projects so citizens will have a good understanding of the purpose and nature of these projects and can raise their concerns to the local officials but our request was not granted. However, we believe that Mother Nature worked its way to put things in order when former President Rodrigo Roa Duterte granted our request immediately to present the ill state of Coron through a face-to-face meeting on March 22, 2022. Due to serious environmental law violations and noncompliance to legal requirements of the Coron Bay Development Project (CBDP) by the Palawan Provincial Government and private contractors, the President decisively ordered the project stopped by the Philippine Reclamation Authority and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. He firmly stated that, **"If there's no legal cover diyan sa project na yan, it's illegal, e di kunin ng gobyerno yan, then plant all the trees available para mabalik yung green. If I were you, fruit trees na lang sa reclamation, pakinabang pa ang next generation."** Truly, God does wonders!

Due process, through interagency investigation, followed. On March 31, 2022, the President announced to halt of all new applications for reclamation all over the country. In celebration, our group spearheaded a tree-planting activity on Earth Day, April 22, 2022, that was attended by more than a thousand concerned citizens to commence the rehabilitation of the reclaimed land. We also commissioned a marine ecosystem study for the biophysical assessment of the damage to marine habitats. Research showed that with the human-related disturbances of rich marine biodiversity, such as poorly planned dump and fill activity, the livelihood of the small-scale fishermen in the area is adversely affected. Fisheries potential through actual test fishing revealed that the catch per unit effort in the impact site is 1.2 kilograms/hour compared to the undisturbed, control site, which

has a higher fish yield of 3.4 kilograms/hour. Researchers strongly recommended the stoppage of the reclamation expansion and starting the rehabilitation to prevent further permanent destruction of habitats in the nearby areas.

On May 12, 2022, the Environmental Compliance Certificates were canceled based on the EMB-MIMAROPA Case No. PAL-064-22 for violation of Presidential Decree No. 1586 and its Implementing Rules and Regulations, which was also signed into law by former President Marcos in 1978. A joint verification survey was conducted by the PRA's and DENR's Geodetic Engineers and the illegality of the CBDP was finally concluded when the Philippine Reclamation Authority's Board of Directors ordered the Total Forfeiture of Phase 2, the 22-hectare reclamation on June 16, 2022, through a Resolution No. 5541, due to the lack of legal requirement, that is Area Clearance, from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. It was a huge victory for nature because the strongly acidic soil from the quarried mountains will not be dumped anymore into the remaining mangrove trees, seagrass beds, and coral reefs, which are now inundated with heavy siltation. The President, envisioning the next generation reaps the benefits of a "*green land*" sheds more light that we must strengthen our cause to protect the environment by proceeding with mitigation actions and rehabilitation.

But the illegal reclamation issue was only the tip of the iceberg. During the investigation, we have seen the perennial concerns in the municipality that hinder the inception of rehabilitation as they are interconnected and must be addressed systematically. The CBDP has started without critical requisites and due diligence resulting in artificial land of inferior quality that has a high risk of liquefaction and subsidence. Mitigating measures that should have been done during the dumping activity and abandonment phase were not instituted causing severe harm to the marine ecosystems and exacerbating the decades-old water pollution problem. The lack of a proper drainage system, sewage treatment plant and silt traps worsens the waste generation in the bay. Coastal flooding that prompted emergency evacuations and superficial solutions is a common sight during typhoons. Illegal and unregulated mountain and river quarry activities are widespread resulting in the theft of minerals, flash floods, landslides, soil erosion, and numerous illegal reclamations, while the resettlement issues and illegal occupation of forestlands and easement zones have been unresolved for years. There are government infrastructure projects built in environmentally critical areas that despite the issuance of Notices of Violation and Cease-and-Desist-Orders by the DENR due to lack of environmental permits, act with impunity prevails.



(Dumped seagrass beds and coral reefs; siltation)

In spite of all these alarming concerns that are hidden in the "*one of the top tourist destinations*" label of Coron, it is proven that its natural and incomparable beauty surpasses its flaws but the distinct quality of this island will diminish in time if the continued assault on the environment thrives. The pristine landscape and seascape are the main drivers for economic growth but people have an insatiable hunger for more than nature can offer. People who are money-driven abuse fragile ecosystems while most of the residents are silent on the rampant destruction of nature. This town puts too much weight on materialism by exploiting the natural resources irresponsibly which leads to intergenerational inequity that compromises the general welfare of future generations. This vicious cycle must be stopped as Coron is in grave peril. What each of us can do to put an end to this trend to save our remaining vital life-support systems?



(Illegal mountain quarry; dumped mangrove forest)

Since April 2022, we are working relentlessly with the concerned government agencies to press for mitigation actions and rehabilitation of the forfeited land and abandoned mountain quarries but the agreements remain stale due to blurred policies on governance to these project failures. It was evident that the forfeiture process of the illegally reclaimed land was a challenging task but stopping the adverse environmental impacts is far more difficult to achieve. Laws require strict compliance with the progressive mitigation and rehabilitation of environmentally critical projects but this has not been considered by the parties responsible and liable for damages as causing irreversible damage to our natural resources.

We humbly seek your intervention, Mr. President, to revive the damaged Coron. Mother Nature is begging for environmental justice. Further delays to address the ailing environment increasingly threaten food security, health, and safety much to the detriment of the affected communities. We respectfully appeal to you to give this island a chance to recover from environmental degradation by strengthening the State-civil society partnership to collaborate and work proactively on holistic and time-bound mitigation and rehabilitation of the reclaimed land and mountain quarries with the adherence to the highest transparency and accountability standards. No matter how complex the problems are, with clearly defined green policies and determined will and effort on hand, we can turn the narratives and investigation into action with the shared mantra of doing the right things for the greater cause as the impact of climate change is already with us, with increased risks to come, and earnestly calls for a profound shift in people's way of thinking and attitude toward the environment.



(Earth Day tree-planting event, Sagip Coron Palawan)

Please help us save Palawan, our country's *Last Ecological Frontier*.

Thank you, Mr. President.

Respectfully yours,

ROBERTO B. MAGALLANES

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