

Profiles



Apo Reef NATURAL PARK

SABLAYAN, OCCIDENTAL MINDORO, PHILIPPINES

Photos by George Tapan

General Information

Apo Reef is the largest coral atoll-like reef in the Philippines. It is a 34-square kilometer submerged platform of reefs separated by a 30-m deep channel with fine white sand bottom, numerous mounds and patches of branching corals under the deep blue water. The reefs are the habitat of about 375 fish species such as sharks, stingrays, mantas, jacks and snappers, swarms of tropical aquarium fish and morays and several invertebrates such as giant clams, cone and nautilus shells and even the coconut crab.

Its mangrove forest serves as a bird sanctuary, source of food, nursery and spawning grounds of a myriad marine life; it also protects the coastal zone from storm and soil erosion.

A presidential proclamation established Apo Reef as a Natural Park, encompassing 15,792 hectares of both land (29 ha) and water (15,763 ha). The buffer zone

surrounding the protected area has a marine area of 11,677 ha. It is located within the municipality of Sablayan, in the island province of Occidental Mindoro, Philippines.

Three islands mark Apo Reef on the surface. These are Apo Island, Apo Menor (Binangaan), a rocky limestone island with relatively little vegetation, and Cayos del Bajo (Tinangkapan), a flat coralline rock formation with no vegetation.

Apo Island boasts fine white sandy beaches and a shallow lagoon surrounded by mangrove species that harbor several kinds of birds including the endangered Nicobar pigeon (*Caloenas nicobarica*). The endangered Green (*Chelonia mydas*) and Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) sea turtles nest on its arcing sandy beaches. Ramrose corals dominate the reef flat, while stingrays and mantas, giant bumphead parrot fish and wrasses are found on the reef crest and drop-off areas. Seagrass meadows and

algal assemblages in the shallow intertidal reef flat and fringing coral reefs support various plants, fishes and invertebrates such as starfish, holothurians, sea urchins, octopus, and squid; seashells are found about 100 to 130 meters from the shore.

The partly submerged weathered hull of a World War II Japanese cargo acts as a reef for hundreds of marine species including manta rays and white tip sharks.

There are no permanent residents on the islands. But a few staff of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) live and work there on a rotation basis. A low-rise building serving as the DENR office, picnic huts, and a 36-meter high lighthouse built in 1905 by the American Administration are the only structures there. The lighthouse, which has been refurbished by the Conservation of Priority Protected Areas (CPPAP), runs on solar power.

Communities in the nearby coastal barangays of Sablayan such as Buenavista and Ligaya depend mainly on fishing at Apo Reef for their subsistence and added income.

Apo Reef Natural Park is one of 10 priority sites of CPPAP, a special project of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. The Global Environmental Facility-World Bank provides financial assistance.

Protected Area Management

Both the DENR-Region 4 office and the Protected Areas and Wildlife Bureau-DENR thru the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) and the Protected Area Superintendent (PASu) Office manage the Park. In Sablayan, the Apo Reef Office or Station is located at 254 P. Urieta St., Sablayan, Occidental Mindoro, [tel./fax no. (63-43) 711-5207]. Visitors are advised to come here for an orientation on the rules and regulations within the Park and for the payment of appropriate fees.

The PASu Office and the PAMB are planning some form of organized tourism, where visitors can come to see the islands and the vast reef beneath, without damaging the park's fragile ecosystem. Visitors will live aboard dive boats and only go ashore

for brief periods so as not to disturb the birds or marine creatures living in the reef shallows.

