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DENR CRACKDOWN GOES TO PALAWAN

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The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) will be cracking the whip in Palawan, particularly in the Subterranean River National Park in Puerto Princesa City and El Nido, according to officials.

The DENR has added Palawan to Panglao Island in Bohol and Boracay where it is going after establishments violating clean water and easement laws.

Environment Secretary Roy Cimatu said on Tuesday the DENR could not afford to have another problem similar to that of Boracay.

Last week, President Duterte called Boracay a "cesspool" and threatened to close it down in six months if the sewage and garbage problems were not solved.

Speaking at the opening of the 2nd Philippine Environment Summit in Cebu City, Cimatu cited the condition of the Subterranean River National Park in Puerto Princesa, a Unesco World Heritage Site and one of the New 7 Wonders of Nature.

Considered the longest navigable underground river in the world, it flows directly underneath St. Paul Mountain Range, passing through caves and rock formations.

Cimatu told reporters that the ceiling of the caves had darkened, which might be caused by too many people passing through.

"It's carbon. Where does the carbon come from? Exhalation of people," he said.

Also on Tuesday, Natividad Bernardino, director of DENR Mimaropa, told the Inquirer that her office had marching orders from Cimatu to "clean up" El Nido, particularly of establishments violating laws on coastal zone easement.

El Nido carrying capacity

Bernardino said the department had warned that El Nido, with the rapid growth of its tourism in the last few years, "has exceeded its carrying capacity."

She said her office would start issuing next week notices of violations (NOVs) to establishments that built structures beyond the coastal salvage or easement zone.

"We hope to complete the process in the next two months, and we will be issuing NOVs right away," she said.

El Nido authorities have been conducting dialogues with local establishments for a gradual demolition of structures that have crowded the town's main public beach.

Surge in visitors

Annual tourist arrivals in El Nido have surged in the past three years. Provincial government data indicate an annual growth rate of over 30 percent, with the number of tourists hitting a record 200,000 last year.

Cimatu has dispatched a technical study team to validate claims that tourism in the Underground River has adversely affected its natural features, Bernardino said. "They will be conducting an inspection [on Wednesday]."

In a press conference shortly after the opening program of

the summit, Cimatu said five teams totaling 50 people had

started inspecting all structures in Boracay to pinpoint the sources of waste being discharged into the sea.

He said 834 of the 2,600 establishments in Boracay were discharging wastewater. But only 118 have discharge permits while 36 have failed to renew theirs.

The DENR has issued NOVs to all 36 establishments.

Since only 118 have applied for discharge permits, the secretary noted that a majority, or 716 of the total business establishments in Boracay, were presumed to be discharging wastewater into the sea.

Cimatu also expressed dismay over the condition of rivers, creeks and esteros in Cebu. He requested Cebuanos to keep from dumping waste into rivers and creeks. —WITH A REPORT FROM IRENE SINO-CRUZ INQ

* Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR)

* Tourism