

PRESS RELEASE

November 3, 2021

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### **Strengthened Wildlife Law should be 18<sup>th</sup> Congress' legacy – environmental group**

Environmental group Tanggol Kalikasan has called for the immediate passage of the amendments to Republic Act 9147 or the Wildlife Resources Conservation and Protection Act of 2001, saying the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress must make it their legacy.

Tanggol Kalikasan executive director Ma. Ronely Bisquera-Sheen said that it is high-time to strengthen the 20-year-old law to address the increasingly sophisticated and organized illegal wildlife trade operations.

Leading the country during the pandemic, lawmakers of the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress must ensure the passage of the strengthened law to effectively combat illegal wildlife trade, widely believed to have contributed to the global health crisis.

“We call on the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress to use their power to pass this much-needed law. It will be a worthwhile legacy that will not only protect our wildlife resources, but also the lives and livelihoods of generations of Filipinos,” Bisquera-Sheen said.

“Crime syndicates are exploiting legal loopholes, low fines and penalties, digital technology, and limited enforcement capacity. RA 9147 must be urgently amended. Our law must keep up with the changing landscape of wildlife crimes and enforcement,” she said.

Penalties in the current law do not correspond to the gravity of offenses, failing to serve as a deterrent. Most of the sentences under the law are below six years imprisonment, with first-time offenders usually applying for probation to skip detention and paying fines.

In 2019, foreign nationals were caught with P1.7 million worth of dried seahorses, considered endangered species, but the offenders ended up paying a measly fine of P15,000.

Under the bills, penalties for trading, possession, and transport of wildlife can be as high as 8 years of imprisonment and/or fines of up to P1 million; while penalties for killing or destroying wildlife can reach up to 12 years imprisonment and/or fines of up to P2 million. Wildlife trafficking shall also be treated as a distinct and separate offense if the violation involves more than one species.

If the bills are passed into law, the offender shall also pay the wildlife economic value, or the amount proven to have been lost as a result of the crime. Citing the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the group said the estimated value of illegal wildlife trade in the country is P50 billion or \$1 billion yearly, including the market value of wildlife

and its resources, their ecological role and value, damage to habitats, and loss in potential ecotourism revenues.

The group, citing Dr Glenn Maguad of DENR-Wildlife Rescue Center, said there is also a need for additional financial and technical assistance to the more than 20 Wildlife Rescue Centers nationwide.

“Rescue centers provide a sanctuary for confiscated wildlife, most of which are in critical condition, and play a crucial role in the law enforcement chain nationwide,” Maguad said.

With implementation challenges in the regions, Tanggol Kalikasan emphasized the critical role of local government units in wildlife law enforcement,.

Under the bills, LGUs shall require businesses and wildlife-related activities to present permits from the DENR and the Department of Agriculture before they can obtain or renew business licenses and clearances.

“The LGUs’ knowledge, expertise and law enforcement efforts in the areas will help enforcers at the national level in combating illegal wildlife trade, especially in light of the Supreme Court’s Mandanas ruling, which transfers higher national tax revenue to local governments,” Bisquera-Sheen said.

“Furthermore, imposing rules that complement local ordinances will make it difficult for violators to commit crimes,” she added.

“The said ruling increases the national government tax revenue transferred to local governments. Furthermore, imposing rules that complement local ordinances will make it difficult for violators to commit crimes,” she added.

Senate Bill Nos. 2078 and 2079, filed by Senator Cynthia Villar and Senate Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri, respectively, seek the imposition of stronger and more specific penalties, the strengthening of enforcement capacity, and the removal of legal loopholes exploited by illegal wildlife traders. The counterpart measure, House Bill 9833, was approved in August on third and final reading.

The Philippines, among the world’s most mega-diverse countries, has become an important source, transit, and destination point for illegal wildlife trade, which is now the fourth largest illicit trade worldwide behind illegal drugs, arms, and human trafficking.