Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

OUTLOOK

The prospects for the achievement of this goal hinge on successful conservation and sustainability of marine and coastal ecosystems while maintaining the economic, food security and livelihood benefits of marine resources. Oceans, seas and coastal systems provide invaluable support to the planet for food security, transport, energy, tourism and many of the most critical ecosystem services, including climate. However, climate change, overfishing, habitat change, invasive species introduction and pollution arising from poor management practices and market failures are threatening ocean health, with serious harmful and irreversible consequences.

THE PHOTO

Boy in wooden goggles catches fish off Atauro Island, Timor-Leste

Photo credit: Martine Perret/United Nations
INSIGHTS

• About 85 per cent of the global fish stocks are fully fished, overfished or have collapsed. The contribution of fisheries as a vital resource for livelihoods, employment, nutrition and opportunities for economic growth faces serious risks. The main drivers of overfishing must be tackled, such as fishing vessel overcapacity, perverse subsidies and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. There are also serious human rights violations in the fisheries industry, including human trafficking and labour exploitation, that must be confronted.

• As much as an estimated 40 per cent of the world’s oceans are heavily affected by human activities, including nutrient-based pollution, marine debris and plastics and loss of coastal habitats, resulting in coastal hypoxia and loss of marine biodiversity and other ecosystem goods and services. These reflect poor management practices and underscore the need to directly target land-ocean interaction.

• Warmer air and sea surface temperatures, ocean acidification and rising sea levels are expected to cause significant loss of coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass and intertidal habitats. Such losses will further threaten ecosystem health and expose coastal populations to increased harm from natural disasters, threats to basic human rights (such as food and fresh water) and population displacement. The small island developing States of the Pacific are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and require the most urgent attention.

• For comprehensive future monitoring of SDG 14, statistics are needed on a broader range of benefits and challenges related to conservation and the sustainable use of marine resources. Current scientific knowledge on the complex marine ecosystems is too limited to develop complete coverage of indicators for monitoring ocean sustainability, compounded by the limited data for existing indicators.

BRIGHT SPOTS

Conservation and sustainability of marine and coastal ecosystems

• Fisheries management and the economic value derived from fisheries for small island developing States is improving in the region. Conventional fisheries management is shifting from an orientation towards single-species maximization (such as maximum sustainable yield) to an ecosystem approach that is broader in scope, encompassing biological, environmental, economic and social objectives.

• A growing number of marine protected areas have been created to protect threatened species and important habitats. Many countries in the region have started protecting large expanses of their coastal and oceanic waters; the most notable is Palau, which recently enacted the Palau National Marine Sanctuary Law, which declares 80 per cent of its waters as a no-take
fishing zone.³ The Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries and Food Security, a multilateral partnership, aims to contribute towards achieving SDG 14 targets by sustaining marine and coastal resources (participating countries are Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste).

- Strengthening the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the negotiation of a new global treaty for the conservation of oceans and seas presents an opportunity to close current gaps in ocean governance. At the same time, support for country compliance with existing regional and global multilateral agreements provides a framework for achieving the SDG targets.

- The durability of most plastics combined with inadequate end-of-life management has resulted in marine plastics and microplastics becoming a global problem.⁴ The Ocean Cleanup is developing advanced technologies to remove about half of the “Great Pacific garbage patch” in ten years.

Use of coastal and marine resources

- Efforts to improve economic benefits from fisheries among small island developing States in the Pacific have made some progress. The strengthening of the Vessel Day Scheme,⁵ for instance, has increased the access-fee revenue paid by tuna fishing vessels,⁶ from $60 million in 2010 (when the scheme reached full implementation) to more than $400 million in 2015.⁷ Revenues are expected to increase further as the eight countries in that scheme continue to negotiate higher fees within the context of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Convention to ensure resource sustainability. There have been numerous attempts in all Pacific island countries to encourage small-scale fishers to harvest larger amounts of tuna.

HOTSPOTS

Harvesting and overfishing

- Effectively addressing overfishing is likely to be the biggest challenge, considering the complexity of the drivers. Reducing illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing requires political will. Weak laws, poor governance and ineffective fisheries management have made coastal fisheries in most of the region largely open access and overfished. Some countries, such as Indonesia, have taken strong positive action.

- Governance of the fisheries sector is generally poor, and in some countries, it is undermined by corruption. Many governments have neglected the management and sustainability of coastal fisheries, which thus threatens the food security and livelihoods of coastal communities.

- With high unemployment, particularly among youth in the Pacific, the fisheries sector has been an employer of last resort, and limits to entry are unlikely in the face of widespread unemployment and underemployment.
Climate change impacts

- Climate-related variables are worsening and endangering the lives, livelihoods, food security and other ecosystem services of the small island developing States and the regions with large riverine and low-lying coastal areas, such as Bangladesh and Viet Nam.

- Sea levels are now rising at an accelerating rate. Unless greenhouse gas emissions are drastically reduced by 2050, sea levels will rise by a metre by 2100. Continual global warming is putting at risk coral reefs, which are the most productive coastal ecosystems. More intense and more frequent typhoons and cyclones are increasing the loss of life and destroying natural and economic assets.

Marine pollution

- Reduction of land-based pollution and marine debris, including ocean plastics, poses challenges to the overarching goal of industrialization by most Asian countries. The coasts will continue to be pollution sinks without dramatic consumption or waste management changes.

Coastal and marine conservation

- While the geographic extent of marine-protected areas has increased by roughly sevenfold (between 2000 and 2014), the areal coverage still falls below the target. Most marine protected areas are largely “paper parks” with non-existent management plans; where they exist, implementation is hampered by lack of funds.

Emerging issues

- Rather than a comprehensive global regime for conserving marine ecosystems in areas beyond national jurisdiction, there is currently a complex patchwork of regional agreements on fisheries and specific frameworks that address some threats to marine biodiversity (such as marine pollution). Discussions on a new global treaty to protect marine biodiversity called for at the Rio+20 summit represent a significant opportunity to take on this challenge.

- While Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu are emerging as world leaders in the granting of licences for the mining of seabed minerals (only Papua New Guinea has granted licences for exploitation, the remaining licences are exploratory), the management and regulation of deep seabed mining according to the precautionary principle is a critical emerging issue in the Pacific. Domestic environmental management appears currently inadequate to ensure the protection of marine ecosystems.

- The leaders of the Forty-Seventh Pacific Islands Forum welcomed the Paris Agreement and reiterated that achieving the goal of limiting global temperature increases to 1.5°C above pre-industrialized levels is an existential matter for many Forum members but must be addressed with urgency.
14.1 By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution

14.2 By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans

14.3 Minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels

14.4 By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics

14.5 By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information

14.6 By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation

14.7 By 2030, increase the economic benefits to small island developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism

14.a Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology, taking into account the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology, in order to improve ocean health and to enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular small island developing States and least developed countries

14.b Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets

14.c Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides the legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources, as recalled in paragraph 158 of “The future we want”