

Weaving seas, people, and policy: A collective vision for Central Sulawesi's marine future

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The coastlines of Central Sulawesi do not draw lines on a map—they erase them.

From the deep blue waters of the Tomini Bay to the intricate mangrove fringes of the Togean Islands, nature operates as a single, living system. Fish migrate freely across invisible boundaries, coral reefs are affected by upstream waters, and coastal communities rely on the same shared seas for food, income, and identity. Yet governance, development planning, and institutional mandates have long been divided by administrative borders that the ocean itself does not recognise.

This fundamental mismatch between ecological reality and political structure set the stage for the *High-Level Dialogue on Integrated Coastal and Marine Management* held in Palu City on 23 October 2025. The gathering brought together national policymakers, provincial and district leaders, scientists, and community stakeholders—united by one pressing question: *How can fragmented governance be transformed into a shared stewardship of the sea?*

A sea without borders: A system that must catch up

Opening the dialogue, officials underscored a simple but urgent truth: coastal and marine ecosystems are interconnected systems shaped by currents, species movement, and ecological dependency—and not jurisdictional lines. Coral reefs in one district can sustain fisheries hundreds of kilometres away, while mangroves in another buffer storm surges that protect entire coastal economies.

Yet these systems are managed through separate policies, institutions, and budgets.

Participants agreed that this fragmentation has real consequences: overlapping authority, inconsistent spatial planning, and enforcement gaps that leave ecosystems vulnerable to unsustainable fishing, pollution, and coastal degradation.

The challenge, they noted, is not a lack of policy but a lack of coherence.



Roundtable discussion on integrated coastal and marine management and the importance of shared stewardship across interconnected coastal and marine ecosystems

Conservation as investment, not limitation

A recurring message throughout the dialogue reframed conservation itself.

While marine protected areas include restricted or “no-take” zones, they are portrayed more as productive ecological engines. They are “fish banks” that replenish surrounding waters, and “natural fortresses” that shield coastlines from erosion and storms. Coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass beds were positioned as nature-based infrastructure for both biodiversity and socio-economic stability, protecting lives and livelihoods.

In this framing, conservation is not an obstacle to development, but its foundation.

This perspective aligns closely with Indonesia's long-term development vision, including the Indonesia Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2025–2045, the National Long-Term Development Plan, and the broader aspiration of “Golden Indonesia 2045,” where environmental integrity and economic growth are treated as mutually reinforcing goals.

The Togean Islands: A Microcosm of National Challenges

Few places illustrate these tensions more clearly than the Togean Islands.

For local leaders, the challenges are immediate and visible: illegal fishing practices, coral reef degradation, mounting plastic waste, and lack of alternative livelihood. For provincial authorities, the issue lies in fragmented spatial planning, where terrestrial and marine activities and development plans often overlap or conflict. For national agencies, the concern extends to systemic issues: financing gaps, institutional silos, uneven capacity across regions, and weak law enforcement.

Academics added another layer: inadequate environmental monitoring and the persistent lack of ecological data, which limits evidence-based decision-making and weakens long-term planning.

Despite differences in perspective, one conclusion was shared across all levels of governance: no single institution can manage the system alone.

From Dialogue to Convergence

Across multiple rounds of discussion, a pattern emerged. Although mandates differ, priorities increasingly align.

National planning agencies emphasised the integration of the blue economy into development frameworks. Forestry institutions stressed that human capacity, not just policy or funding, is the critical driver of success. Provincial governments called for clearer spatial boundaries and harmonised maps to resolve jurisdictional uncertainty. Local governments highlighted the need for enforcement that reaches villages where destructive fishing is driven by economic necessity.

Academia and conservation experts, meanwhile, repeatedly returned to two themes: data gaps and gender and social inclusion. Without reliable ecological baselines and meaningful participation of coastal communities, they argued, even well-designed policies risk failing in practice.

Despite these challenges, the dialogue also revealed strong convergence on one principle: integration is no longer optional, it is essential.

