

Environmental concern is rightly growing, as is genuine fear that — if we do not change our ways — the damage we inflict on our planet will render it incapable of sustaining, for future generations, the economy to which we have grown accustomed. Pressure is mounting for every potential polluter, every energy user and every conspicuous contributor to global warming to clean up their acts and adopt greener practices.

Since it began functioning in 1959, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) — the United Nations specialized agency with responsibility for safety and security at sea and prevention of marine pollution by ships — has adopted a wide range of measures to prevent and control such pollution and to mitigate the effects of any damage from maritime operations.

Statistics show that shipping is the least environmentally damaging mode of transport, when its productive value is taken into consideration: the vast quantity of grain required for the world's daily bread, for example, could not be transported any other way. And set against land-based industry, shipping is a comparatively minor overall contributor to marine pollution.

IMO adopted the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, universally known as MARPOL, in 1973. Much expanded and updated, it remains the most important international convention covering such pollution, whether from operational or accidental causes. Its six annexes set out regulations on pollution from ships by oil; by noxious liquid substances carried in bulk; by harmful substances carried by sea in packaged form; by sewage; by garbage; and of the air. With other measures, it has laid the foundation for substantial and continued pollution reductions — despite a massive increase in world seaborne trade. The average number of spills of over 700 tonnes of oil from ships each year, for example, shrank from over 25 in the 1970s to just 3.7 in the 2000s.

MARPOL advocates a global approach, but recognizes that some areas need greater protection than others. So it defines “Special Areas” of sea, with very strict mandatory anti-pollution measures. Meanwhile IMO has adopted criteria for identifying and designating “Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas”, requiring an even higher degree of protection because of their particular ecological, socio-economic or scientific significance and vulnerability to damage by international maritime activities.

IMO's safety related conventions — such as the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) — help to ensure that accidents do not happen in the first place, while other environmental conventions cover preparedness, response and co-operation in tackling pollution by oil and hazardous and noxious substances — and the right of States to intervene on the high seas to prevent, mitigate or eliminate danger to their coastlines or related interests from pollution following a maritime casualty.

In February 2004, IMO adopted the Ballast Water Management Convention, addressing the immense damage that can be caused by microscopic aquatic life transported around the world in this way and deposited in alien local ecosystems, threatening to disrupt their delicate balance. And a convention banning the use of harmful anti-fouling paint on ships' hulls will enter into force next September,

There was a major change of approach on regulating the use of the sea as a depository for wastes, when, in March 2006, a protocol to the 1972 Convention



on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter entered into force. Effectively, dumping is now prohibited, except for materials on an approved list. Last May IMO adopted a new convention on the removal of wrecks that may present a hazard to navigation or a threat to marine and coastal environments — or both — and it is developing a new mandatory instrument on ship recycling, due for adoption in 2009.

Atmospheric pollution now presents perhaps the most significant environmental threat. IMO is reviewing the existing MARPOL Annex VI, which sets limits on sulphur oxide and nitrogen oxide emissions from ship



# ship

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Meanwhile, UNEP has developed a series of regional action plans — including regional conventions to protect the marine and coastal environment and protocols on combating marine pollution in an emergency. IMO has helped formulate these protocols and ensured an important degree of harmonization of their relevant provisions. It has also become involved in the aftermath of marine pollution incidents from other sources, collaborating with other United Nations agencies where appropriate. In 2006, for example, it helped to draw up and implement an action plan to help the Lebanese authorities clean up coastal oil pollution following an air-strike on a refinery. The plan was agreed at an international meeting convened by IMO and UNEP, and its execution supervised by the IMO-administered Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Centre for the Mediterranean Sea (REMPEC) and Lebanon's Minister of the Environment.

REMPEC was the world's first regional centre under UNEP's Regional Seas Programme, which IMO wholly supports. Shipping is a world-wide industry requiring internationally agreed standards and rules. Regional co-operation and collaboration are important in promoting global, uniform and effective implementation and enforcement of international standards, the key objective of IMO's global technical co-operation programme.

IMO also links with UNEP via the Regional Marine Pollution Emergency, Information and Training Center for the Wider Caribbean Region (REMPEITC-Carib), which helps the region's countries prevent, prepare for and respond to major pollution incidents. The two agencies are also partners, with others, in the UN Group of Experts on Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP) and in the UN system-wide Environmental Management Group. And the GloBallast Partnerships project to help developing countries reduce the transfer of harmful aquatic organisms in ballast water — executed by IMO, in partnership with the Global Environment Facility and the United Nations Development Programme — relies on UNEP's support through its Regional Seas Programme offices.

These examples of co-operation highlight how IMO's work in protecting the marine environment must be part of a broad-based effort in which everyone has a responsibility and a role to play, a concept reflected in the maxim: "Think globally — act locally".

This year the IMO Council selected environmental issues to be the theme for World Maritime Day, celebrated on 27 September 2007. They have been the centrepiece of a host of IMO activities and initiatives to educate people; increase their awareness about the true, and deteriorating, state of the planet; and help us all to become responsible citizens. For, when it comes to the environment, what everyone does, every day, really does matter. 

exhausts; prohibits deliberate emissions of ozone-depleting substances; and puts a global cap on the sulphur content of fuel oil. When this revision is completed, it will also cover particulate matter and volatile organic compounds.

IMO also has an action plan to reduce ships' emissions of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide, which are not covered in the annex. It is co-operating closely with international shipping and UN bodies to ensure that the issue is tackled truly internationally, avoiding unhelpful unilateral regional or national action.