

reflections

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Ducie atoll will not be familiar to most readers of *Our Planet*, but perhaps it should be. In many ways this tiny uninhabited speck at the far end of a Pacific island chain symbolizes the challenges of trying to sustainably manage the world's seas and oceans. A few years ago scientists recording new species on nearby Pitcairn Island went to Ducie out of curiosity. In a morning's stroll they catalogued almost 1,000 items of litter and rubbish — from old bread crates to plastic bags, a punctured football, discarded meat tins, and two toy cars.

This unattractive haul, collected almost 6,000 kilometres from the nearest continent is bad enough. But perhaps even more cause for alarm is the often invisible pollution and sustained over-exploitation of marine resources. Some months ago, UNEP launched its flagship report — Global Environment Outlook-4. Its point of departure is the 1987 Brundtland Commission. GEO-4 asks how we have fared in the past two decades. The answer, including on marine issues, is 'not very well'. In 1987 collapsed fisheries numbered 15 per cent globally. GEO-4 says this has now roughly doubled to 30 per cent. Twenty years ago a fifth of fish stocks were over-exploited; this has now risen to about 40 per cent. In 2004, there were around 149 dead zone sites — often vast areas of seasonal, occasional or even permanent de-oxygenated water. New assessments put the total at 200.

The case of dead zones and of Ducie atoll underline a further reality: managing a transition back to healthy and productive seas and oceans will require the international community to address the link between activities on land and their impacts on the marine world. Sewage, solid wastes and fertilizers, sediments, chemicals and even nuclear materials almost inevitably migrate to coastal waters. Scientists are also increasingly concerned about the impacts of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide, which may trigger acidification of the seas, affecting corals and shellfish and, indeed, knock the entire food chain.

Among the central international responses to marine management are the UNEP Regional Seas and the UNEP Global Programme of Action (GPA). More than 60 countries — including Bangladesh, Barbados, Costa Rica, India and the Philippines — have developed action programmes, many of which have led to revised or new laws on coastal policy, water policy and integrated coastal management. Rehabilitation of coastal ecosystems, for example mangroves, is happening in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nigeria and Sri Lanka, and the designation of marine protected areas, a potentially important management option, is accelerating from a pitifully low level. Mexico, for example, has established significant areas in the past five years.



The economic benefits can be significant. In Fiji, no-take zones and better management of marine areas has increased species such as mangrove lobsters by 250 per cent a year, with annual increases of 120 per cent in nearby waters. Meanwhile, the integration of coastal and inland river basin management is also evolving. The Global Environment Facility is supporting this approach, as well as integrated management of shared living marine resources in the Caribbean. There are many success stories. And there is cause for optimism in other fora, such as in the World Trade Organization with respect to fisheries subsidies. But, as GEO-4 concludes, while we have rolled the multilateral response out across many sustainability challenges, including marine, we have not matched the magnitude or the pace of the challenge.

Part of the response must come from partnerships between the UN, governments, business, civil society and citizens. I am pleased that the work of the GPA, for example, has been endorsed by industry bodies, including those covering dredging and ports and harbours. The response must also include monitoring, compliance and enforcement of existing agreements, backed by the resources needed to realize their potential.

The key missing link is economics. The world must learn to truly value marine ecosystems and safeguard their enormous income generating potential. Sometimes these economic benefits are overlooked. Take the parrot fish as an example. In Kenya, the Watamu Marine Reserve is a magnet for tourists keen to experience its classic blue sea and bright white sand. According to local naturalist Richard Bennett, parrot fish chomping on coral heads each generate one kilogram of fine white sand a day. Remove parrot fish from the equation by polluting or over fishing and you not only say goodbye to attractive marine organisms, but goodbye sand, tourists and economically important foreign exchange.

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Cover photo © SHINICHI EGUCHI/ amana images/ Gallo Images/ Getty Images. Complex, beautiful, awe-inspiring, yet fragile, the marine environment is the theme of this edition of *Our Planet*. Seen from space, Earth is the blue planet. Oceans cover around 71 per cent of the Earth's surface, and are home to a vast proportion of the world's wildlife and plants. But the world's oceans and seas — from the Antarctic to the Caribbean — are under increasing pressure from pollution, global warming and species depletion. Preserving their fragile ecosystems is a key component of reversing the planet's environmental decline.