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Action Urged to Avoid Deep Trouble in the Deep Seas

UNEP-IUCN Report Charts Ways Forward at UN Meeting

New York, 16 June 2006 - Swift and wide ranging actions are needed to conserve the world's entire marine environment amid fears that humankind's exploitation of the deep seas and open oceans is rapidly passing the point of no return.

The call is made to governments by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in a new report launched today in New York where countries and experts are holding talks on the law of the sea.

The report, entitled *Ecosystems and Biodiversity in Deep Waters and High Seas*, argues that the many lessons learnt on conserving coastal waters should be adapted and applied right across the marine realm, including in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

Achim Steiner, UNEP's Executive Director and until recently IUCN's Director General, said: "Humankind's ability to exploit the deep oceans and high seas has accelerated rapidly over recent years. It is a pace of change that has outstripped our institutions and conservation efforts whose primary focus have been coastal waters where, until recently, most human activity like fishing and industrial exploration took place. We now most urgently need to look beyond the horizon and bring the lessons learnt in coastal water to the wider marine world."

"Well over 60 per cent of the marine world and its rich biodiversity, found beyond the limits of national jurisdiction, is vulnerable and at increasing risk. Governments must urgently develop the guidelines, rules and actions needed to bridge this gulf. Otherwise we stand to lose and to irrevocably damage unique wildlife and critical ecosystems many of which moderate our very existence on the planet," said Ibrahim Thiaw, Acting Director General of IUCN.

With more than 90 per cent of the planet's living biomass—the weight of life—found in the oceans, the report underlines the value of the deep seas and open oceans and highlights how science is only now just getting to grips with the wealth of life, natural resources and ecosystems existing in the marine world.

Less than 10 per cent of the oceans have been explored [90 per cent of the oceans remain unexplored] with only one millionth of the deep sea floor having been subject to biological investigations.

The report, launched at the UN Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea (UNICPOLOS) which feeds into the UN General Assembly, also highlights the way fisheries, pollution and other stresses such as those arising from global climate change are impacting and affecting the marine world.

“Once limited largely to shipping and open ocean fishing, commercial activities at sea are expanding rapidly and plunging ever deeper. Deep sea fishing, bioprospecting, energy development and marine scientific research are already taking place at depths of 2,000 m or more,” says the report’s author, Kristina M. Gjerde, High Seas Policy Advisor to IUCN’s Global Marine Program.

“Throughout the oceans, shipping, military operations and seismic exploration have intensified with growing impacts on deep water and high sea ecosystems and biodiversity. The spectre of climate change and its impacts such as ocean warming and acidification underscore the need to reduce direct human impacts, because healthy ecosystems are better able to respond to changing oceanic conditions,” she adds.

Taking into account the discussions in various international fora and the emerging actions by individual countries, the author outlines options aimed at charting a course for progress into the 21st century for the conservation and sustainable management of the deep seas and open oceans.

This includes actions and measures that reflect an integrated approach to oceans management based on ‘ecological boundaries’ rather than just political ones, giving higher levels of protection to vulnerable species like deep sea fish as well as to biologically and ecologically significant ecosystems such as cold water corals and hydrothermal vent communities.

Other steps include the creation of a “precautionary system of marine protected areas” along with improved impact assessments that reflect the full range of possible human activities across the total marine environment. Both approaches are vital to conserve valuable marine biodiversity and to save poorly studied or understood species - before it is too late.

Some Fingertip Facts about Deep Waters and High Seas from the Report

Deep Waters

- 90% of the oceans are unexplored. Only some 0.0001% of the deep seafloor has been subject to biological investigations.
- About 50% of animals collected from areas deeper than 3,000m are new species.
- Cold-water coral reefs can be up to 8,500 years old, 35m high, 40km long, and 3km wide. They have been found so far off the coast of 41 countries from the poles to deep equatorial waters.
- Communities living on hydrothermal vents and cold seeps obtain their energy from chemicals seeping from the Earth’s crust or ancient sediments. They are examples of life on Earth which does not depend directly on energy from the sun.

Global fishing

- In the last 42 years, capture of wild marine fish for human consumption increased from 20 million tonnes to 84.5 million tonnes, with more than 40% entering international trade.

- Global by-catch amounts to 20 million tons a year, approximately 25% of the fish caught.
- Over half (52%) of the global fish stocks are fully exploited. Overexploited and depleted species have increased from about 10% in the mid 1970s to 24% in 2002.
- Around 3.5 million fishing boats use the world's ocean. 1% of these are classified as large, industrial vessels, which have the capacity to take around 60% of all the fish caught globally.
- Catch from high seas bottom trawl fishing in 2001 was worth an estimated US\$300-400 million, equal to approximately 0.5% of the value of global marine catch. The sector employs an estimated 1,000-2,000 people using around 250-300 vessels (on a full time-equivalent basis).
- The worldwide value of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) catches is estimated between US\$4.9-9.5 billion. Up to 30% of IUU fishing (US\$ 1.2 billion) occurs beyond national jurisdiction.

Threatened marine biodiversity

- Each year, illegal longline fishing kills over 300,000 seabirds, including 100,000 albatrosses. 19 out of 21 albatross species are now threatened with extinction.
- Populations of large fish with high commercial value, such as tuna, cod, swordfish and marlin, have declined by as much as 90% in the past century.
- Orange roughy, a commonly targeted deep sea fish, matures after around 32 years. A specimen of this species was recently found to be approximately 240 years old meaning that it was born about the time of Napoleon Bonaparte's birth.
- Over 46,000 pieces of plastic litter are floating on every square mile of ocean today. In the Central Pacific, there are up to 6 pounds of marine litter to every pound of plankton.

Fingertip Facts

The above facts are a selection of a larger list contained in the report. All facts are taken from various literature sources and do not attempt to be exhaustive. The author is not responsible for the accuracy of these facts.

Notes to Editors

"Electronic versions of the report are available on the home pages of the UNEP Regional Seas Programme (www.unep.org/regionalseas/) and the IUCN Marine Programme (www.iucn.org/themes/marine/index.htm).

About the World Conservation Union (IUCN)

Created in 1948, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) brings together 81 States, 120 government agencies, 800 plus NGOs, and some 10,000 scientists and experts from 181 countries in a unique worldwide partnership. The Union's mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to

conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable.

The Union is the world's largest environmental knowledge network and has helped over 75 countries to prepare and implement national conservation and biodiversity strategies. The Union is a multicultural, multilingual organization with 1,000 staff located in 62 countries. Its headquarters are in Gland, Switzerland.

More information can be found at www.iucn.org.

UNEP's activities in the sustainable management and conservation of the marine and coastal environment are facilitated among others, through its global Regional Seas Programme (RSP) that supports and facilitates collaboration with 14 Regional Seas Conventions and several Action Plans, in total 18 RSPs with over 140 participating countries. In addition, other UNEP actors in this field include the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities (GPA) hosted in The Hague, the Coral Reef Unit and the World Conservation and Monitoring Center (WCMC) hosted in Cambridge, and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) hosted in Montreal.

More information can be found at:

UNEP: www.unep.org
Regional Seas: www.unep.org/regionalseas
GPA: www.gpa.unep.org/bin/php/home/index.php
WCMC: www.unep-wcmc.org
CBD: www.biodiv.org/default.shtml

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