How to reach the Park

- 1. Manila-San Jose by air.** Two airlines ply this route from the Manila Domestic Airport, Parañaque, Metro Manila. Asian Spirit (info@asianspirit.com; www.asianspirit.com; tel: (63-2) 8403811/(63-2)524-4310-12; fax: (63-2) 8130183) has two morning flights (6:00 and 7:20) every Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays that reach San Jose in an hour. Air Philippines [tel:(63-2)843770; (63-2) 551-2180; fax:(63-2)845-2448; (63-2) 551-7881; email: (reservations@airphilippines.com.ph; tktg.msd@airphilippines.com.ph) takes off twice in the mornings (5:45 and 7:00) of Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday for a 45-minute flight to San Jose. One-way airfare costs about PhP1,500.00 (US\$30)*.
- 2. Manila-San Jose by boat:** From the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA), Parañaque, Metro Manila, a taxi could bring you to the North Harbor, Manila at a cost of about PhP300.00(\$6). Two shipping lines ply this route: MV Nikki of Moreta Shipping Lines leaves the port at 5:00 pm every Sunday. Fare per person is: PhP400.00(\$8) (deluxe or aircon); PhP300.00 (ordinary); William Lines (MV Edwards) (245-4061;255-0102 to 04; 523-8343) is located at Pier 14, North Harbor. Voyage time is about 12 to 16 hours.
- 3. Manila-Batangas City by bus -Abra de Ilog, Sablayan by boat.** From the airport, the closest bus service bound for Batangas is BLTB located at No. 3, Malibay, Pasay City [Tel.: (63-2) 833-550]; a taxi fare could cost about P300(\$6). In Quezon City, buses bound for Batangas are: BLTB at Ali Mall, Cubao and Tritran at EDSA corner Timog Ave. Both buses leave every hour

The estimated US dollar equivalent is based on the June 2001 rate: PhP50 = US\$1. Prices may change after June 2001.

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for a 3-4 hour trip that costs about PhP120(\$2.4). From the Batangas port, two ferryboats leave daily at 6:00pm (Montenegro Lines or M/B Lady Manaoag), for a 12-hour journey to Sablayan. Regular fare is PhP90 (\$1.8); PhP120(\$2.4) for aircon buses. From the San Jose airport or the pier, a tricycle [PhP20(\$0.4)/person] can bring you to the bus stop in the town proper, from where you can get a bus for Sablayan. When full, the bus leaves for a 3-5 hour trip that costs about PhP110(\$2.2). Tricycles at the Sablayan bus stop can take you to the Apo Reef Office.

Entrance and Other Fees

Fees and charges shall be made in Philippine cash only. *(The US dollar equivalent rates below serve only as guide.)*

Entrance fees (per person per visit*):

*Per Visit is equivalent to 36 hours or less from arrival to departure.

Filipinos	Children	PhP25
	Adults	50
Foreigners		PhP250 (\$4-5)

Other Charges

Motorboat Hire	PhP2,500.00 (\$50) (round trip: Sablayan to Apo Island and back)
Scuba diving:	PhP400 (about US\$8)
Swimming/Snorkeling	PhP50.00 (\$.4) per person per day

Camping	PhP50.00(\$1) per person per day
Sportsfishing (Hook & Line)	PhP30.00(\$.6) per rod per day
Paddle Boat Hire	PhP30.00(\$.6) per rod per day
Anchoring/Mooring Fee	PhP200.00(\$4) per day
Video taping	PhP1,000.00(\$20) per tape
Filming for movie production and TV commercials	PhP3,000.00(\$60) per day

Guidelines for Visitors

- Before visiting the Park, inform the PASu at least five days before your actual trip.
- Always drop by the office for a brief orientation, fill out the form and pay the corresponding fees or charges.
- Have your luggage, items and paraphernalia inspected by the PASu or his staff.
- Bring your own sleeping bag or mat and drinking water should you plan to stay overnight.
- For swimmers/snorkelers/divers, bring your own equipment.
- Do not bring in any liquor or prohibited drugs. Gambling is not allowed.
- Do not gather, hunt, kill or disturb any marine life, nor cut, gather or remove any plants. Mere possession of any plant or animal is also prohibited.
- Do not gather, collect, or damage the corals, sea grass, seaweeds, sea cucumbers, sea urchins and shells.

Best Time to Visit

The best time to visit is during the months of February to April.

