

## Sixty-fourth Session, General Assembly

### Agenda Item 76: Oceans and the Law of the Sea

**Delivered by Mr. Harlan Cohen**  
(Please check against delivery)

**4 December 2009**  
**New York**

Mr. President,

IUCN – The International Union for Conservation of Nature welcomes the resolutions put forward this year for consideration by the General Assembly. The resolutions foresee a number of important meetings during the coming year within the United Nations with respect of Oceans and Law of the Sea and my delegation welcomes this attention. The health of the oceans is crucial to the health of the planet and thus to human health and wellbeing. The Secretary-General noted in his message on World Oceans Day in June of this year that “human activities are taking a terrible toll on the world’s oceans and seas”<sup>1</sup>. My delegation shares this concern.

Climate change is a grave threat to our health and to our safety. The effects of climate change are already apparent in the world’s oceans but these impacts have been largely ignored in climate discussions to date. We know the world’s oceans are warming. This will cause fish species to migrate, something that has already been observed with certain species, for example herring and pollock in the northern hemisphere, which have been found to be migrating pole-ward. Climate change is causing sea levels to rise as warming waters expand. Climate change is projected to cause shifts in ocean currents and in rainfall patterns. Combined with increasing fresh water from melting glaciers, this can trigger oxygen depletion in the deep sea and depleted productivity in the sunlight upper ocean.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.un.org/Depts/los/reference\\_files/oceansday2009.pdf](http://www.un.org/Depts/los/reference_files/oceansday2009.pdf)

Increasing concentrations of carbon dioxide dissolved in sea water are also causing acidification of the world's oceans. The oceans have absorbed some 25-30% of all carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel consumption since the beginning of the industrial revolution, and each year the marine environment absorbs approximately 30% of all carbon dioxide emissions that we put into the air. The pH (measure of acidity/base level on a logarithmic scale) in the oceans has changed from an average of 8.2 to 8.1, which while seemingly small actually reflects a 30% change in acidity. If we continue on our current course of action, the change will be on the order of 100% by century's end. This acidification has profound implications for marine life. As marine life represents some 90% of the Earth's biomass, this has worrisome implications for all life on Earth, including ours. The oceans have not been so acidic since eight hundred million years ago, well before we humans existed.

Coral reefs have been identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as a key example of an ecosystem vulnerable to climate change. Even at the lowest predicted threshold of temperature increase, coral bleaching is expected. Reef scientists predict that irreversible and catastrophic decline of coral reefs will occur with a warming of 1.7°C warming, less than the best-case global target that seeks to keep warming at 2°C. Ocean acidification will accelerate the destruction of coral reefs. At a meeting in London earlier this year coral scientists suggested that because of both warming and ocean acidification reefs were seriously declining and time-lagged effects would result in their continued demise, with impacts on other marine and coastal ecosystems. The scientists warned that proposals to limit carbon dioxide levels to 450 parts per million in the atmosphere would not prevent a catastrophic loss of coral reefs.

Seventy science academies from around the world released in June 2009 through the Royal Society in London an Inter-Academy Panel on Ocean Acidification statement in which they noted that the acidification of the world's oceans, like climate change, is a direct consequence of increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations and that rapid and deep reductions in carbon dioxide emissions are our only viable solution to this problem. The seventy scientific academies noted the critical role that the world's oceans play in the global carbon cycle and the rapid and irreversible changes that are taking place in ocean chemistry as a direct result. The scientific leaders noted the urgent need to act to reduce other stressors, including overfishing and pollution, on marine ecosystems in order to increase resilience to ocean acidification.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, we need to reduce carbon emissions into the environment quickly and sharply to protect the world's oceans. But there are other steps that we can take to build resilience. IUCN has published in recent weeks documents focused on oceans to provide advice to this end that we encourage you to share with colleagues headed to Copenhagen.<sup>3</sup> In short, we must reduce existing stressors and protect marine and coastal environments to build ecosystem resilience to climate change. Additionally, we must protect and enhance natural coastal carbon sinks, including tidal salt marshes, mangroves, sea grass meadows and kelp forests. At the same time, we must promote research and monitoring of the oceans' role in the global carbon cycle. To this end, we welcome progress on the establishment of a regular process for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment, including socio-economic aspects on a continual and systematic basis. Such assessments support informed decision-making and should contribute to managing human activities that affect the oceans in a sustainable manner to the interest of all.

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.interacademies.net/Object.File/Master/9/075/Statement\\_RS1579\\_IAP\\_05.09final2.pdf](http://www.interacademies.net/Object.File/Master/9/075/Statement_RS1579_IAP_05.09final2.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See "The Ocean and Climate Change: Tools and Guidelines for Action" by Dorothée Herr and Grantly R. Galland at [http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/the\\_ocean\\_and\\_climate\\_change.pdf](http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/the_ocean_and_climate_change.pdf); and "The Management of Natural Coastal Carbon Sinks" edited by Dan Laffoley and Gabriel Grimsditch at [http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/carbon\\_management\\_report\\_final\\_printed\\_version\\_1.pdf](http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/carbon_management_report_final_printed_version_1.pdf).

