



SOMETHING FISHY? CAN THE PHILIPPINES PROTECT THE WEST PHILIPPINE SEA AMID RISING GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS?

BY GENEVIEVE DONNELLON-MAY

Genevieve Donnellon-May is a Researcher at Oxford Global Society and a fellow at the Indo-Pacific Studies Center. She sits on the advisory board member of Modern Diplomacy and is a 2023 CSIS Pacific Forum Young Leader.

Contact: genevieve.donnellonmay@gmail.com



An A.I. generated boat picture. Source: AI Image Generator

Can the Philippines protect its most vital marine resource – the West Philippine Sea (WPS) – to ensure food security amid rising geopolitical tensions? This question was up for discussion at the recent Manila Dialogue on the South China Sea in the Philippines. As Professor Jay Batongbacal pointed out, the WPS plays a key role in the country’s fisheries sector and national food security efforts, yet it faces an alarming number of challenges.

The WPS is a vital part of the South China Sea which sits within the Philippines’ 200 nautical-mile exclusive economic zone, as per the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Strategically

located along key international shipping lanes, the WPS is indispensable not only to the country’s food security and economy but also to its sovereignty.

The sea harbors some of the Philippines’ most productive fishing grounds, contributing to the Philippines’ status as one of the world’s [11th biggest fish producers](#). Coastal waters, including those in the WPS, account for [40 to 60% of the country’s total fish catch](#). Fish and seafood products are not only a staple in Filipino diets, second only to rice, but they also provide [over 50 percent](#) of Filipino families’ sources of protein.

The WPS plays a significant role in fish production. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, the WPS produced [304,586 metric tons of fish products](#) between 2018 and 2022. Of this amount, between 2018 and 2022 the WPS contributed [approximately 7.19 percent](#) to the total fisheries production and 10.74 percent to the total food fish production in the Philippines.

Fisheries, including those in the WPS, are also important for the Filipino economy. Contributing [around 1.3%](#) to the national gross domestic product, the fisheries sector provides [around 1.6 million jobs](#) (or approximately 4 percent of the country’s labor force), including low-income, subsistence fishing communities. For many coastal communities, the WPS is a primary source of both food and income. Such a dependence on the WPS for national food security and local economies emphasizes the need for its protection.

Effective management of the WPS and its fisheries are vital for the Philippines’ long-term food security. However, the fisheries sector faces mounting challenges, including depleting fish stocks that threaten livelihoods and jeopardize food security.

The signs are worrying. According to a report by Filipino newspaper *The Inquirer* last month, the country’s fish production in the country decreased by [as much as 80 percent](#) amid marine environment degradation and over-fishing in the WPS.

Making matters worse, the absence of stronger enforcement and better resource management could

threaten the country's food supplies and economic stability. To ensure the sustainability of fisheries, Manila faces pressure to protect its marine resources for current and future generations.

In response, the Philippine government has emphasized the need for sustainable management to ensure long-term food sources and economic stability for future generations. Under President Ferdinand "Bong Bong" Marcos Junior, the government has placed securing the West Philippine Sea as [a central priority](#) of his administration's foreign and security policy.

Similarly, the country's Agriculture Undersecretary Asis Perez has highlighted untapped areas in the WPS that could [boost fish production and reduce dependence on imports](#) as part of broader efforts to safeguard the country's food security. Despite challenges from Chinese vessels, Perez urged commercial fishers to explore peaceful, underutilized regions of the WPS with government incentives to drive local fishing efforts and reduce annual fish import costs.

Meanwhile, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) aims to address declining fish catches through various means, including the LAYAG-WPS program, which offers fuel subsidies, livelihood support, and post-harvest assistance to fisherfolk. The program also provides boats, gear, and training to enhance fishing capacity. For 2024, BFAR has [allocated PHP1.5 billion \(US\\$26.6 million\)](#) for the purchase of additional floating vessels to support these efforts.

However, significant challenges lie ahead. Aside from the [over-exploitation of fisheries](#), the Philippines faces ongoing challenges in protecting the WPS amid continued tensions with China over territorial claims in the South China Sea. Stemming from a case filed by Manila in 2013, the July 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling affirmed the Philippines' sovereign rights over the WPS. By doing so, it invalidated China's ["nine-dash line" claim](#), which encroaches on the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and indeed [almost the entire South China Sea](#). While this ruling was a legal victory in Manila's favour, Beijing

has rejected it. This, in turn, has undermined Manila's authority to regulate fishing and protect marine resources.

Despite the ruling, Chinese fishing vessels regularly encroach on Philippine waters. To this end, the Philippine Coast Guard has regularly reported incidents of Chinese vessels harassing Filipino fishing boats. This is part of China's broader effort to assert control over disputed areas, preventing Filipino fishermen from accessing vital fishing grounds, depleting marine resources, and worsening food (fish) security concerns. Notably, in March and April 2021, [over 200 Chinese vessels](#) anchored at Whitsun Reef within the Philippine EEZ, engaged in IUU fishing, despite repeated protests from the Philippine government.

More recently, in July this year, the fishers' group Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas reported [a significant 60 percent income loss](#) for fishermen near Scarborough Shoal after China imposed a four-month fishing ban in the South China Sea. The group noted that the concurrent increased presence of Chinese vessels has disrupted local fishing, hindering regular operations despite the absence of direct confrontations.

Such actions not only violate Philippine sovereignty and international law but also continue to undermine efforts to sustainably and effectively manage the WPS, accelerating overfishing and degrading marine ecosystems.

Environmental degradation in the WPS threatens both marine ecosystems and food security in the Philippines. The country, home to some of the world's most biodiverse coral reefs, is experiencing rapid reef decline due to overfishing, destructive fishing practices, and pollution. This undermines biodiversity and jeopardizes the livelihoods of millions of Filipinos who depend on fishing for sustenance and income.

From Manila's perspective, Beijing's actions, including large-scale reclamation projects and destructive fishing practices have contributed to this degradation. The Asia Maritime Transparency

Initiative's 2023 report, [Deep Blue Scars: Environmental Threats to the South China Sea](#), demonstrates how China's dredging and landfill operations have caused significant coral damage over the past decade. The WPS, home to over 100 reef features covering 37,200 km² (about 5% of the world's reef area and 30% of the Philippines' coral reefs), had 27 reefs occupied by China, spanning 4,648 acres, with most severely damaged by these activities.

Manila has also reported coral reef damage. In September 2023, the Philippine Coast Guard reported [coral reef damage in Sabina Shoal and Rozul Reef](#), which it attributed to Chinese activities. In response Beijing accused Manila of [making “baseless claims”](#).

Climate change exacerbates these challenges. Rising ocean temperatures, ocean acidification, and sea level rise all pose significant risks to marine life. At the same time, rising sea levels and coastal erosion endanger low-lying areas where many communities depend on the WPS for their catch.

The ongoing degradation of marine ecosystems in the West Philippine Sea presents an alarming picture of the region's future, with declining fish stocks threatening the livelihood of millions in the coming years. Such scenarios could result in worsening food insecurity and poverty for millions of Filipinos dependent on fishing for income.

The WPS is vital to the Philippines' food security. As geopolitical, environmental, and ecological challenges persist, ensuring the WPS remains a source of food, income, and regional stability will be crucial for the Philippines' future.

Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.