

What happens on the high and deep seas affects us all

If we are merely looking at the vast expanse of waters from the shores of Thailand, Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia, or living in the land-locked Lao People's Democratic Republic, we tend to think that oceans are too big, too deep and too lively to be overfished and polluted. We also tend to feel that they are too far from Southeast Asia to impact our everyday lives. But the truth is that what happens in the high and deep seas affects our food, air, climate, health and, perhaps, every aspect of our life and future.

Today, the world's oceans are threatened by overfishing, the use of destructive fishing practices, deep-sea mining for new sources of oil, gas, metals and other precious materials, bioprospecting (or the search for plants, animals and microorganisms from which medicinal drugs and other commercially valuable compounds can be obtained), and pollution, including plastic trash dumping, siltation, warming waters and coral bleaching. The impacts of climate change are causing "dead zones" in the oceans, higher temperatures and acidification.

According to studies, fish and all other seafood will be off the menu within our lifetimes unless the ruinous activities are stopped now and a network of marine areas fully protected from extractive and harmful activities is established. Right now, only 3% of our oceans are protected while, according to science at least, 40% should be reserved and fully protected to allow them to recover.

Just a few weeks ago, the world's governments met in New York and discussed ways to conserve and preserve marine biodiversity beyond every country's territorial jurisdiction that should be covered by a new implementing agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (Unclos). The Unclos is widely regarded as the constitution of the world's oceans.

However, a number of issues and concerns were identified in that meeting that will affect how governments will address the oceans crisis.

For example, while most countries agree that existing governance arrangements, geographically by region or by sector, are not enough to protect the oceans, proposed ways must not undermine the mandate of those organisations.

Unfortunately, this may imply that problems of overfishing, including destructive fishing practices that are assumed falling under the mandate of regional fisheries management organisations, will not be included and addressed by the new instrument.

There were also differences in opinions on how to identify marine protected areas and how long they should be reserved and protected from fishing and other activities. There were questions on what can be subjects of environmental impacts assessments, how to perform, and who will conduct, approve and review such assessments, as well as how the Precautionary Principle, Polluter Pays Principle, and the like are to be operationalised in the case of activities in the high and deep seas.

In the past, Southeast Asian governments have actively participated in this UN process. But for the next rounds of meetings, their consistent push and help in addressing such critical issues and in clearing the way for more marine protected areas and healthy oceans is needed.

It will help if continuous national consultations involving stakeholders and the public on these issues are conducted to collate information, exchange views and come up with suggestions on how to address the identified issues, thereby enhancing the countries' engagement in the UN meetings.

Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines have started their national consultations early this year. It will further help if the Southeast Asian governments come together for regional consultations for the same purpose. They may even consider putting forward a unique science-based conservation measure which is mindful of setting aside large marine areas for protection to allow our oceans to fully recover.

Oceans generate most of the earth's oxygen; provide food, water and life-saving medicine, even ingredients for beauty products; and provide for recreational areas and inspiration. They regulate the climate that nurtures life, and are home to the region's coral reefs. .

The oceans are not too big, too deep, too lively to be overfished and polluted; and never too far away to affect us. (Bron: Zelda DT Soriano, *Bangkok Post*, 23 april 2016)

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