



# CORAL TRIANGLE INITIATIVE

ON CORAL REEFS, FISHERIES AND FOOD SECURITY  
PHILIPPINES

## Improving lives and promoting conservation in the Turtle Islands

### TURTLE ISLANDS WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

was proclaimed as

#### Protected Area

by virtue of

Presidential Proclamation No. 171  
Dated : August 26, 1999

with a total area of 242,567.00 has.  
comprising the islands of Baguan, Taganak,  
Langaan, Bakkungan, Uhiman and Boan.  
Marine : 242,649.00 has.  
Terrestrial : 318.00 has.

Located at  
Municipality of Turtle Islands  
Province of Tawi-Tawi



Department of Environment and Natural Resources  
Office of the Protected Area Superintendent  
Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary  
Taganak, Turtle Islands, Tawi-Tawi





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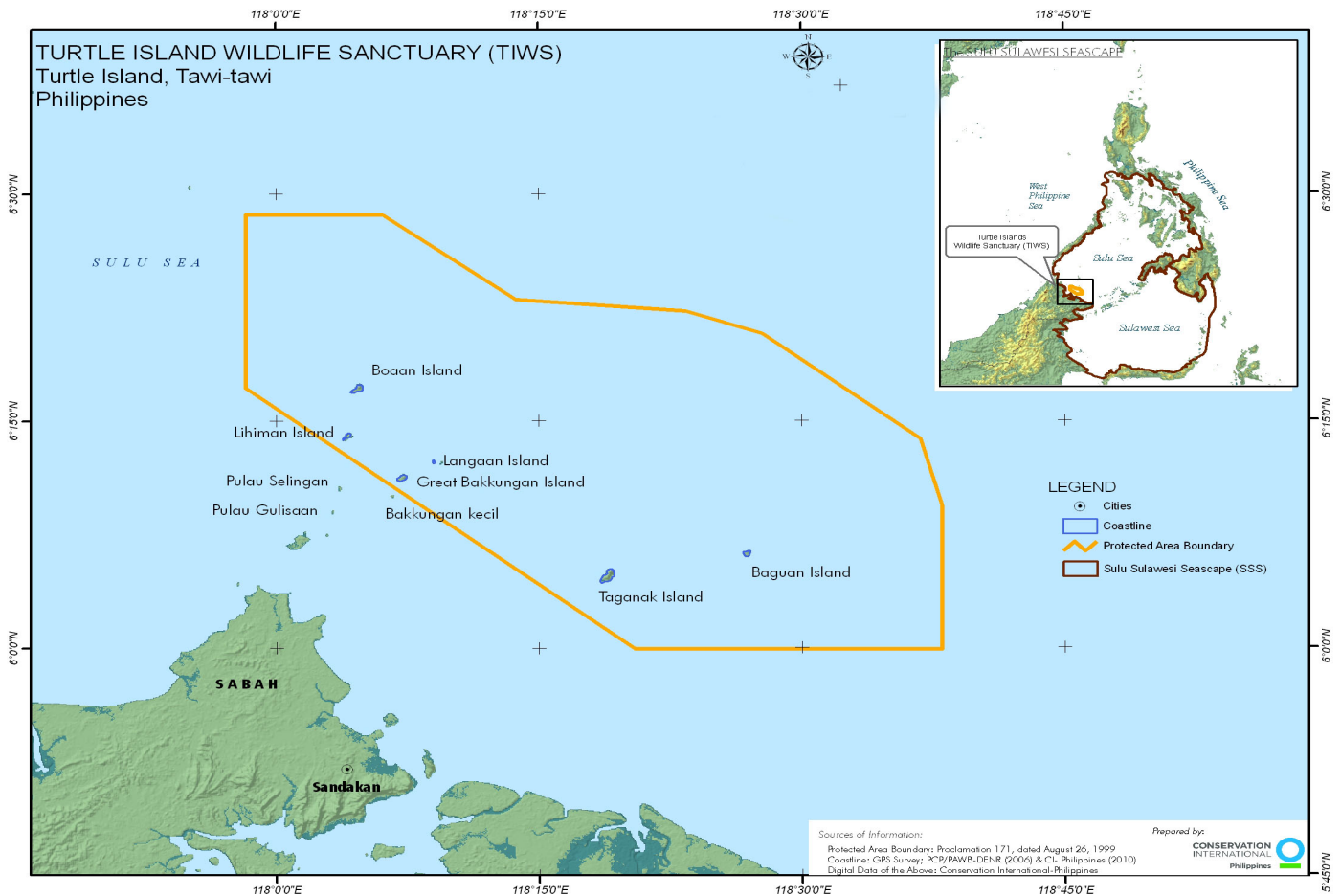
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# Improving lives and promoting conservation in the Turtle Islands



In Tawi-Tawi, the Philippines' southernmost province, a group of islands called the Turtle Islands Wildlife Sanctuary (TIWS) host some of the world's most important areas for sea turtle populations. TIWS is part of the Turtle Islands Heritage Protected Area (TIHPA), a one-of-its-kind protected area, one that was jointly established by two countries (Philippines and Malaysia) for the conservation of sea turtles.

TIHPA covers the six islands of TIWS plus three islands of Sabah. Collectively, these islands comprise the most important nesting areas of green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) and hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) in Southeast Asia, a distinction it shares with the Berau Marine Conservation Area in Indonesia. In TIWS, recent years have seen a rise in the number of green turtle eggs laid, with an average of nearly 2 million turtle eggs laid annually from 2010-2012.

