



## **WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY MESSAGE** **by Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of UNEP**

### **Wanted! Seas and Oceans: Dead or Alive?** **5 June 2004**

Seen from space, our planet is blue, testament to the oceans that cover 70 per cent of its surface. We know this because of the billions of dollars that have been spent in recent decades exploring our solar system and beyond. The irony of this continuing passion for exploring humanity's place in the universe is that there is a neglected and largely unknown frontier here on Earth about which we know too little.

Earth's seas and oceans remain largely a mystery. Sixty per cent of the planet is covered by ocean more than a mile deep, the vast majority of which is unexplored. Yet, our ignorance is not preventing our blind exploitation of what we are increasingly learning is a fragile and finite resource. More than 70 per cent of the world's marine fisheries are now fished up to or beyond their sustainable limit. Across the world, diners are finding new species of fish on menus as traditional fare becomes ever more scarce, while artisanal fishing communities, who harvest half the world's fish catch, are seeing their livelihoods increasingly threatened by illegal, unregulated or subsidized commercial fleets. At the same time, needlessly destructive fishing practices are killing hundreds of thousands of marine species each year and helping to destroy important undersea habitats.

Another threat to marine life and to human health and livelihoods is pollution. Eighty per cent of all pollution in the seas comes from land-based activities. Three-quarters of the world's megacities are located by the sea, and 40 per cent of the world's population now lives within 60 kilometres of a coast. Death and disease caused by polluted coastal waters costs the global economy \$12.8 billion a year. The annual economic impact of hepatitis from tainted seafood alone is \$7.2 billion. But it is not just coastal dwellers and industries that pollute the oceans. Rivers that run into the sea carry silt, untreated sewage, industrial waste and the assorted rubbish of consumers from far inland. Each year tons of discarded plastic products find their way into the oceans, killing hundreds of thousands of marine mammals and ocean-going birds, and untold numbers of fish. This waste is not only deadly, it is persistent. Animals killed by plastic waste decompose, but the plastic does not. Instead it remains in the ecosystem to kill again and again.

Also adding to the ocean's woes are surplus agricultural fertilizers which, when washed downstream, are creating a growing number of coastal dead zones where algal blooms regularly consume all the oxygen in the water. Then there is global warming, which is raising sea levels and temperatures. Climate change threatens to destroy the majority of the world's coral reefs, wreak havoc on the fragile economies of small island developing states, and devastate the lives of billions of people who live within range of the increasingly fierce and frequent storms, hurricanes and typhoons that are battering coasts worldwide.

All this adds up to a picture of an ecosystem in crisis. That is why UNEP chose **Wanted! Seas and Oceans: Dead or Alive?** as the theme for World Environment Day 2004. The message is simple. We have a choice: act now to save our marine resources, or watch as the rich diversity of life in our seas and oceans declines beyond the point of recovery.

The good news is that not only is there increasing global awareness of the crisis facing our seas and oceans, there is growing commitment to do something about it. A series of time-bound targets were agreed by governments at the World Summit on Sustainable Development to improve fisheries management and develop an ecosystem approach to the sustainable development of the seas and oceans — including the establishment of a representative network of marine protected areas and a regular process for reporting on and assessing the state of the marine environment.

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These targets complement the internationally agreed development goals contained in the Millennium Declaration. Reducing hunger and poverty, and improving the health, education and opportunities of people — especially women and children — throughout the world will go a long way to reducing the burden on the seas and oceans.

UNEP is a key player in many of the mechanisms whereby these goals will be achieved. As well as participating in preparations for the Global Marine Assessment, UNEP has, in the past year, helped alert the global community about the role and status of crucial marine habitats such as seagrass beds, mangroves and cold- and warm-water corals, and the importance of increasing marine protected areas coverage from the current figure of less than one half a per cent of seas and oceans. These habitats will also benefit from the growing strength of the UNEP Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities (GPA) and the UNEP-supported network of regional seas programmes and action plans.

However, none of the many plans for the restoration and sustainable use of the world's seas and oceans will succeed without the active support of all sectors of society. Each year World Environment Day provides an opportunity for individuals, communities, businesses, industries and local and national governments to focus on the world's environmental challenges. This year the spotlight is on seas and oceans. Dead or alive? It's our choice.