

Seascapes of Change: Coastal Communities, Women, and Indigenous Knowledge Shape an Inclusive Ocean Future

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In the coastal communities of Southeast Asia, the future of marine conservation is no longer being imagined solely in laboratories, government offices, or conference halls. It is being shaped in mangrove forests, fishing villages, ancestral waters, and community assemblies through the voices of women sea wardens, Indigenous elders, youth leaders, and local fishers who have long protected the ocean through lived experience and inherited wisdom.

From 30 April to 3 May 2026, representatives from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand gathered for the regional capacity-building workshop *Seascapes of Change*, a four-day learning exchange focused on integrating Gender Equality, Equity, Diversity, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into marine governance and conservation planning.

The workshop carried a clear message: sustainable ocean governance cannot succeed if it excludes the very communities that depend on and protect marine ecosystems.

Reimagining marine conservation through inclusion

The workshop opened with a powerful question: *How can our stories build an inclusive ocean future?*

Participants from government agencies, civil society organisations, Indigenous and customary groups, women's organisations, youth groups, and conservation practitioners reflected on the realities facing marine conservation efforts across the region. Through “Highs and Lows” sharing sessions, delegates surfaced common challenges such as political transitions disrupting conservation programmes, weak coordination between institutions and communities, declining fish stocks, and the continued marginalisation of women, youth, and Indigenous Peoples in decision-making spaces.

Yet the discussions quickly moved beyond identifying problems. Facilitators guided participants towards understanding how systems of inequality shape environmental outcomes.

“Our objective is to transition away from the degraded side of the ecosystem by cultivating a future where community-led stewardship and science-based management safeguard our marine heritage.”

- Sudtrion, Indonesia Youth Representative

“By integrating our traditional wisdom with formal scientific management, we can co-create solutions for inclusive and participatory governance that ensures marine conservation is sustainable and just for the next generation.”

- Pinmani Hanthale, Thailand Youth Representative

“Our commitment is rooted in the collective drive to ensure the next generation inherits a resilient environment that offers more than just subsistence, despite the complex intersection of extreme biodiversity and socio-economic struggle.”

- Carlo D. Doctolero, Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Officer (PENRO) La Union, Philippines



Discussion on GEDSI

One of the workshop's central lessons was the distinction between equality, equity, and justice. Providing everyone with the same opportunities, participants learned, does not necessarily lead to fair outcomes. Effective marine governance requires equity, ensuring greater support for those historically excluded, and ultimately justice, where structural barriers themselves are dismantled.

Conversations on gender further challenged traditional assumptions. Gender, as participants discussed, is socially constructed and shaped through cultural expectations, unlike biological sex. These socially assigned roles often create unequal power relations, particularly for women who carry what many participants described as a “multiple burden” of caregiving, livelihood work, and community responsibilities.

“Within the ASEAN ENMAPS project, GEDSI is not merely an “add-on” but is systemically integrated into the project’s over-all approach and implementation.”

- Charisse M. Jordan, Gender-Safeguards Specialist, ASEAN ENMAPS

Country gender profiles revealed striking similarities across the three ASEAN member states. Women remain central to fisheries, coastal livelihoods, food security, and community cohesion, yet they are often underrepresented in formal governance structures and marine management institutions.



Dr. Narumon Arunotai, Resource Speaker for the TEK

Despite these barriers, the workshop fostered a collective regional vision for change. Delegates crafted positive national affirmations reflecting their aspirations for inclusive conservation.

Thailand challenged stereotypes by affirming women as capable, decisive leaders. Indonesia emphasised that inclusive governance requires patience, tolerance, and listening to diverse voices as part of the nation’s spirit of unity in diversity. The Philippines declared that genuine justice and prosperity can only be achieved when no one is left behind.

By the end of the first day, participants had reached a shared understanding that women, Indigenous Peoples, youth, and marginalised groups should not merely be consulted as stakeholders. They must be recognised as leaders and co-creators of conservation solutions.

Traditional knowledge as living science

The second day shifted attention to TEK, ancestral systems of understanding developed over generations through close interaction with coastal and marine ecosystems.

Far from being static folklore, participants described TEK as a dynamic, evolving body of knowledge that guides sustainable resource management, climate adaptation, and stewardship practices across Southeast Asia.

Examples shared during the workshop illustrated how Indigenous and local communities have long developed sophisticated ecological systems rooted in observation and reciprocity with nature. Indonesia’s Sasi seasonal fishing closures and Thailand’s monsoon-based fishing calendars demonstrated how customary practices regulate resource use while maintaining ecological balance.

TEK represents a deep relationship with nature that is dynamic and essential—it is an evolving body of knowledge, practices, and beliefs developed over generations through repeated observations by indigenous peoples and local communities.

- Dr. Narumon Arunotai

Speakers highlighted that TEK offers strengths that complement Western science, particularly in understanding local ecosystems, adapting to environmental change, and grounding conservation in community realities.

Yet participants also confronted the persistent biases that marginalise traditional knowledge

systems. Too often, TEK is only considered valid when confirmed by formal scientific methods. Institutional policies frequently privilege written regulations over oral traditions and customary governance.

Indigenous leaders and ethnic representatives from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand stressed that TEK is inseparable from culture, livelihoods, identity, and ancestral responsibility. It is passed down across generations not simply as information, but as a way of life.

However, the continuity of these traditions is increasingly under threat. Participants pointed to declining youth interest, external commercial pressures, illegal fishing, and weak government support as major challenges affecting the survival of traditional practices.

