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The government should stop spending so much of its time focusing on potential ocean carbon trading schemes because the jury is still out on whether the country’s waters absorb or emit carbon, an expert in the field said on Thursday.

“There has been a huge misunderstanding in the public at large that our oceans can absorb CO2 [carbon dioxide]. Contrary to that claim, much research has shown that Indonesia’s waters release carbon dioxide” instead of absorbing it, said Alan Koropitan, an ocean expert from the Bogor Institute of Agriculture (IPB).

In May this year, former Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Minister Freddy Numberi told the World Ocean Conference in Manado, North Sulawesi, that Indonesia’s oceans could absorb 66.9 million metric tons of carbon dioxide per year and coastal areas could absorb an additional 245.6 million tons of carbon dioxide a year.

The statement drew sharp criticism from civil society groups, which accused the government of laying the groundwork to commercialize oceans and coastal areas for financial gain while neglecting the welfare of traditional fishermen.

Alan said while oceans do have the potential to absorb carbon dioxide, industrialization has rendered some unable to absorb the greenhouse gas, and those seas now release carbon dioxide into the air instead.

“In order to know whether oceans absorb or release carbon dioxide into the air we
should consider the whole marine carbonate system, not just empirical methods, which should not be hastily implemented in Indonesia’s waters,” he said.

The marine carbonate system is the system by which carbon passes from the atmosphere to the biosphere and oceans, and back again.

According to Alan, Indonesia’s waters have become a source of carbon dioxide rather than a storage resource because their temperature is much hotter than that of southern oceans.

“Much research has proven that southern oceans, which are subtropical, are a carbon sink because their temperature is cooler, while our water areas are tropical,” Alan said.

“So, it is very dangerous to claim that our oceans could absorb millions of tons of carbon dioxide annually,” he said.

Alan added that scientists were still debating whether oceans were able to sequester carbon dioxide and store it like growing forests do.

“The government should not have brought up the idea before scientists reached agreement on the issue. They should just focus on how to deal with rising sea levels and changes in weather patterns as a result of global warming,” he said.