

TEO: I'M WITNESS TO BORACAY ROT

## Tourism chief says pollution in world famous resort island has been going on for too long

DAVAO CITY—Tourism Secretary Wanda Teo on Friday said she agreed with President Duterte's observation that the country's premier tourist destination, Boracay Island, has become a cesspool, recalling one instance when she personally witnessed how human wastes were being thrown into the sea indiscriminately.

"Once, I went there with some undersecretaries and there was this (noise)," said Teo. "It turned out it was caused by human wastes being washed into the water," she said.

Teo said she fully supported Mr. Duterte's order for officials and entrepreneurs in Boracay to shape up or he would order the closure of the entire island, which has become world-famous for its white sand beaches.

The tourism chief, however, also admitted that the President's description of the resort island as a cesspool had

economic repercussions. She confirmed reports tourists had canceled bookings for Boracay.

### Locals know

Teo, speaking to reporters at Marco Polo Hotel here, said even locals in Boracay would attest to the pollution that was now hounding the island because of uncontrolled growth which led to thousands of establishments sprouting without access to sewerage systems or water treatment facilities.

She said the smell of pollutants or human wastes would overwhelm people in Boracay on a regular basis.

Teo said locals had been long complaining against pollution in Boracay but this had not been addressed properly.

She blamed the lack of political will by previous leaders and officials. "It always redounded to fear of losing votes," Teo added.

It is only now that the coun-

try has a leader who has the political will to crack down on Boracay's excesses despite a projected backlash, said Teo.

"The President is serious," said another ranking tourism official, Undersecretary Katherine de Castro. "When he says six months, he will do it in six months."

### Duterte order

Teo said she welcomed Mr. Duterte's order to shut down erring establishments and launch a massive cleanup of Boracay.

She said at least 200 tourism establishments were violating environmental laws.

The problems in Boracay have been a nagging issue for long that Teo said she was already aware of these even when she was still with the private sector.

"I got lot of complaints. My clients who went to Boracay would tell me they got itchy from dipping in its waters," said

\* TOURISM

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Teo, who owns a travel agency.  
"The massive cleanup of Boracay is a bitter pill that we have to swallow if we were to collectively save and sustain Boracay," she said.  
She said her department would continue to market the island, however.

A compliance monitoring office under the Department of Tourism (DOT) would open in Boracay "to see to it that tourism establishments are operating according to standards," said Teo.

#### **Drainage project**

She said she had ordered the Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority, an agency of the DOT, to "oversee the swift completion of the P716 million drainage project to address the flooding in the area."

She appealed for the full cooperation of people in Boracay.

While admitting that Mr Duterte's rant against pollution in Boracay hurt tourism business there, it has only a "limited effect."

She said the tourism director in Boracay reported "no substantial cancellation" of bookings in big hotels and resorts. Only eight hotels reported cancellation of bookings, said Teo.

These included Bamboo Beach Resort and Blue Marina Boracay which reported 22 cancellations.

She admitted "the cancellations were attributed to the President's declaration." "But it was not that much," she said.

#### **Boracay West Cove**

De Castro said the DOT had already submitted a list of violations committed by a resort said to be once owned by Sen. Manny Pacquiao in Boracay West Cove, a set of rock formations.

Tourism Assistant Secretary Frederick Alegre said the DOT did not renew West Cove's accreditation anymore. He said the DOT was "now checking who gave permission for it to operate."

Among the most glaring violation of environmental rules in West Cove, he said, was the cementing of some of the rock formations and the building of structures atop these. —ALLAN

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