

Our Ocean – Norwegian Views

A healthy ocean is one of the keys to a healthy future. But the ocean is under pressure, from climate change, acidification, pollution and unsustainable harvesting. Our common challenge is to eliminate these pressures, or at least reduce them to sustainable levels, and to secure productive, diverse and resilient marine ecosystems that can provide food and income opportunities for a growing world population.

Clean and productive oceans

We need clean and productive oceans in order to safeguard and improve the ecological foundation for food production, both at sea and on land. The better care we take of the ocean the better the ocean can help us to meet our needs. Seafood plays a significant, but not yet fully recognised, role in global food security and nutrition. Sustainable fisheries and sustainable aquaculture are vital if we are to feed a growing world population. Aquaculture is currently the fastest growing food industry.

Today, 29 percent of the world's fish stocks are overfished or depleted, and global catches of wild fish are stable. We have the means, however, to improve this state of affairs.

Illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing (IUU fishing), which undermines our attempts at keeping fish harvests within sustainable limits, can be combated through improved international cooperation on the monitoring and enforcement of fishing restrictions. All states should accede to and apply the FAO Agreement on Port State Measures, under which vessels engaged in IUU fishing activities are to be denied entry into ports. Overcapacity, another cause of IUU fishing, should be reduced. And since today's overcapacity is largely due to subsidies, subsidies should be avoided.

Discards of less attractive specimens should be prohibited. Discarding fish is wasting food. The subtraction of significant amounts of fish from the catch statistics also complicates the task of the scientists who are to give advice on stock management.

Independent, scientific advice should form the basis of all decisions regulating fisheries. In the North Atlantic, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) has been providing advice to fishery authorities for more than 100 years. And the cooperation between Norwegian and Russian marine scientists, which has continued uninterrupted since the early days of the Cold War, deserves a great part of the credit for the healthy state of the Barents Sea fish stocks.

Stopping ocean debris

The pollution of our oceans is worsening. Plastic waste is a new threat to biodiversity and may threaten food production. It is a rapidly increasing problem due to the large and still increasing consumption of plastics worldwide, and the steady fragmentation of plastic debris in the marine environment. Investing in data collection, research on the source and impact of microplastics on the marine environment and human health is part of our response to the problem. Norway participates in the EU-lead CleanSea project, which is analysing the effects of microplastics on the global marine environment over a three-year period. Norway is working actively to ensure that ocean debris becomes a priority action area for the UN Environmental Programme and other relevant international agencies.

Preventing ocean acidification

Ocean acidification occurs when the oceans absorb large emissions of CO₂, which are being caused by human activities. The only solution is to reduce our emissions of CO₂ as a matter of urgency. Ocean acidification is yet another reason, in addition to climate change, to intensify our efforts to reduce CO₂ emissions.

The Arctic Ocean is particularly vulnerable to acidification. Organisms from plankton to fish can be affected, and some species could become locally extinct. Ocean acidification could also cause problems for people

living in the Arctic, as it could affect commercial fisheries as well as the marine resources used by Arctic indigenous peoples. This is why the fight against ocean acidification is a priority among Arctic states and should continue to be a priority for the Arctic Council.

Integrated ocean management

Food production from the sea depends on the way we manage not only our fisheries, but also all the activities in the oceans and along the coasts, including land-based activities, that have an impact on the marine environment.

In Norway, the relevant authorities have cooperated on the development of integrated, ecosystem-based management plans for all Norwegian marine areas, including both Arctic and non-Arctic waters. The purpose of these management plans is to provide a framework for the sustainable use of natural resources and ecosystem services derived from the ocean areas, and at the same time maintain the structure, functioning, productivity and diversity of the marine ecosystems. They provide a cross-sectorial framework for management of activities to ensure that the total environmental pressure does not threaten the marine environment.

We have also developed marine spatial planning as a tool within the integrated approach of the management plans. This makes it possible to safeguard the marine environment and, at the same time, facilitate the co-existence of different industries, particularly the fisheries industry, maritime transport and petroleum industry. Norway is ready to share its experience of integrated ocean management plans with other interested states.

Knowledge is the key

Scientific advice is a key to informed decision-making. Many developing states lack the infrastructure and capacity needed for science-based management. The Nansen Project, which is administered by FAO and uses Norwegian expertise and is financed by Norway, has been running consecutively for 40 years. It has assisted more than 50 developing countries in mapping their marine living resources and building up their own capacity for sustainable and ecosystem-based fisheries management. With a new research vessel in place in 2016, the next phase of the project will strengthen climatic and environmental research relating to the oceans.

Joint efforts for a sustainable future

The Law of the Sea provides the legal framework for all activities in the oceans and seas. This framework consists of several legal instruments that set out various mandates and responsibilities. We must ensure effective implementation of these instruments at both national and regional level. And we need to provide funding to assist developing states to do the same.

Sustainable and ecosystem-based management of the ocean can only be achieved through a fruitful interplay between the organisations and bodies with an ocean mandate, such as the UN General Assembly, the International Maritime Organisation, the International Seabed Authority, the Food and Agriculture Organization, UN Environment Programme, regional fisheries management organisations and regional seas organisations. It is therefore crucial to strengthen cooperation and coordination within and between these organisations and bodies.

In the context of the post-2015 development agenda, Norway favours the inclusion of specific targets to promote healthy, productive and resilient oceans and the sustainable use of marine resources. Such targets could be included under several of the goals currently under discussion in the Open Working Group. The proposal to establish a separate sustainable development goal for oceans is also under active consideration.