Conservation International has been working with Philippine and Malaysian authorities in TIHPA since 2008, providing assistance in implementing conservation initiatives such as protected area management, law enforcement, and capacity building. In 2011, through additional support of the United States Agency for International Development-Coral Triangle Support Partnership (USAID-CTSP), CI's Sulu-Sulawesi Seascape Program embarked on a new area of engagement in TIWS, this time working with local communities to implement alternative livelihood activities that will help lessen dependence on turtle eggs for food and trade as well as the use of destructive and illegal fishing methods.



©Conservation International/Photo by Orlando Maliwanag

## Enlisting community commitment through conservation agreements

Under CI's Conservation Stewardship Program, communities become active partners in addressing ecosystem threats and sustaining conservation initiatives while also being able to diversify their sources of income and reduce destructive and natural resources-dependent activities.

CI works with local communities in exploring alternative livelihood options that are compatible with the area's ecosystems and available natural resources as well as the people's skills and traditional activities. Livelihood projects are selected and designed using participatory approaches, interviews and consultations are conducted with the different sectors of the communities, and core groups are mobilized to generate, process, and assess project ideas. Additional training programs are also provided if needed.

In Tawi-Tawi's Turtle Islands, a women's group and a youth group became part of the program: the Taganak Women's Buying Club, a newly-established group composed of six women and the Friends of Environment, Nature and Development Society or FRIENDS, a group of some 30 members composed mostly of high school students. A group of traditional mat weavers also became part of the program.

The conservation agreement with the Buying Club provided seed capital to its members that enabled them to put up small convenience (sari-sari) stores. FRIENDS, on the other hand, was provided seed capital and tools for making handicrafts and souvenir items to be put up for sale. The mat weavers received materials for making their traditional mat products.

Most of the members already had skills in weaving and handicraft making, but they also received additional training on solid waste management, which included learning how to transform plastic wastes into products for livelihood like key chains, wallets, and placemats (in partnership with Earth Day Foundation). To help them sustain their operations, they were also given training in managing their livelihood activities and marketing their products.

As part of the agreement, the two groups made the following commitments:

- to lead coastal clean-up efforts in Taganak, TIWS' most populated island
- to not engage in collecting turtle eggs for food and trade
- to not catch, kill or trade other protected wildlife
- to not use destructive fishing methods
- to help in monitoring wildlife poaching



## Immediate results for families, communities

Most of the members of these groups were not actively engaged in livelihood activities prior to the start of the conservation agreement program. However, in less than a year since the conservation grants were awarded in September 2011, both groups were able to provide additional income to their families and sustain their business operations. The Buying Club members reported an average income increase of \$35-\$71 per person per month from the sales of their sari-sari stores' goods as well as their traditional mats. The FRIENDS youth group, on the other hand, earned nearly \$1,000 in eight months through the sales of their products like t-shirts, key chains, and wallets.

The additional income enabled immediate improvement in the lives of the members' families. One member of the buying club bought a portable power generator, while another used the money to purchase building materials to improve her family's house. The youth group members were able to buy their own school supplies using their group's earnings. The conservation agreement with the Buying Club provided seed capital to its members that enabled them to put up small convenience (sari-sari) stores. FRIENDS, on the other hand, was provided seed capital and tools for making handicrafts and souvenir items to be put up for sale. The mat weavers received materials for making their traditional mat products.

*Some products made by Turtle Islands' women and youth groups: key chains and wallets woven using recycled plastic bags, t-shirts with turtle designs drawn by local artists, and traditional mats ©Conservation International/Photos by Orlando Maliwanag (top to third) and Rina Bernabe De Alban (bottom)*

Benefits were not limited to the members of the two groups and their families but extended to their respective communities as well. For example, the sari-sari stores were able to provide goods at cheaper prices because they were established using the conservation grant's seed capital, as opposed to similar stores in the area whose operations or capitalization depend on middlemen or on loans that accrue interest.

The members themselves also made it a point to use part of their earnings for community projects. By setting aside a small portion of their income, the women's group was able to support the school expenses of two high school students from low-income families, while the youth group was able to donate a deep well to their school, which used to have no own source of water.

As part of their commitment under the conservation agreement, both groups participate in coastal clean-up activities, and part of the trash collected—specifically the plastics and driftwood—are recycled and used as materials for handicraft making. They have also stopped being part of the customary collection of turtle eggs done in the islands.



Top: Lihiman Island, TIWS (©Keith A. Ellenbogen)

Bottom: members of the youth and women's groups (Left: ©Keith A. Ellenbogen, Right: ©Conservation International/Photo by Orlando Maliwanag)



## Opportunities for growth

Using the regular transport routes to and from Turtle Islands, the two groups sell their products in Zamboanga province or in the provincial capitol of Bongao, Tawi-Tawi. As their operations grow, they are also hoping to supply customers in Manila as well as Sabah. However, years from now, the groups are also looking forward to serving another potential market: tourists.

In future, conservationists and protected area authorities alike envision that TIWS will emerge as a prime ecotourism destination with the nesting sea turtles as the prime attraction. While a lot of work still has to be done in the areas of institutional arrangements, infrastructure development, and program development, the potential is definitely there.

During the peak season, as many as 200 turtles nest in TIWS' beaches each night, and in Baguan Island where the bulk of the nestings happen, a record-breaking 1.44 million green turtle eggs were laid in 2011, the highest recorded since 1984. For the year 2012, this record has already been broken as early as August, and it is projected that the year's total will reach up to 2 million eggs.

It is hoped that the participation of the members of Taganak Women's Buying Club and FRIENDS in conservation partnerships will help spread the message to the rest of TIWS' residents that protecting sea turtles is important not only because of their roles in maintaining a healthy and productive marine ecosystem, but also because of their potential to provide direct benefits to the community through ecotourism income.

In the meantime, these women and young people are doing their part in being productive members of their communities and serving as environmental champions and models.





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