Beyond conservation: Toward integrated coastal management

As discussions progressed, participants shifted toward solutions. Integrated coastal management (ICM) emerged as the central framework capable of connecting fragmented efforts into a unified system.

ICM, as described during the dialogue, is not merely a technical tool; it is a governance philosophy. It demands coordination across ministries, harmonisation of plans, alignment between spatial plans, and participation from communities traditionally left at the margins of decision-making, including fishers, women, indigenous peoples, and youth.

It also emphasises connectivity; not only ecological, but institutional and social. Marine protected areas (MPAs) must function as networks rather than isolated zones, reflecting how marine species actually move and survive. Ridge-to reef management, marine spatial planning and zoning, MPA management, habitat restoration and protection, sustainable fisheries and livelihoods, climate and disaster resiliency, pollution reduction, and circular resource use together with gender equality, disability, and social inclusion are strategic actions within the ICM framework.

A roadmap for the next four years

The most tangible outcome of the gathering was the formulation of a 2025–2028 Integrated Management Roadmap for the Togean Islands and surrounding waters.

The roadmap is built on four pillars:

- **Policy and Institutional Integration:** Harmonising plans, such as the Man and Biosphere Reserve of the Tojo Una Una Regency, integrated land- and sea-use plan of the provincial government, and the Togean Islands National Park Management Plan, and strengthening coordination platforms among the different levels of government and the local stakeholders.
- **Sustainable Resource Management:** Applying ridge-to-reef approaches, restoring and protecting ecosystems, and improving fisheries management.
- **Capacity Building and Community Empowerment:** Strengthening skills, knowledge, capabilities, and participation in planning, conservation, and coastal economies and livelihoods.
- **Enforcement and Monitoring:** Enhancing patrol systems, participatory mapping, and adaptive management.

Responsibilities are shared across national ministries, provincial agencies, district governments, academic institutions, conservation authorities, and the local communities. This reflects the very integration the roadmap seeks to achieve.

The missing link: An enabling platform

Yet even as consensus formed around goals and actions, one unresolved question remained: what connects it all?

Participants repeatedly pointed to a gap between coordination in principle and coordination in practice. Existing mechanisms are numerous but often fragmented, under-resourced, or limited in scope.

The dialogue concluded that what is needed is not another plan, but an enabling platform capable of harmonising existing plans, linking institutions, aligning funding, integrating data, and sustaining collaboration over time.

Without such a mechanism, even the most comprehensive roadmap risks remaining a collection of parallel efforts.



