

Philippines presses for payment over damaged reef

March 31 2013



This photo, released on March 30, 2013 by Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), shows a portion of the stern of the USS Guardian being lifted by a boat crane during its salvage operation at Tubbataha reef, off Palawan island, western Philippines.

The Philippines on Sunday welcomed the removal of a US minesweeper that had been stuck on a protected coral reef for 10 weeks, but stressed that compensation must be paid for the environmental damage.

Salvage crews contracted by the US Navy Saturday extracted the last remaining piece of the USS Guardian from the Tubbataha reef, a [UNESCO World Heritage site](#) in a remote area of the Sulu Sea.

"We maintain there must be accountability and we will enforce our existing laws," said Herminio Coloma, a spokesman for President Benigno Aquino.

"We will adopt needed measures to prevent a repetition (of the incident)," he said.

Initial investigation showed that the ship had damaged about 4,000 square metres (43,055 square feet) of the reef, famous for its rich marine life that divers say rivals that of Australia's [Great Barrier Reef](#).

Tubbataha is a protected marine park under Philippine law, and is off limits to any vessel unless permission is granted by park authorities.

Fines can reach up to \$585 for every square metre that has been damaged, officials said.

While only a small portion of the marine park has been damaged, the incident has stoked nationalist sentiment and revived debate about a controversial agreement that allows a US military presence in the country.

The United States has repeatedly apologised for the incident, but has not clearly explained why a naval vessel with state-of-the-art equipment ran aground in an area that local officials said was clearly visible in any map.

The US embassy in Manila said the 68-metre (223-foot) vessel was en route to Indonesia when the incident happened in January.

Angelique Songco, head of the Tubbataha Management Office that oversees the [marine park](#), said US and Philippine divers would remain in the area for further clean-up operations to ensure no debris was left behind.

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