

rethink,

UNEP's oceans and coasts programme has long been one of its flagships. It continues to be strong, but converging pressures are forcing it — and the international community — to rethink marine and coastal governance. The first, fundamental pressure comes from the research of a scientific community employing a new wealth of high-tech methodologies and instruments. Over the past decade, scientists have produced a series of alarming reports on emerging threats to marine and coastal ecosystems and to the well-being of the billions of people living near the oceans. The most prominent is global climate change, affecting ocean circulation, chemical and nutrient cycles, ocean acidity, ocean temperature and sea level. Another is the proliferation of 'dead zones' — areas, which can encompass 100,000 sq km of ocean, where algal blooms, stimulated by fertilizers and sewage, have consumed all the oxygen in the water and snuffed out life.

The high seas are also threatened. Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing has thwarted international efforts to make their fisheries sustainable — while examination of the seabed has revealed that fragile deep sea ecosystems are being destroyed, perhaps permanently, as seamounts are ravaged by heavy trawls. Scientists have also continued to document other threats and their causes, such as the growing coastal impact of urbanization and tourism, over-exploitation, and ever-increasing marine pollution from both maritime and land-based activities. The science can no longer be ignored by policy-makers or the public.

A second source of pressure comes from civil society — international NGOs, think tanks and other groups — which has raised an outcry in response to these findings and has called for a host of new initiatives and actions to address the threats. And the greater international community provides a third.

Encouraged by larger-scale UN reforms, UNEP and its partners have recognised that conventional governance in the field of oceans and coasts has not brought us to where we should, and could, be. Many promising initiatives are stagnating in the face of institutional inertia, competition with other development interests, and turf battles and fragmentation among various bureaucracies.

As a result, interests as diverse as the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the UN General Assembly, governments, environmental NGOs, a dozen UN agencies and a multitude of other stakeholders have demanded a new approach to international environmental governance. This, in turn, requires us to rethink our approach to marine issues from the bottom up, to realign and strengthen existing forces, and to redirect our efforts toward a new set of goals.



realign, redirect

by Ibrahim Thiaw

UNEP is therefore revising its priorities, as part of a new strategy for 2010-2013, in response to the challenges revealed by science. The strategy identifies ecosystem management as one of its six principle objectives, and UNEP has launched a process to identify elements within its divisions, which can contribute to a coherent marine and coastal programme which addresses this.

As part of this effort, it held a consultative — rethinking — meeting in August 2007 to: analyse emerging oceans and coastal issues; outline UNEP's capacities and potential; set some new priorities for the marine and coastal programme; and identify areas of work that need continued, and perhaps increased, attention. These priority areas, in turn, include: pollution from land-based activities; the physical alteration and destruction of habitats, including by aquaculture; the impact of climate change on oceans and coasts; marine and coastal biodiversity, including the deep seas; environmental aspects of fisheries, high seas and seabed management and governance; the vulnerability of islands; and chemicals and other hazardous substances affecting the marine environment.

Untold human and financial resources are wasted through duplicated, uncoordinated — and sometimes conflicting — efforts by UN agencies, international organizations, global conventions, regional and national authorities and others. The UN is tackling this problem through a reform initiative, called the 'One-UN' process, in which system-wide resources are used in concert. In keeping with this, UNEP is undergoing an intense process of self-reflection and organizational learning to create closer, more results-oriented partnerships among its divisions.

UNEP's work on marine and coastal issues has in the past taken place primarily within two programme areas — the Regional Seas Programme (RSP) and the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities (GPA). The RSP brings together governments from 17 regions, the scientific community, intergovernmental organizations and other stakeholders to assess marine environmental problems, and devise strategies, policies and management tools to deal with them. The GPA assists States in taking action at the national, regional or global level through a number of capacity building and technical programmes.

UNEP will continue to build on these programmes' undeniable strengths but will also develop new monitoring networks, identify pollution sources, and assess marine pollution, marine biodiversity, and coastal zone development in the light of its new priority areas. It will work more closely and actively with the marine-related Multilateral Environmental Agreements, and with the scientific programmes of its international partners.

The international community is now turning its attention to emerging priorities. The United Nations General Assembly has, for example, called on the international community to take urgent measures to protect deep-sea corals, seamounts and other vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems from the impact of bottom trawl fishing and other destructive practices on the high seas. Similarly, the Millennium Development Goals have offered a potential solution to problem of competition between development interests by linking poverty with oceans and coastal issues.

UNEP's consultative meeting came up with a new list of priority issues, some familiar and some new. Pollution from land-based activities and from hazardous substances has long been of concern, but new attention is now being paid to the problem of the physical alteration and destruction of coastal habitats. The impact of climate change on oceans and coasts, the vulnerability of small islands, and the loss of biodiversity in the deep seas are rapidly moving up the list as new scientific evidence pours in. And the priorities also address the plight of coastal human populations over such economic issues as fisheries and the exploitation of the high seas and seabed.

Under GPA's mandate, UNEP is focusing much of its attention and resources on problems related to population increase and construction in coastal areas and resulting habitat destruction through its the Physical Alteration and Destruction of Habitats Programme.

The RSP, meanwhile, is one of UNEP's key instruments for implementing the decisions of global intergovernmental forums on these issues — but it can only fulfil this role if its scientific credibility is acknowledged. It has recently adopted a new set of strategic directions, and is strengthening its scientific underpinnings with greater emphasis on monitoring and assessment and on cooperation with UNEP's scientific partners and specialized agencies. Individual regional programmes are being asked to improve their scientific base and their capacity to follow scientific issues. It is also devoting more effort into assessing the impact of climate change on the marine and coastal environment — and the likely knock-on effects on fisheries, tourism, human health, marine biodiversity, coastal erosion, and small islands ecosystems — to provide data to underpin new regional adaptation strategies.

Whatever its approach, alignment and direction, UNEP's coastal and oceans work must continue to be firmly grounded in science. Crucial emerging issues identified by scientists must find their way more quickly onto its shortlist of priorities. More than ever we need to understand what is happening to the marine environment, so we can take effective and concerted action before entire ecosystems reach 'tipping points', leaving no way to undo the damage. 

