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The UNEP's contribution to the oceans and marine science

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After almost 40 years, the sustainable management of marine and coastal resources remains a significant challenge for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the global community, particular in lieu of the international commitment to the Millennium Development Goals in 2000.

The UNEP has continually adapted its approach to marine and coastal management to ensure delivery on its mandates. Recent reviews of the UN system as a whole called for greater coherence across various development-related agencies, funds and programmes. The UN Secretary-General noted, in particular, the need to strengthen delivery of operational activities. Cognizant of recent directional shifts in the organization, the Medium Term Strategy (MTS) 2010–2013 called for a coordinated, results-focused delivery of work programmes. Six cross-cutting priorities were identified to provide a new focus for the work of the UNEP, namely: Climate change; Disasters and conflicts; Ecosystems management; Environmental governance; Harmful substances and hazardous waste; and Resource efficiency.

The UNEP identified within its new marine and coastal strategy assessment/ knowledge, management, policy and partnership gaps and the UNEP's comparative

¹ Prepared in cooperation with Jacqueline Alder, Head of Coastal and Marine Programme.



Fig 20.1 UNEP has a mandate that encompasses the marine environment and all its living creatures. © Edwin van Wier/ Shutterstock.com, image ID 2495900.

advantage in addressing specific marine issues, and identified seven priority areas in the marine and coastal sector:

1. Pollution from land-based activities (LBA) including excessive nutrients.
2. Physical Alteration and Destruction of Habitats, including through aquaculture.
3. Impact of climate change on oceans and coasts.
4. Marine and coastal biodiversity, including deep seas.
5. Environmental aspects of fisheries.
6. Environmental aspects of high seas and seabed management and governance (beyond areas of national jurisdiction).
7. Vulnerability of islands.

The preceding directional shifts within the UNEP have provided the management driver for the UNEP to commit to the development of a dedicated Marine and Coastal Strategy within the Ecosystem Management theme but to cut across the six themes and guide future work in this area. The present strategy uses a 10–15-year horizon for facilitating changes in the marine sector, while recognizing and complementing existing strategies, plans and policies including MTS 2010–2013, the UNEP Water Policy and the Climate Change Strategy. It aims to build on the identified strengths and experiences of the UNEP as an organization, to facilitate change at the policy and operational levels.

Strategy initiatives are grouped in four key streams, each addressing a number of the priorities and expected accomplishments identified in the MTS 2010–2013 and beyond. The four streams of activity are:

- Land–Coast Connections
- Marine and Coastal Ecosystems for Humanity
- Reconciling Resource Use and Marine Conservation
- Vulnerable People and Places

Fig 20.2 Marlborough Sound, Queen Charlotte Islands. Establishing Marine Protected Areas is a difficult but important goal for Coastal States. Taking the next step into international waters will be even more challenging. © Holger Mette/Shutterstock.com, image ID 10293964.



Since the UNEP was established, the Regional Seas Programme (RSP) has been one of its flagship programmes. The RSP gives priority to regional activities, encouraging and supporting the preparation of regional agreements for the protection of specific water bodies. To date, UNEP has supported the negotiation, adoption and implementation of 13 regional seas conventions and action plans throughout the world, and become the Secretariat of six of these, as well as created partnerships with five marine programmes. The UNEP provides ongoing support to regional seas governing bodies on legal and public relations issues, and assists in the achievement of financial sustainability. The regional seas conventions and action plans are also used as instruments for sustainable development and as platforms for regional implementation of multilateral environmental agreements, programmes and protocols. The UNEP and IOC of UNESCO have been active partners in using the Regional Seas platforms.

Following various calls by the UNEP Governing Council and relevant preparatory work, the international community adopted the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land Based Activities (GPA) in 1995, addressing the interlinkages between the freshwater and coastal environments. The UNEP was called to support States in implementing sustained action to prevent, reduce, control and/or eliminate marine degradation from land-based activities through applying integrated coastal area and watershed management approaches. At the request of governments, the UNEP became the GPA Secretariat in 1997. Further to the UN reform process being carried out in those years, the nineteenth session of UNEP GC in 1997 adopted the Nairobi Declaration on the Role and Mandate of the UNEP.

In Agenda 21, adopted at the Rio Conference on Environment and Development, states committed themselves to improve the understanding of the marine environment in order to assess present and future conditions more effectively (UN 1992). In 2001/02, work commenced to explore the feasibility of establishing a regular global assessment process for the state of the marine environment. The feasibility study led the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg to support actions at all levels to *'establish by 2004 a Regular Process under the United Nations for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment, including socio-economic aspects, both current and foreseeable, building on existing regional assessments'*. In November 2005, UNGA launched the 'Assessment of Assessments' (AoA) as a preparatory stage towards the establishment of the Regular Process (resolution 60/30). An Ad Hoc Steering Group (AHSG) was established to oversee implementation of the AoA and a Group of Experts was established to carry it out, supported by a secretariat of the two lead agencies: UNEP and IOC of UNESCO. These agencies have, since 2006, proceeded with the implementation of the start-up phase of the Regular Process, producing an excellent partnership in complementing each other in their respective comparative advantage in marine environmental science and assessment. The vital role of the UNEP in undertaking assessments, such as the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) process and the UN Assessment of Assessments, provides critical information and analysis on conditions and trends in marine and coastal environments.

Where does the Global Reporting and Assessment of the Marine Environment (GRAME) fit in the world's oceans needs at this time?

The marine environment is undergoing unprecedented change, threatening ecosystem goods and services on which humans depend. The response from the international community and national governments involves judgements about trade-offs among objectives and priorities, and about the likely effectiveness of policy options. These judgements will need to be based on up-to-date information and supported by iterative assessments. To promote support for such policy-making, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) decided to launch a start-up phase towards a regular process for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment, including socio-economic aspects. After presenting the report – 'Assessment of Assessments' – on the outcome of this preparatory stage, the UNEP and IOC UNESCO hope that UN Member States will be empowered with information on the framework and options for a future global regular process as well as a valuable resource for decision-makers dealing with marine environmental issues.