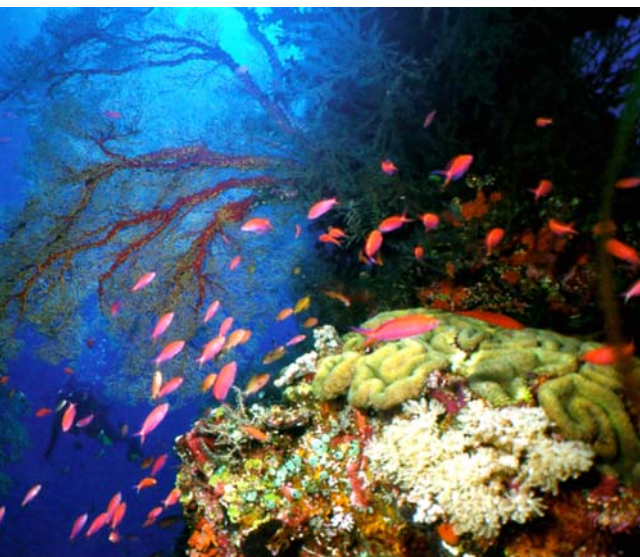
The Apo Reef Natural Park is dry from December to May and wet from June to November. The temperature ranges from a low 26.63° C in February to a high 30.37° C in May.

Eco-Tourism Destinations

Dive Spots On Apo Reef

The Pandan Island Resort recommends the following dive sites: Shark Ridge. This northeast side of





Apo Reef consists of a sheer drop with many overhangs. If you dive to as deep as 50 meters, you will see white tip and gray reef sharks, turtles, barracudas and schools of snappers.

Apo Island. The dive sites around the island range between 10 to 50 meters deep, and are the best as far as corals are concerned. Here, huge table corals, stag horns, brain corals, fire corals and varied soft ones, will mesmerize you. The northern, eastern and southern sides consist of sheer drops with many pelagics and turtles. Hammerhead sharks and Manta rays are now sighted more often. Because of unpredictable currents, the northern dive site may be difficult for beginners. The western side is more a slope than a drop-off, making it easier for less experienced divers.

Apo 29. This is an underwater mound, reaching to about 25 meters below the surface of the South China Sea. This is a true blue water dive, recommended for experienced divers only; currents can be strong and unpredictable and the sharks more curious than in other spots around Apo reef.

Hunters' Rock. This dive spot located about 10 nautical miles west of Apo Island consists of a rock pinnacle that almost reaches the surface. Sharks and big trevallies are as common as the strong current, making this dive spot tricky for inexperienced divers. Professional guides are a must.

Merope Rock. Like Hunters Rock, Merope is about 10 nautical miles west of Apo Island. It is accessible only during overnight Apo trips or on the way to

Busuanga. An underwater mound reaching to about 15 meters below the surface on the eastern side, consists of a wall that offers good chances for one to see sharks, tunas and other pelagics. M/Y Nautika offers live-aboard diving packages. For the Apo Reef (coupled with a dive in Busuanga), the package costs US\$ 165.00 per person per night.

Note: The resort offers safaris to Apo Reef and the wrecks of Coron Bay. Pandan has a dive operation that is close enough for day trips to Apo Reef, about an hour by speedboat. Check out the website of Pandan Island Resort (www.pandan.com) for its dive packages.

Food and Accommodation

Pandan Island Resort, 24 nautical miles away from the Reef, has 5 budget-room bungalows (US\$10 to 12US\$); 10 standard bungalows (US\$20), and one family bungalow (US\$32 for 2-4persons; US\$37 for single occupancy). Price for single occupancy is higher to avoid only one person staying in a Family Bungalow

Restaurant food ranges from US\$3-12, depending on the size of serving. Children under 4 years old have free meals.

Sablayan: For those not camping within the park, or staying at the Pandan Resort, you may stay in any of the following lodging places: La Sophia Hotel [PhP180 (\$4)]; Landmans Hotel [PhP250 (\$4-5)]; Emily Hotel [PhP200 (\$4)]; and Feliz Del Mar Beach Resort [PhP150(\$2-3)/cottage/day]. The hotels serve meals, ranging from PhP60 (\$1.20) to PhP100 (\$2).

There are several places where you can eat, but you may want to check out the following restaurants: El Sabungero, Bahay Kobo and Chow Queen, where meals range from PhP60 to PhP100. ●

Sources:

- PASu Lorenzo O. Ordenes and staff
- Briefing Kit on Apo Reef Natural Park
- General Management Plan for Apo Reef Natural Park 2001
- Conservation of Priority Protected Areas Project (CPPAP), Philippines, DENR/NIPA/WB-Global Environment Facility
- CPPAP brochure
- Our Natural Heritage: Protected Areas of the Philippines, 1999. DENR/PAL
- Pandan Island Resort Website (www.pandan.com)