The workshop underscored the importance of ethical knowledge-sharing approaches rooted in cultural humility, respect for Data Sovereignty, and Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). Discussions emphasised that conservation efforts must move away from treating communities as “research informants” from whom knowledge is extracted. Instead, participants promoted knowledge co-production, an approach where communities, scientists, policymakers, and practitioners collaborate as equal partners.

This shift in perspective became especially visible during role-playing exercises where participants negotiated marine management scenarios from multiple viewpoints including women fishers, Indigenous leaders, government officials, youth advocates, and conservation practitioners. Despite differing priorities, groups consistently reached solutions grounded in shared stewardship, sustainable livelihoods, and mutual respect.

The day concluded with a collective recognition that the ocean is understood through many lenses, as livelihood, cultural identity, spiritual inheritance, and ecological home, and that governance systems must embrace these pluralistic perspectives.

Women leading conservation at *Ang Pulo*

On the third day, workshop participants travelled to the Calatagan Mangrove Forest Conservation Park in Batangas, Philippines, where theory met reality.



The field visit showcased a successful model of community-led conservation anchored in women’s leadership, volunteerism, and collective responsibility.

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At the heart of the initiative is Pro-mangrove Alliance and Implementing Team and Arm as Kilitisan’s Advocates of Nature also known as PALITAKAN, the local community organisation managing the 7.5-hectare mangrove conservation area. Delegates observed how strong local governance, transparent financial systems, and long-term community commitment have transformed the site into a nationally recognised conservation model.



Ms. Lucena “Lucy” Dumat, President of PALITAKAN

Women play a central role in this success. Community leaders explained how women serve not only as organisers and educators, but also as mangrove wardens and members of the Bantay Dagat (sea wardens) enforcement teams combating illegal fishing activities.

The initiative reflects the Filipino principle of *Bayanihan*, collective volunteerism and mutual support. Community members repeatedly emphasised that conservation is sustained not by funding alone, but by people willing to commit their time, labour, and care.

The conservation programme also demonstrated how environmental protection and economic resilience can reinforce one another. Sustainable livelihood initiatives such as clam culture, ecotourism, and eco-bag production provide alternative income streams while reducing pressure on marine resources.

Delegates from Indonesia and Thailand expressed admiration for the site’s accountability mechanisms, unity, and long-term vision. At the same time, Thai participants noted that many women-led conservation initiatives in their own communities remain vulnerable because they lack formal government recognition and legal support. The visit reinforced a recurring lesson throughout the workshop: inclusive conservation succeeds when communities are empowered not only socially, but institutionally and economically.

From reflection to action

The workshop’s final day focused on translating ideas into concrete action.

Using a reflective exercise called “Cards of Change”, participants identified the lessons and inspirations they intended to carry home. Women’s leadership, inclusive participation, and the value of traditional knowledge emerged as recurring themes.

These reflections informed the development of two-year action plans tailored to each country’s marine protected areas and governance contexts.

Across all three nations, participants committed to increasing women’s, youth’s, and Indigenous Peoples’ representation in marine governance structures, strengthening enforcement against illegal fishing, and documenting TEK within management plans.

Indonesia prioritised securing at least 30 per cent women’s representation in Marine Protected Area management units, conducting TEK mapping in priority sites, and strengthening multi-stakeholder governance platforms.

The Philippines focused on institutionalising women’s and Indigenous Peoples’ participation in Protected Area Management Boards, expanding women’s roles in fisheries enforcement, replicating successful women-led conservation models such as Ang Pulo, and strengthening TEK education and exchanges across generations.



Participants preparing the action plan on Day 4

Youth leaders were also visibly active and expressed appreciation for the learnings derived from distinct and shared context discussions per country. They were also inspired from the community visit in *Ang Pulo* with its strong women leadership, multisectoral collaboration, and historic community-based conservation initiatives to safeguard the mangroves and marine life. They hope to impart these learnings in their locality, and aspire to have similar local community-led and youth-oriented conservation learning exchanges within their respective marine protected landscapes.

Thailand’s plans emphasised community-based ecotourism, formal recognition of ethnic and women’s groups, youth conservation camps, curriculum reform, and stronger legal support mechanisms for Indigenous and women-led conservation initiatives.

Panel experts reminded participants that conservation planning must also address broader socio-economic realities. Unsustainable fishing, they noted, cannot be solved through enforcement alone. Long-term success requires diversified livelihoods, sustained financing, and programmatic support that extends beyond short project cycles.

The workshop concluded with a symbolic “Sea of Commitment” activity, where participants collectively pledged to transform their plans into sustained action within their communities and institutions.

Building an inclusive ocean future

Throughout the four-day workshop, one message resonated across countries, cultures, and sectors: conservation is strongest when rooted in community agency, shared stewardship, and inclusion.

The experiences shared during *Seascapes of Change* demonstrated that women, Indigenous Peoples, youth, and local communities are not peripheral actors in marine governance. They are knowledge holders, innovators, protectors, and leaders whose contributions are essential to sustaining coastal ecosystems and strengthening climate resilience.

The workshop also revealed that integrating GEDSI and TEK into marine conservation is not simply about adding participation requirements into policies. It requires confronting power imbalances, valuing different knowledge systems equally, intergenerational collaboration, and creating governance structures that genuinely share authority and responsibility.

As delegates departed with new partnerships, action plans, and commitments, the workshop left behind more than technical recommendations. It strengthened a growing regional movement towards a future where marine conservation is not only scientifically sound, but also socially just,

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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