

Much more than “fish and ships”

The oceans are suffering. The main source of food for two billion people, a key element in climate control and a largely untapped reserve of vital resources, they deserve to be managed better. This is why the United Nations has decided to celebrate the first ever World Ocean Day on the 8th of June.

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The Great Barrier Reef, off Australia's north-east coast. The world's largest coral complex is under threat of disappearing.

When the ocean makes the headlines, the news usually concerns a threat to biodiversity, a crisis in the fishing industry or an oil-spill accident. These are important issues, but are only part of the much bigger story that needs telling.

As our understanding of the climate system improves, we realize the complex yet essential role of the ocean plays in its regulation. Because of its capacity to store heat, the ocean is not only the engine of weather but also the memory of climate. Life on earth originated in the margins of the primordial ocean and for millions of years evolved in this aquatic milieu. The ocean is the ultimate global commons providing essential ecological services that make life possible on our planet. Humankind has strong fundamental reasons to revere the ocean, as ancient civilizations intuitively did.

But our everyday behavior falls far short from this serene ideal. As the current piracy crisis has revealed - and despite the 1982 United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) - there are many gaps in the governance in this unique international space. UNCLOS provides an integrated legal framework on which to build sound and effective regulations to the different uses of the ocean, which have been implemented by the UN specialized agencies and programs over the last 30 years. Nevertheless, severe limitations exist for

monitoring and enforcing these regulations. National and international institutions are fundamentally weak. They are usually compartmentalized on a sector by sector division of duties and responsibilities, leaving little room for integrated policy-making addressing issues that cut across several domains.

Thus, despite progress, many major challenges remain to be addressed. Regulation of High Seas or trans-zonal fisheries is one of them. There is also increasing concern that many fisheries practices are unsustainable and that global fisheries generally are facing a major crisis.

Major challenges

Unsustainable uses are posing a danger to many special habitats as well, especially in the coastal environment and including mangroves, estuaries, coral-reefs and underwater mountains, which are hot-spots of marine biodiversity. The illegal traffic of people, arms and drugs via the High Seas is increasing.

Absorbing millions of tons of CO₂ every year - one third of total annual emissions - the ocean has already spared us from catastrophic climate change. But in doing so, its own intrinsic balances are being altered: it is becoming more acidic and has taken the largest fraction of the additional heat generated by climate change, something that might eventually alter the normal patterns of ocean circulation that are so essential for keeping CO₂ out of contact from the atmosphere.

Because of these alarming trends, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 decided to keep the oceans under permanent review via global and integrated assessments of the state of the seas. This is the most comprehensive initiative undertaken by the UN system yet to improve Ocean Governance. In 2005 the UN General Assembly through resolution 60/30, requested UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to take the lead in getting this process started. The report of three years of work is ready and has been distributed to the United Nations Member States and the general public. Later this year, in the emblematic UN Headquarters building in New York, a Working Group of the whole composed by all members of the UN will consider this report and propose a course of action to the 64th Session of the General Assembly. A positive endorsement will open the way for the first Global Integrated Assessment of the Ocean to be conducted by the UN system for 2014-15, the two years when the Commission on Sustainable Development will conduct a review of oceans and coastal issues. Given the high stakes, failure to do so is not an acceptable option.

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