Signing of support for the conservation management program

A shared commitment to the sea

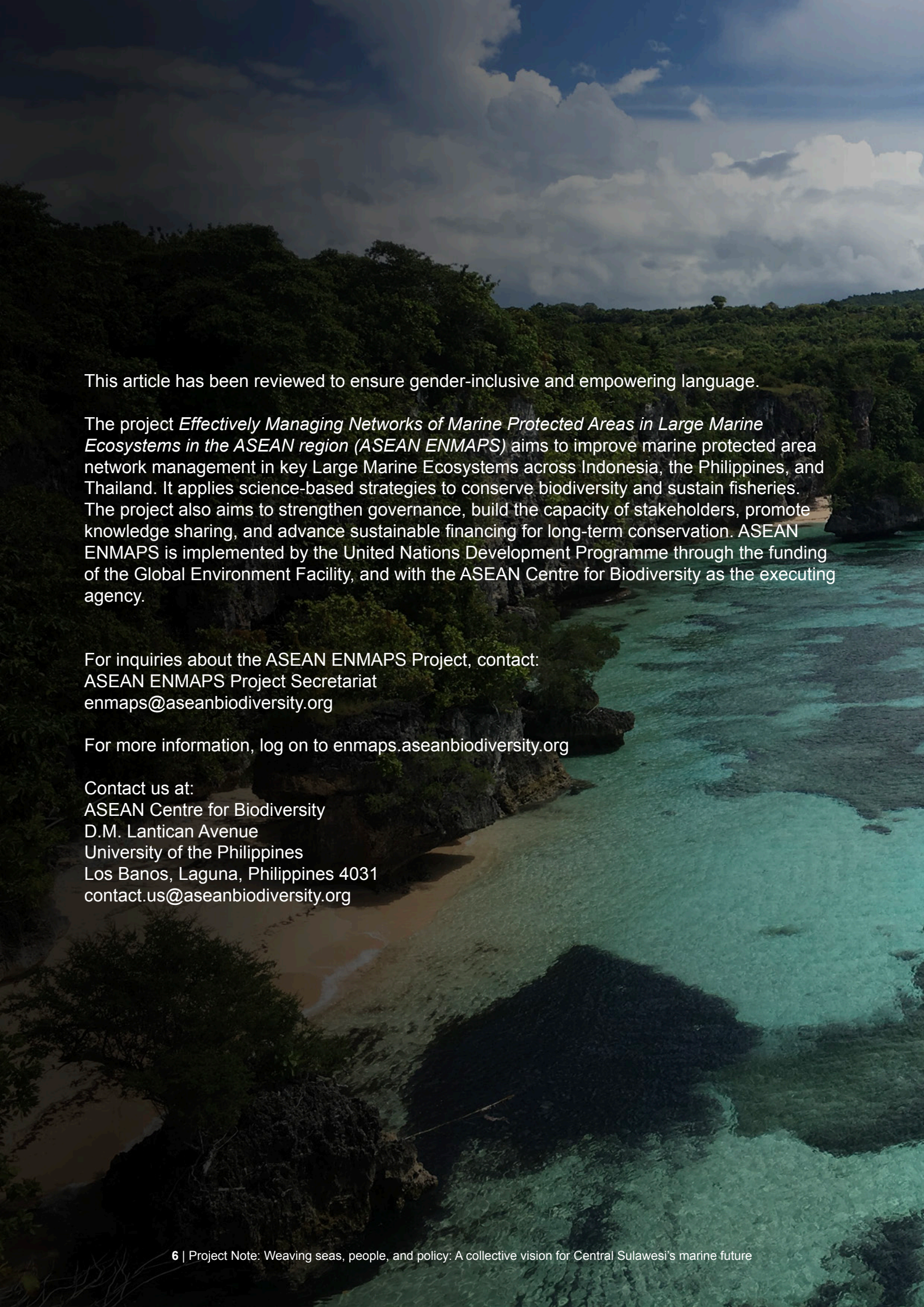
Despite the complexity of challenges, the dialogue ended on a note of convergence.

Stakeholders reaffirmed that conservation is a long-term investment in inclusive prosperity and resilience. Healthy seas mean stable fisheries, resilient coastlines, and sustainable tourism. Degraded ecosystems, by contrast, undermine both livelihoods and national development goals.

The guiding vision that emerged, “Healthy Seas, Prosperous People, Sustainable Indonesian Nature”, captures this dual imperative.

In Central Sulawesi, the message is increasingly clear: the ocean does not recognise boundaries, and neither should its management.

The success of the Togean Islands, and of Indonesia’s broader marine future, will depend on whether institutions can finally learn to govern as connected as the seas they seek to protect.



This article has been reviewed to ensure gender-inclusive and empowering language.

The project *Effectively Managing Networks of Marine Protected Areas in Large Marine Ecosystems in the ASEAN region (ASEAN ENMAPS)* aims to improve marine protected area network management in key Large Marine Ecosystems across Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. It applies science-based strategies to conserve biodiversity and sustain fisheries. The project also aims to strengthen governance, build the capacity of stakeholders, promote knowledge sharing, and advance sustainable financing for long-term conservation. ASEAN ENMAPS is implemented by the United Nations Development Programme through the funding of the Global Environment Facility, and with the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity as the executing agency.

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