



## OFFICE OF SENATOR SABINA FLORES PEREZ

Chairperson

Committee on Environment, Revenue and Taxation, and Procurement

*I MINA'TRENTAI SINGKO NA LIHESLATURAN GUÁHAN*

35<sup>TH</sup> GUAM LEGISLATURE

### PRESS RELEASE

#### **Senator Perez Opening Statement for Bill 53-35 (Scuba Fishing Ban)**

*Guam, March 3, 2020* – Senator Perez’s opening statement from today’s Session discussion of Bill 53-35 (relevant to banning the practice of scuba fishing):

Bill 53-35 will protect Guam’s reefs and vulnerable fisheries by ending the harmful practice of SCUBA fishing in Guam’s waters. I sincerely thank my co-sponsors on this measure, Senator Ridgell and Speaker Muña Barnes.

This bill is a response to a growing environmental and cultural threat. In recent decades, our people have witnessed a staggering drop in fish stocks. In a recent study of 832 coral reefs in 64 localities, two stood out for having fish biomass low enough to constitute fisheries collapse: Papua New Guinea and Guam.

Many in our community, including a number of commercial and sport fishermen, have expressed their concerns to me. They’ve seen firsthand how SCUBA fishing allows for the targeting of reef fish at greater depths, and at greater efficiency, than our traditional fishing methods. In fact, SCUBA fishing is so effective that it’s more akin to harvesting than fishing.

This relentless practice prevents struggling fish stocks from regenerating, which are essential to the health of coral reef ecosystems. Studies show that unrestrained SCUBA fishing can contribute significantly to fisheries collapse.

Two species, once prevalent in Guam’s waters, are particularly vulnerable to SCUBA fishing: *Atuhong* (Humphead Parrotfish) and *Tanguisson* (Humphead Wrasse). Both require the ability to grow large in deep waters before returning and repopulating reefs. However, with the advent of SCUBA fishing, the largest of these fish are now being targeted in deep waters with startling efficiency. Data compiled by the Guam Department of Agriculture shows that all recorded catches of *Atuhong* and eighty-five percent of recorded *Tanguisson* catch were caught by SCUBA fishing.

Not only does the impact of SCUBA fishing harm the livelihoods of all fishermen, but our tourism economy is suffering as well. Snorkeling and recreational scuba diving are significant industries on our island. With disappearing fish stocks, our reefs weaken. We must act now if we hope to save our fisheries and reefs from ecological collapse.

The bill also ends the use of SCUBA when capturing live fish (often with the intent to sell to private collectors). This practice was recently banned in Hawaii after the industry grew large and



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destructive. It's important we regulate the practice in Guam before it too becomes an unsustainable, harmful force here.

Bill 53-35 also aims to improve safety for all fishermen. Currently, SCUBA fishing is reducing fish populations found at shallower depths, forcing all fishermen, including free-divers, to go deeper. This is extremely dangerous for free-divers, and also unsafe for SCUBA fishermen who will need to chase depleting fish populations to ever greater depths.

The solution cannot simply be to dive deeper and deeper, indefinitely, while fish stocks die off. The solution must focus on sustainability. We need to practice inafa'maolek.

Our ancestors faced challenges in the past, and they managed fish stocks accordingly. They were wise stewards, who preserved the environment and their fishing practices for us. Now it's our turn to come together, take responsibility, and preserve our resources and cultural way of life for future generations.

I view Bill 53-35 as a continuation of this practice. This is our community coming together to establish shared rules that apply to all of us.

SCUBA fishing is certainly not the only risk we face. Climate change, pollution, erosion and storm run-offs also threaten our waters. We absolutely need to do more. We need better enforcement of existing laws, and we need to invest in education. I thank our new Director of the Department of Agriculture for taking great strides on this front. But we nevertheless still need a SCUBA fishing ban if we want meaningful change.

The ban proposed by Bill 53-35 has already been adopted in 63 nations/jurisdictions, including the CNMI. This is a tested and sensible approach, supported by most Pacific island nations. We should follow the lead of our sister islands and end this destructive practice that is not cultural, not historical, not safe, and not sustainable.

The decisions we make now will have far-reaching implications. If we fail to address our dying reefs, our people will lose a practice that defines us; future schoolchildren will have to go to the Guam Museum to learn about peskadots. But if we take action now, we not only preserve our fishing culture, but we can help it thrive again in a sustainable and economically viable way. I only hope it's not too late.

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