

Philippines launches suit in reef plunder

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Local dive master Joel Pandino shows coral reef formation in the Verde sea passage, south of Manila in 2007. The Philippines on Friday began legal action against traders accused of plundering corals and marine turtles in a case that officials said may have destroyed large tracts of precious reefs.

The Philippines on Friday began legal action against traders accused of plundering corals and marine turtles in a case that officials said may have destroyed large tracts of precious reefs.

The customs bureau said it filed a complaint, asking the justice department to file [criminal charges](#) against four businessmen it accused of shipping the items to the port of Manila, where they were confiscated last month.

"The Bureau of Customs has lowered the boom on the rapists of the ocean," it said in a statement.

Wildlife police have said they seized 163 stuffed hawksbill and [green turtles](#), more than 21,000 pieces of black corals, 7,340 trumpet and helmet shells and 196 kilograms (430 pounds) of sea whips.

The items are all threatened species that cannot be legally gathered, collected, traded or transported, they said.

President Benigno Aquino's government had condemned the environmental plunder and vowed to step up marine patrols to prevent a repeat.

The corals and [turtles](#) were apparently stolen from the pristine waters of the Moro Gulf and the Sulu Sea off the main southern island of Mindanao, according to Aquino's spokesman Edwin Lacierda.

Under the Philippine fisheries code and a wildlife resources conservation law, their gathering and export are punishable by up to two years in prison.

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