



June 20, 2022

Statement of Rocky Sanchez Tirona, Managing Director of Rare's Fish Forever Coastal Fisheries Program to the 2022 UN Ocean Conference

Climate change. Overfishing. Plastic pollution. In response to these and other challenges, the UN Convention on Biodiversity set a target of conserving 30 percent of land and ocean by 2030. National governments and international organizations are participating in the 30x30 campaign to achieve it. Convenings like the UN Ocean Conference are opportunities to scaling up action to support it.

It is inspiring to see countries come together in support of an ambitious goal. But are global efforts to protect the ocean directing support and resources where they can have the greatest impact for people and nature?

To meet global goals for protecting biodiversity, we must protect the full array of ocean regions that have large impacts on biodiversity.

At the top of the list would be the territorial seas – the thin band of ocean up to 12 nautical miles from shore. This area is home to 100% of mangroves, 100% of seagrass beds, 100% of kelp forests, and 83% of coral reefs – all critical habitats for fish and other ocean life. These coastal regions are also where high biodiversity meets high human use.

Coastal communities throughout the developing tropics depend on healthy coastal fisheries for food and livelihoods. These fisheries employ 50 of the 51 million small-scale fishers globally. They produce 40% of global fish catch. And nearly all fish caught in these fisheries goes toward human consumption making them essential to food security.

But today, only 11% of Marine Protected Areas – the main tool in protecting oceans – are inside territorial waters. Most are established offshore, far from the biodiversity-rich territorial seas.

Why? Because it's socially and politically easier to protect areas far from densely populated regions. Although there are important benefits from successes in offshore protection, addressing the disparity in more coastal protection is critical if we want 30x30 to have a globally meaningful impact on nature and people.

My organization, Rare, has a proven path for achieving impact and scaling success.

First, we pair protection with effective management. Local and indigenous communities depend on territorial waters for food and jobs - they can't be all off limits. We pair no-take reserves with areas where sustainable fishing is allowed, and make sure the rights to fish in those areas are reserved for indigenous and local fishers. We call this system Managed Access with Reserves.

Next, we embrace "bigger isn't always better." We design networks of smaller marine reserves within territorial waters using larval dispersal data to protect the lifecycle of fish, and provide connectivity between protected areas, can help biodiversity, fish populations, and fisheries recover.

These reserves also protect ecosystems like seagrass beds, coral reefs, and mangroves, which not only provide habitats for marine life, but are critical to mitigating the impact of climate change in the form of extreme weather. This approach is usually easier for communities to adopt, when very large coastal protected areas aren't feasible.

Third, we advocate for local governments and communities to be empowered with management capabilities. Territorial waters intersect with hundreds of thousands of scattered communities, so top-down approaches rarely work. But when the authority to manage waters is devolved, and local governments are empowered with the knowledge, tools, and data for good decision-making, local communities have successfully sustained conservation efforts.

Protecting and effectively managing territorial waters is difficult, but critical. As we push towards 30x30, we need a concerted effort from governments, donors, NGOs, and local communities to both prioritize these critical waters and ensure such conservation efforts are properly funded.

As we look for solutions that benefit people and nature, pairing protection with sustainable production is an effective and equitable path forward. The UN Ocean Conference provides the opportunity to hear directly from representatives from impacted communities and come together around workable solutions for both people and nature.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rocky Sanchez Tirona". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Rocky" being the most prominent.

Rocky Sanchez Tirona
Managing Director, Fish Forever
Rare