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Tubbataha seeks exclusion from offshore exploration

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY, Philippines -- Officials of the world-famous sea sanctuary, Tubbataha Reefs National Marine Park, on Thursday asked the Department of Energy (DoE) to exclude over 15,000 hectares of its protected waters from oil and gas exploration.

Angelique Songco, park manager, said the management board approved a resolution asking the DoE to resolve the overlapping boundaries of the country's largest marine park and Service Contract 61 which it awarded to Burgundy Global Exploration Corp. in July 2006.

"We are very much concerned that an important area covered by the expanded Tubbataha park overlaps with an oil and gas concession, which means seismic exploration activities can and will affect marine life inside the park," Songco told the Philippine Daily Inquirer, parent company of INQUIRER.net.

The Tubbataha Reefs, a pair of giant atolls teeming with marine life in the middle of the Sulu Sea, was designated a Unesco World Heritage Site as it represents a unique example of pristine atoll reef, with a very high diversity of fish. It was expanded as a protected area on August 23, 2006, under Presidential Proclamation No. 1126.

Now covering a total area of 96,828 hectares, the park is located 92 nautical miles southeast of this city.

Songco said the Jessie Beazley Reef on the outer edge of the park was also covered under SC 61.

The reef is "an important source and sink area of the park," said Dr. Terry Aquino, a marine mammal specialist and consultant of the Tubbataha Management Office. "It is a very productive area for marine life and is very sensitive to disturbance caused by seismic explorations due to the presence of cetacean species which are sensitive to sonar."

Aquino proposed the establishment of a buffer area of at least 10 nautical miles around the Jessie Beazley.

"Seismic explorations caused by compressed air fired from the water surface during exploration activities can cause a lot of damage to Jessie Beazley, which is now just recovering since it was acquired by the park in 2006," he added.

SC 61 is one of the 28 petroleum service contracts awarded by the DoE to exploration companies. In a presentation to the provincial board on the status of these service contracts last month, the department noted that Burgundy Global was planning to conduct more seismic surveys there next year.

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