

**DENR: □ ILLEGAL STRUCTURES IN CORON BAY WILL HAVE TO GO □**



The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is bent on clearing the world-famous Coron Bay in Palawan of illegal structures as part of its campaign to address water pollution and other environmental problems facing top tourist destinations.

“This is a very difficult move on the part of the Department, but we have to do it to address the high levels of coliform contamination in Coron Bay,” DENR-MIMAROPA Regional Director Natividad Bernardo told a crowd of some 250 business owners attending the Stakeholders’ Forum held Tuesday at the Coron Coliseum.

The clearing operations will cover more than 4,000 informal settler families and business establishments that were established either in water or encroaching easement zones and mangrove areas.

The DENR identified a number of factors leading to the deterioration in the water quality of Coron Bay. These include the absence of a centralized sewage treatment facility, discharge of untreated wastewater by various establishments, disposal of informal settlers of their wastes

directly into the bay, and discharge of oil into the water by tourists and passenger boats.

“We need to decongest Coron Bay and ensure compliance to environmental regulations. We are appealing to the Provincial Government of Palawan and the local government of Coron to provide resettlement for the informal settlers who were previously identified as beneficiaries of the typhoon Yolanda relocation program,” explains Bernardino.

DENR MIMAROPA created the Task Force Coron which will inspect more than 750 establishments, about half of them cater to tourists, for compliance to environmental regulations, easement zone provisions of the Clean Water Act, Water Code, and Forestry Code.

Task Force Coron has started the inspection last week and already found some hotels, restaurants, and diveshops atop stilts in Coron Bay. The Task Force is recommending the dismantling of these structures.

Bernardino admitted that though Coron Bay is more congested and its rehabilitation may be more difficult because of the presence of a huge number of informal settlers who will need relocation before they can be demolished.

Coron’s iconic islands, lakes, and rich marine resources draw more than 175,000 tourists in the last two years. This has increased the demand for hotels, restaurants, and other services, exerting pressure on this small town’s ecosystem.

During the dry season, supply of fresh water is increasingly becoming a problem for more residents and establishments.

Representatives of the local government of Coron, the Department of Interior and Local Government, the Department of Tourism, the Philippine Navy, and the Philippine Coast Guard who were present during the forum expressed full support for DENR’s initiative.

DOT MIMAROPA Regional Director Maria Luisa Diploma says the department is also closely monitoring tourist destinations in the region. She said, “Kung hindi natin aalagaan ang mga ito,

'di na rin masisiyahang pumunta ang mga turista." She said that they will now require all tourist establishments to have proper wastewater discharge facilities before they can get DOT accreditation.

Coron Mayor Ajerico Baracoso said that the LGU has already prepared a project feasibility study for the construction of a P400 million-peso centralized sewage treatment plant, and is seeking fund support from DOT and other concerned agencies.

Business owners, recognizing the growing environmental problems and their potential impact to businesses, also express willingness to cooperate with the cleanup of Coron Bay and convey their appeal to DENR and other government agencies concerned.

Francisco Fernandez, president of Calamianes Association of Tourism Establishments (CATE) sought clarification if establishments without proper wastewater treatment facilities will be allowed to operate until the centralized sewage treatment plant is built.

Bernardino explains that as an interim measure, individual businesses should set up their own septic treatment facilities or they can enter into an agreement with companies that can provide desludging and sewage treatment services.

Community Environment and Natural Resources Officer Eriberto Saños appreciates the high level of environmental awareness of the people of Coron, but he said, "Environmental awareness is not enough, we need to act to preserve the country's resources." ###