With respect to reducing other ocean stressors, we welcome language in the Sustainable Fisheries resolution that calls for the implementation of the precautionary approach and ecosystem approaches to the conservation, management and exploitation of fish stocks. We share the concern expressed in the resolution that though progress has been made with respect of bottom fishing as called for in General Assembly resolution 61/105, these actions have not been sufficiently implemented in all cases. Thus further actions are necessary to strengthen implementation, in particular a need to conduct the assessments in advance of such fishing, to conduct further marine scientific research and to use the best scientific and technical information available to identify where vulnerable marine ecosystems are known to occur or are likely to occur and to adopt conservation and management measures to prevent significant adverse impacts on such ecosystems or close such areas to bottom fishing until conservation and management measures have been established.

We welcome agreement to implement the 2008 International Guidelines for the Management of Deep-sea Fisheries in the High Seas of the Food and Agriculture Organization to manage sustainably fish stocks and protect vulnerable marine ecosystems, including seamounts, hydrothermal vents and cold water corals, in view of their great importance and value, including for marine biodiversity. We also welcome the adoption this year of the Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing of the Food and Agriculture Organization and look forward to its early entry into force. We further welcome the decision of the Committee on Fisheries of the Food and Agriculture Organization at its most recent session to support the development of a Comprehensive Global Record of Fishing Vessels, Refrigerated Transport Vessels, and Supply Vessels. Such a Record will serve as a useful tool to better monitor vessels in order to combat Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing.

This year the five regional fisheries management organizations with competence to regulate highly migratory species (sometimes referred to as the tuna RFMOs) met in San Sebastian, Spain and agreed that global fishing capacity for tunas must be addressed and in a way that recognizes the legitimate rights of developing countries, in particular small island countries, to participate in and benefit from these fisheries. These concerns are well-justified and in this connection, we note that the state of bluefin tuna stocks, particularly that of the eastern Atlantic, remain of grave concern. My delegation is deeply troubled that a quota agreed for the coming year was significantly higher than that recommended by the scientific advisory body of the relevant RFMO. If fisheries are to be sustainable for this and future generations, management decisions will have to be based and implemented on the best available scientific advice. Otherwise, there is a real possibility that these stocks will cease to exist as a viable or sustainable fishery.

With reference to the importance of assessments for better knowledge about the role of the oceans and to better conserve and manage their resources my delegation would welcome consideration of an integrated approach to assessments to better inform science and to better manage human impacts, including cumulative impacts, on the oceans. Such an approach could include a requirement to conduct environmental impact assessments for all activities likely to have impacts on the oceans that are more than minor or transitory. Under the Convention on Biological Diversity an expert workshop to provide scientific and technical advice that could help the development of guidance on environmental impact assessments and strategic environmental assessments took place recently in Manila, the Philippines. We would welcome it if efforts to advance such assessments can be discussed more fully in meetings under the General Assembly during the coming year.

Another approach that would clearly help to conserve and manage better the marine environment and ocean ecosystems would be to establish networks of marine protected areas. We are fast approaching 2012 when we agreed through the Johannesburg Plan of

Implementation in 2002 to have established representative networks of marine protected areas. In this regard, we welcome work under the Convention on Biological Diversity on scientific and technical guidance on the use of biogeographic classification systems and identification of marine areas beyond national jurisdiction in need of protection that was held in Ottawa, Canada and look forward to implementation of this work to identify areas on the high seas for consideration of protection. We also welcome steps taken by States to use areas closures to protect particularly vulnerable ecosystems and to conserve and manage fish stocks, as described in the Secretary-General's report of 17 August 2009<sup>4</sup>. The decision of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources to close a large area east of the Antarctic Peninsula is an excellent step towards representative networks. More needs to be done to establish networks of marine protected areas quickly and we look forward to discussion at meetings under the General Assembly next year to promote this outcome.

In closing, I refer to the most recently updated IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ that shows that 17,291 species of the 47,677 assessed species are threatened with extinction. The results reveal that 32 percent of open ocean sharks and rays are threatened with extinction, primarily through overfishing. Also 21 percent of all known mammals, 30 percent of all known amphibians, 12 percent of all known birds, and 28 percent of reptiles, 37 percent of freshwater fishes, 70 percent of plants, 35 percent of invertebrates assessed so far are under threat. This latest analysis shows the 2010 target to reduce biodiversity loss will not be met. Thus scientific evidence indicates a growing threat of the risk of extinction of species, including marine. My delegation looks forward to working with others next year, the International Year of Biodiversity, as we identify and implement steps to protect marine biodiversity.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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<sup>4</sup> A/64/305

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*IUCN'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.*

*IUCN is the world's largest environmental knowledge network and has helped over 75 countries to prepare and implement national conservation and biodiversity strategies. IUCN is a multicultural, multilingual organization with 1,000 staff located in 62 countries.*