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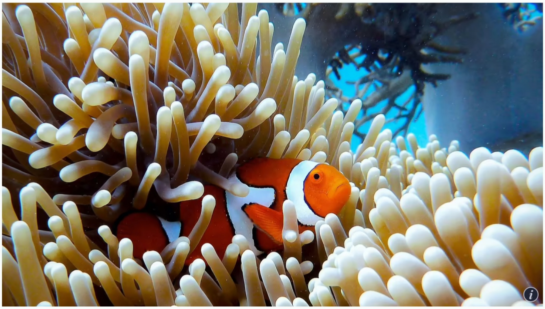
UN Ocean Conference: high seas deal, seabed mining, climate change on agenda

By Liv Martin



Elevated human-made emissions are leading to rising sea levels, ocean acidification, biodiversity losses, and a higher frequency in extreme weather events like tsunamis and hurricanes. The second United Nations Ocean Conference, from 27 June to 1 July in Lisbon, Portugal, is aiming to translate science-based solutions into worldwide action to protect the ocean.

‘A death of 1,000 cuts’

From miles-long ocean dead zones caused by pesticides to countless human activities destroying marine ecosystems, our oceans are suffering. The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found that dead zones span over 245,000 km^2 globally (roughly the size of the United Kingdom), and that an estimated 30 to 35 per cent of marine habitats like seagrass, mangroves and coral reefs have been destroyed.

Plastic pollution is another major problem, and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates one million tonnes of plastic enter the ocean annually. The UN also says ocean acidity is up 26 per cent since pre-industrial times, and could reach 100 per cent by the end of the century.

Read more: Can we rid the ocean from its plastic problem?

Though oceans cover an impressive 70 per cent of the planet's surface, the problem boils down to the idea of a "death of 1,000 cuts", said Pepe Clark, global oceans practice lead at the World Wide Fund for Nature International (WWF).

Oceans provide humans with clean air, food and water, in addition to regulating our climate and sustaining diverse ecosystems. They are also the largest "carbon sinks" on Earth, meaning they have the ability to absorb a staggering quarter of all carbon emissions.

Building momentum from 2017

This year's conference promises to build on discussions from the first ocean conference in 2017 at the UN's New York headquarters. Its main purpose was to take stock of all of the problems facing the ocean. Like the first conference, the upcoming Lisbon conference, co-hosted by Kenya and Portugal, is tied to Sustainable Development Goal 14 — to "conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development."

"In the past five years, we've really seen the prominence of oceans as a global policy issue and an issue of conservation concern become greater and greater," Clark told Geneva Solutions.

As a delegate representing the WWF at the meeting, his priorities will be settling a ban of deep seabed mining and ratifying a World Trade Organization fisheries agreement to eliminate overfishing incentives. WWF and other environmental campaigners will also push for a treaty to protect the high seas (30 per cent of the world's oceans) which countries failed to deliver over the last round of talks in March. Another key issue will be securing funding and resources for conservation and research efforts.

Other issues on the table will be overfishing, acidification, pollution, and the destruction of marine habitats and biodiversity. And just like many climate summits, the ocean conference will take a look at climate change impacts, adaptation and mitigation. When thinking about adaptation in the context of oceans, the focus is turned to the coastal communities which will experience climate change-related extreme weather events.

The UN has ambitious goals related to ocean conservation. In 2021, the General Assembly launched the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. Lasting until 2030, the initiative aims to find sustainable development solutions while encouraging public involvement.

The first high-level meeting of the Ocean Decade Alliance — an effort of the Ocean Decade to bring together a long list of major actors, such as state presidents and prime ministers, royalty, CEOs, environmental groups and donors — will be co-hosted by UNESCO's director general Audrey Azoulay at the Lisbon oceans conference. Azoulay will also announce UNESCO's new tsunami readiness program, which has a goal of preparing all coastal communities for these extreme weather events by 2030.

A new tide

"Humanity's current relationship with the ocean is not sustainable," said Clark, who is based in Australia. As someone who grew up on the shores of the Great Barrier Reef, he has seen firsthand the destruction of coral there from climate change and water pollution, where warmer seas have resulted in the plants becoming bleached and eventually dying.

Educating people — from policymakers to school children — on humankind's relationship and reliance on the ocean is a way to connect people personally to environmental issues. "Ocean literacy" is being introduced in full force at the 2022 ocean conference. This year, UNESCO published an ocean literacy toolkit geared towards policymakers. Now, they have a new goal to introduce the concept to young students via school curriculum in member states by 2025.

The conference is being held at a time when a major focus has been placed on biodiversity conservation. Countries gathered in Nairobi this week are negotiating a new "30-by-30" global pact to designate 30 per cent of the earth's land and oceans as conservation areas. In Clark's experience, protected marine areas are where recovery happens. In parts of the ocean where commercial fishing activity is limited, fish populations come back, and those fish populations are integral to the health of the coral reefs.

"The ocean has a remarkable capacity to recover," Clark said. "… if only we can take the actions that are necessary."

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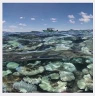

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