

Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City
TWENTIETH CONGRESS
First Regular Session



HOUSE BILL NO. 9233

Introduced by **REP. BERNADETTE "DETTE" G. ESCUDERO**

AN ACT
DECLARING THE MUNICIPALITY OF DONSOL, PROVINCE OF SORSOGON,
AS THE CAPITAL FOR BUTANDING INTERACTION AND CONSERVATION
IN THE PHILIPPINES

EXPLANATORY NOTE

Certain natural wonders inspire awe as profoundly as the *butanding*, the largest fish in the world, yet among the gentlest of marine giants. Known for its immense size, calm presence, and striking white-and-gray spotted patterns, the *butanding* is one of the most majestic and recognizable species in the ocean, prized not only for its beauty and rarity, but also for its ecological importance.¹

The Municipality of Donsol, Province of Sorsogon, has long been identified with the *butanding* and has earned national and international recognition as the country's foremost destination for whale shark interaction. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), in its case study on Philippine best practices in sustainable tourism, described Donsol's whale shark interaction program as the Philippines' most successful ecotourism product. Its distinction has likewise been affirmed by major recognitions, including TIME Magazine's "Best Place for an Animal Encounter" in 2004 and the 11th Kalakbay Award in 2003 for the eco-tourism product category.²

This measure is necessary because Donsol is not merely a place where tourists occasionally encounter *butanding*, but a locality that has built, over time, a model of ethical and conservation-based wildlife tourism. That commitment is reflected in Donsol's Municipal Ordinance No. 12, series of 1998, which protected the *butanding*, declared Donsol's municipal waters a sanctuary for the species, and vested upon the local government the authority to operate, control, and manage the community-based ecotourism program. This legal and policy foundation is further borne out by data reported by WWF-Philippines in 2024, showing that Donsol accounted for 40% of the

¹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (2024, June 16). *What is the biggest fish in the ocean?* National Ocean Service. <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/bigfish.html>

² Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. (2006, July). *Best practices in sustainable tourism management initiatives for APEC economies (Chapter 6, Philippines)*. <https://www.apec.org/docs/default-source/Publications/2006/7/Best-Practices-in-Sustainable-Tourism-Management-Initiatives-for-APEC-Economies-July-2006/TOC/Chapter-6-The-Philippines.pdf>

2,024 whale shark sightings recorded in the Philippines since 2007, underscoring its central role in the country's marine conservation efforts.³

Declaring Donsol as the Capital for Butanding Interaction and Conservation in the Philippines is to accord formal legislative recognition to its established role as a leading center of ethical, responsible, and sustainable ecotourism. The term "interaction" is particularly apt, as *butanding* are migratory species whose seasonal presence in Donsol reflects their natural movement consistent with the municipality's non-intrusive ecotourism program. Thus, the bill does more than confer a title but provides a clear policy signal that can strengthen destination identity, enhance visitor confidence, and encourage greater public and private investment in tourism facilities, conservation initiatives, and local enterprise. The measure is likewise justified by its economic and social impact. Data from the Donsol Tourism Office, as cited by the Philippine News Agency, showed that the pre-pandemic 2019 *butanding* season generated ₱448 million in gross revenues and around 13,000 tourist arrivals, with substantial benefits flowing to the local community and the local government. These figures demonstrate that responsible tourism, when properly managed, can protect wildlife while creating dignified livelihoods, drawing investment, and expanding opportunities for local residents.⁴

Ultimately, this bill affirms a recognized model of development that our country may well uphold with pride, one in which tourism safeguards wildlife, sustains livelihoods, attracts investment, and empowers communities to become faithful stewards of nature. Having earned various distinction through years of conservation, responsible tourism, and community-driven progress, it is both just and timely for Congress to accord formal and lasting recognition to the Municipality of Donsol, Province of Sorsogon, by declaring it the Capital for Butanding Interaction and Conservation in the Philippines.

In view of the foregoing, the approval of this bill is earnestly sought.



HON. BERNADETTE "DETTE" G. ESCUDERO

Representative
1st District, Sorsogon

³ Recebido, B. (2024, January 25). *Whale shark sightings signal start of 'butanding' season in Donsol*. Philippine Information Agency. <https://pia.gov.ph/news/whale-shark-sightings-signal-start-of-butanding-season-in-donsol/>

⁴ Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. (1998, March 25). *BFAR Administrative Order No. 193, s. 1998: Ban on the taking or catching, selling, purchasing, transporting and exporting of whale sharks and manta rays*. Supreme Court E-Library. <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/10/37983>

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Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

1 **SECTION 1. Declaration of Policy.** It is the policy of the State to promote and
2 support the conservation, protection, and sustainable management of the country's
3 marine biodiversity and coastal resources, including threatened, vulnerable, and
4 ecologically significant species such as whale sharks or *butanding* and their habitats,
5 in order to preserve ecological balance, maintain the health and productivity of marine
6 ecosystems, and secure for present and future generations the benefits derived
7 therefrom.

8
9 Pursuant thereto, the State shall recognize the Municipality of Donsol, Province of
10 Sorsogon, as a premier center for responsible and eco-sensitive tourism, anchored on
11 the conservation, protection, and sustainable management of *butanding* and its
12 habitat, while advancing community-based livelihood opportunities for its residents
13 and ensuring the balanced development of tourism in a manner consistent with
14 ecological integrity, cultural preservation, and inclusive local economic growth.

15
16 **SEC. 2. Donsol as the Butanding Capital of the Philippines.** In recognition
17 of its status as the country's premier and most iconic destination for *butanding*
18 interaction and conservation-based ecotourism, the Municipality of Donsol, Province
19 of Sorsogon, is hereby declared as the Butanding Capital of the Philippines.

20
21 **SEC. 3. Effectivity.** This Act shall take effect immediately following the
22 completion of its publication in the Official Gazette or in two (2) newspapers of general
23 circulation.

Approved,