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PRESS RELEASE

Closing the Science Gaps on What is Happening to the World's Oceans and Seas

UN Experts' Report to Governments Charts Ways Forward

New York/Nairobi/Paris, 31 August 2009 – The world's oceans and seas—covering 70 per cent of the planet — may soon be subject to the same kind of systematic scientific scrutiny as the globe's land surface.

Governments are meeting today to consider a series of options and recommendations on establishing just such a monitoring process. It is aimed at plugging significant and serious knowledge gaps that are undermining humanity's ability to better manage a wealth of natural and nature-based marine resources.

If governments give the process the green light, the first globally integrated oceans assessment could be delivered under the auspices of the United Nations by 2014.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, said: "The marine environment is facing a multiplicity of challenges. Some, such as the decline in fish stocks and land-based sources of pollution are persistent ones. Others, from the emergence of 'dead zones' and the impacts of climate change including acidification are rapidly emerging ones. A systematic assessment process is long overdue. This meeting in New York represents a tremendous opportunity for governments to put the best marine science at their service in order to make the best management choices over the coming years and decades."

"Significantly, a very real concern has been acknowledged today with the launch of the *Assessment of Assessments* report – the first ever comprehensive overview of the marine assessment landscape - which also considers socio-economic factors. The report is a clear signal that the world needs a more inclusive approach on its oceans and resources. It provides a framework and options for how this can be done," said Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Despite the central role oceans play in the economic, environmental and social affairs of the planet's 6.7 billion inhabitants, significant gaps exist in our understanding and management of the complex processes at work – from the global climate system, to the water cycle and circulation of nutrients, to changes affecting marine habitats.

In addition, the vastness of the world's oceans have for far too long been perceived as impervious and indestructible to human impact.

The clearing of mangroves and coastal wetlands, the over-exploitation of fish stocks, rising tides of pollution, among many other challenges, are affecting the marine environment's ability to sustain livelihoods and life itself.

Meanwhile, climbing concentrations of greenhouse gases -- equal to a third or more of annual carbon dioxide emissions -- are being absorbed, as well as untold amounts of heavy metals, triggering mounting concern over the marine food chain.

To deal with this situation, improved monitoring and observation practices, regular assessments to provide a deeper understanding of the status and trends of environmental changes, and the know-how and ability to prevent, mitigate and adapt to these changes are urgently required.

That is why governments – at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and, subsequently, the UN General Assembly in 2005 -- recommended that a regular UN process for the global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment, including its socio-economic aspects, be initiated. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (IOC-UNESCO) were asked to serve as the lead agencies in this work.

The initial phase of the process came to be known as the "Assessment of Assessments". Under it, an Expert Group set up in 2006 examined various existing marine assessments, evaluating factors central to the influence of assessments, such as scientific credibility, policy relevance and legitimacy, which also helped identify best practices; thematic, geographic or data gaps, scientific uncertainties, as well as research and capacity-building needs, particularly in the developing world.

The Group will today present their findings to a special Working Group of the UN General Assembly, which will have before it a set of options and recommendations for governments to consider, on ways to move the envisioned "Regular Process" forward. These include clear formulations of the overall objective, the products to be delivered in the first five years of the process, its functionality and funding.

If established, the Regular Process for the reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment will "serve as the mechanism to keep the world's oceans and seas under continuing review by providing regular assessments at global and supra-regional levels."

The Working Group will also have before it a set of organizational options. These deal with the relationship of the "Regular Process" to the UN at the intergovernmental level; and the establishment of a management oversight body, a new expert group, and secretariat support mechanisms. The report provides a set of financing options which could average between \$4 million and \$5.6 million a year.

The GA Working Group was established to recommend a course of action on the Regular Process to the General Assembly at its sixty-fourth session in late 2009.

Note to Editors

The GA Working Group meeting (Ad Hoc Working Group of the Whole meeting for the Assessment of Assessments) takes place at UN Headquarters from 31 August to 4 September 2009.

The Group of Experts comprised 17 senior policy experts and scientists from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Ghana, India, Seychelles, the United Kingdom and the United States. Their work also underwent extensive peer review.

Oversight of the entire process was entrusted to a Steering Group, co-chaired by Australia and Mexico, and comprising representatives from 17 governments and six UN agencies -- including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the International Seabed Authority (ISA), UNEP and IOC/UNESCO.

The full Assessment of Assessments report, including a Summary for Decision-Makers, is available on the "Regular Process" website -- <http://www.unga-regular-process.org>

These reports are also available on the websites of UNEP and IOC-UNESCO:
<http://www.unep.org> and <http://ioc-unesco.org/>

Information on the UN General Assembly Working Group meeting can be found at http://www.un.org/Depts/los/global_reporting/global_reporting.htm and <http://www.unga-regular-process.org>

A detailed presentation on the Assessment of Assessments report will be made on Monday, 31 August, at 1:15 in Conference Room 8 of UN Headquarters. Media are invited.

Several members of the Group of Experts of the Assessment of Assessments report will be in attendance and available for one-on-one interviews.

For more information, please contact:

Nick Nuttall, UNEP Spokesperson and Head of Media, on Tel: +254-20-7623084, Mobile: +254-733-632755, or when travelling: +41-79-596-5737, or e-mail: nick.nuttall@unep.org;
or

Suzanne Bilello, Media Outreach, UNESCO Office in New York, Tel: +1 212 9634386,
e-mail: bilello@un.org

Jim Sniffen, UNEP Programme Officer, on Tel: 1-212-963-8094/8210, Mobile: +1-917-742-2218, e-mail: sniffenj@un.org