

All Nations Agree to Restore Ocean Health

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By Suzanne Maxx

NEW YORK, New York, June 12, 2017 (ENS) – The 193 Member States of the United Nations agreed by consensus to a 14 point Call for Action that will begin the reversal of the decline of the ocean's health at the conclusion of the first-ever United Nations Oceans Conference. The week-long conference, which closed Friday, addressed key topics for our common future with the oceans.

The **Call for Action** states, “We are particularly alarmed by the adverse impacts of climate change on the ocean, including the rise in ocean temperatures, ocean and coastal acidification, deoxygenation, sea-level rise, the decrease in polar ice coverage, coastal erosion and extreme weather events. We acknowledge the need to address the adverse impacts that impair the crucial ability of the ocean to act as climate regulator, source of marine biodiversity, and as key provider of food and nutrition, tourism and ecosystem services, and as an engine for sustainable economic development and growth. We recognise, in this regard, the particular importance of the Paris Agreement adopted under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.”

The oceans generate employment for over 200 million people, and are the primary source of protein for three billion people. The Earth is mostly water, and 97 percent of our planet's water is in the oceans, which cover the majority of the planet's surface.

At the opening of the conference President of the UN General Assembly Peter Thomson of Fiji who co-organized this conference with support from Sweden, began with the unifying words, "We the people of the world..."

"In small island states like Fiji, trash will outweigh fish by 2050," he told the 6,000 conference participants from governments, small island nations, civil societies, nongovernmental organizations, corporations and scientists



The first-ever UN Oceans Conference in session,
June 5, 2017 (Photo © Suzanne Maxx)

Fijians set the stage using the native ceremonial kava ritual, and from opening to the closing the barriers that usually divide those in suits from bare chested or Hawaiian shirt-clad participants were broken down.

The barriers between those living island life with the primal intimacy of the ocean and nature, and those living in the concrete sea of urban areas seemed to melt away in a common concern for the health of the oceans.

The Ocean's Conference unpacked the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) #14, to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine life."

Goal 14's targets were explored through concept papers and side events on: marine pollution, coastal ecosystems, ocean acidification, biodiversity, overfishing, marine preserves, illegal, fishing industry subsidies and the World Trade Organization, small scale artisanal fishing and economic benefits to Small Island Developing States, ocean energy, shipping, the Law of Area Boundaries of National Jurisdiction, and the Law of the Sea.

All of these topics play into the equation of ocean stewardship.

Thomson commented, "Human induced problems need human induced solutions."

Many solutions were presented in a myriad of side events. Solutions ranged from innovative ways to clean up ocean plastics on a large scale, to re-planting coral at reef scale, to tracking whale migration using drones to better understand their needs.

A solutions panel was held every day during the conference in the media zone.

One of the most challenging issues, the cutting of fishing subsidies, was left in the hands of the World Trade Organization.

The conference bustled with news of problems, like The Runit Dome in the Marshall Islands that is leaking radioactive nuclear waste into the South Pacific waters, a result of nuclear testing by the United States.

There were many solutions proposed such as the Seychelles no plastic law banning the use of plastic bags, bottles, plates and cutlery, and solutions from island regions who shared their approach to creating and policing Marine Protected Areas.

The Outcome document, and 1,328 Voluntary pledges registered as the conference closed create an arena for the words to take shape in actions.

The hashtag #SaveTheOceans allowed the Oceans Conference to have a presence on social media. Attention to the humanity's role in the oceans crisis to become aware of the problems and learn about solutions was achieved. Instagram alone showed more than 56,000 ocean posts, a tide that changes the landscape of traditional media. The commitment to the SDG14 is open on-line, and all are encouraged to participate.

"Governments can't do it alone" was stated throughout the conference by various prime ministers. This "Multi-stakeholder Partnerships" approach to allow governments to team up is a formula devised to make the UN's efforts more effective.

It was noted in the Plenary that just half of the global military expenditure of governments would be enough to achieve all the Sustainable Development Goals.

Ocean icons like Dr. Sylvia Earle shared a panel with Trammell Crow. They offered their insights into the degradation of the oceans over the years.

Fabien Cousteau described the state of the oceans in which 90 percent of large fish species have disappeared due to overexploitation, 50 percent of corals have died where there is ever increasing acidification.

Necker Island based Sir Richard Branson explained, "While this gathering of the new [solutions] might be a tiny blip in the history of our planet, our task is to make it the world oceans day where we change our destiny."

In an interview with ENS about the financial mechanisms needed to turn proposals into solutions, such as the Green Climate Fund, green bonds or carbon offsets, Thomson expressed optimism.

"It looks good," he said. "I was in a meeting this morning with the four largest financial houses in the world actually, 'The Economist' brought us together, and we were discussing that green bonds that were nonexistent not so long ago – zero. In 2013 there was 11 billion worth of green bonds issued. The bond market now is around 20 billion in bonds. The estimate for the bonds this year is 130 billion."

He explained this exponential growth, saying, "It had to do with humanity carrying on the way they are going, ignoring sustainability, and that has changed."

Ocean-related bonds are on the horizon, he said. "If that is good for green bonds, then it has to be good for blue bonds."

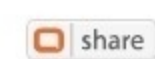
Brought up with no electricity until the age of 26, Thomson said, "If you are off grid, you've got so many renewable energy resources. In fact, if you're off-grid it is preferable to go with all the renewable energy options, especially with the ocean."

"There is a huge amount of off-the-grid action for rural islands, and the ocean will provide energy as well. In Fiji, we don't have the technology or financial resources for that, but we are interested in partnerships [to generate energy] with tidal, wave action, and the gradient of ocean temperature differences."

"I am confident that with the broad support from member states and other stakeholders with concrete actions we can save our oceans," Thomson said.

Thomson explained, "That is basically our work plan going forward, not just us, but everybody. The next step is for the General Assembly to endorse, at its 71st session, the call for action as adopted by the Conference."

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