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New Partnerships Needed to Ensure Future of Marine Environments: UN

On World Oceans Day, UNEP Launches Guide to Ecosystem-based Management

Nairobi, 8 June 2011 - Declines in marine and coastal ecosystems due to human activities such as overfishing and pollution could be reversed if organisations, communities and other stakeholders adopt a more integrated approach to managing coastal environments. Closer partnerships between different marine users - such as fishing communities, the tourism industry and conservationists - can also help coastal communities become better prepared for natural disasters and the impacts of global warming, such as ocean acidification and changes in sea levels.

The recommendations come in a new publication from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which outlines how planners and policy-makers in local, national and regional governments can adopt what is known as an ecosystem-based management (EBM) approach to help ensure sustainable development for marine and coastal environments and the many people who depend on them.

Launched on World Oceans Day 2011, *Taking Steps Toward Marine and Coastal Ecosystem-Based Management: An Introductory Guide*, explains in simple, accessible language how sharing knowledge and best practices across different sectors can make marine management more effective.

Using over 20 case studies and success stories, ranging from polar ecosystems in Antarctica to atolls in the Indian Ocean, the publication offers guidance to marine managers towards achieving long-term sustainability, from initial planning of how to deal with environmental degradation to on-site implementation of action plans.

"The future role of marine and coastal ecosystems in human well-being depends increasingly on developing the capacity of countries to manage human uses and impacts in order to ensure that ecosystem health and self-repairing capacity is not undermined", said UN Under-Secretary-General and UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner.

"Central to a transformational response to decades of overfishing, pollution and unplanned urban development will be moving from sectoral marine and coastal management to a joined approach that marries seemingly competing interests", added Mr. Steiner.

Ecosystem-based management (EBM) considers marine and coastal ecosystems as units with many ecological and social links. These connections can be numerous and complex, with disruptions to any part of an ecosystem - such as changes to habitats or fluctuations in the population of a species - having many knock-on effects.

Agricultural run-off, for example, can pollute rivers or seas, leading to a decline in plants such as seagrasses consumed by fish. This, in turn, can lead to reduced catch for fishing communities and a resulting drop in prosperity and living conditions for coastal populations. EBM uses knowledge of such connections to guide different uses of oceans and coasts and to determine policies and priorities for managing future development.

The value of the natural services provided by marine and coastal areas is also a key part of EBM. Food security through fisheries as well as climate change adaptation, water purification, storm protection, tourism and recreation are among the many ecosystem services provided by healthy oceans and coasts..

The new UNEP guide highlights several examples of how determining the value of ecosystem services has helped improve marine management.

The UNEP-administered Mediterranean Action Plan, which brings together 21 developed and developing countries to protect the Mediterranean environment, recently produced an ecosystem services evaluation for the region. Initial results found that the total value of fisheries production, recreation, climate regulation, erosion control and waste treatment was 26 billion Euro annually. The results will have a significant impact on regional policy-making, which is seeking to address, among other things, the decline of seagrass meadows and coastal lagoons.

Different pathways to healthy oceans and coasts

Many aspects of EBM for marine ecosystems, such as ecosystem assessments, pollution monitoring or fisheries management, are already being carried out by marine and coastal managers across the world. What sets EBM apart, however, is its holistic, integrated approach.

Put simply, EBM is all about managing people – their activities and interactions with ecosystems and the services they provide. This could involve, for example, planning of marine protected areas in direct dialogue with other sectors like fisheries and off-shore energy exploration. In turn, this can provide for broad-scale healthy oceans rather than isolated ‘pockets of biodiversity’.

The guide cites the example of California, where, over the past decade, the US state has rapidly expanded its system of marine protected areas, through a comprehensive marine spatial planning exercise. An example of EBM in action, a group of NGOs, state bodies and other stakeholders developed an ocean atlas, which maps the full range of economic and recreational uses of the state’s waters. An online mapping tool also provides data on overlapping human uses relevant to marine protected areas. Given the success of the project, other US states have now started to develop their own atlases using the same approach.

As cross-boundary co-operation may be required to implement aspects of EBM, UNEP’s Regional Seas Programme, which covers 18 regions of the world, is uniquely placed to assist. The programme addresses the degradation of the world’s oceans and coastal areas by engaging neighbouring countries in specific actions to protect their shared marine environment. Initiatives such as regional action plans (there are currently 14 plans worldwide) can provide a basis for creating common agendas and building an EBM approach to sustainable marine development.

EBM approaches are also being used to tackle marine pollution issues affecting many countries worldwide. In March 2011, UNEP partnered with the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to hold a major international conference to address marine debris. Marine experts from 35 countries, governments, researchers, corporations and trade associations met to make a new set of new commitments to tackle the problem of discarded plastic, industrial waste and other debris in the world’s oceans. The resulting *Honolulu Commitment* encourages the sharing of technical, legal and market-based solutions to reduce marine debris and to improve local and regional understanding of the scale and impact of the problem, while advocating for better waste management worldwide.

With coastal and marine ecosystems coming under increasing pressure from pollution, coastal development, overfishing and climate change, new, collaborative strategies are needed to ensure long-term sustainability. Through shared knowledge, science and best practices, ecosystem-based management can help make communities more resilient to environmental change and ensure an equitable share of marine resources for all ocean users.

To download a copy of *Taking Steps Toward Marine and Coastal Ecosystem-Based Management: An Introductory Guide*, please visit: http://www.unep.org/pdf/EBM_Manual_r15_Final.pdf

UNEP Regional Seas Programme: <http://www.unep.org/regionalseas/>

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