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Evolving the Narrative for Protecting a Rapidly Changing Ocean, Post-COVID-19

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The ocean is the linchpin supporting global health and well-being. Despite the ocean being considered ‘remote’ and largely inaccessible, this has not protected it from many impacts of human activities (Stoknes, 2015; Lubchenco & Gaines, 2019). Only 3% is now recognized by researchers mapping ocean impacts as having no discernible human impact (Halpern et al., 2015).

In the context of COVID-19 and human health more generally, the diversity of ocean life also provides a genetic storehouse of adaptive potential in the face of a changing climate (Blasiak et al., 2020). It is the source of new pharmaceutical products, which have been discovered at rates of up to 2.5 times the industry average (Blasiak et al., 2020).

Pandemics such as COVID-19, alongside all the human suffering and loss, may have brought a small pause to human activity, but this is still outweighed by the human footprint of exploitation and destruction. Although the risks posed by damage to the ocean from the direct and indirect impacts arising from human activities may be less clear to many people, that damage is resulting in increasingly severe climate disruption and sustained loss and degradation of ecosystem functions [1].

The reality is that the ocean is still a largely ignored part of the Earth system, with insufficient protection and management. The ocean cannot be directly ‘managed’, but our

activities can be managed, and in this way reduce impacts on the ocean. Similarly, precision is lacking in other related areas.

The new target of ‘at least 30%’ as a global target for coverage of the ocean by fully or highly protected MPAs (Horta e Costa et al., 2016) - the level of protection that will most benefit biodiversity (Zupan et al., 2018a) - is clearly and specifically worded, yet time and time again the ocean conservation community refers to the target as ‘30%’. The phrase ‘at least 30%’ is a direction, whereas ‘30%’ is a definitive destination. Alongside direct, often local, management issues, such as overfishing, pollution, and habitat destruction, a new range of global climate-related drivers are significantly increasing pressure on the ocean. In the last 15 years, six major areas of concern have been documented in the scientific literature, which are now widely recognized as issues of global concern (e.g. Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), 2019.

– Significant and accelerating heating of the ocean and associated oxygen loss.

– Significant sea-level rise and linked loss of coastal natural protection.

– Significant regional acidification with a worsening trend.

– Significant alterations to wind regimes and perturbations to major ocean currents and upwelling systems, which shape ocean ecosystems and human societies.

– Significant changes in patterns of ocean primary production, ecosystems, and species distribution resulting from increased warming and stratification at low to mid latitudes and decline of sea ice.

– Significant impact on marine [2].

Leading marine scientists created a six-point post-COVID-19 narrative:

1. All life is dependent on the ocean. We depend on the ocean for all life on Earth; it nurtures us, but we have done woefully little to nurture it.

2. By harming the ocean, we harm ourselves. All ocean activities need to be carried out more responsibly with the curtailment of damaging actions that affect current and future values.

3. By protecting the ocean, we protect ourselves. Humanity's reliance on the ocean means we must protect it to protect ourselves.

4. Humans, the ocean, biodiversity and climate are inextricably linked. The ocean modulates the climate and humans influence the state of the ocean and its biodiversity - what is needed is joined-up action and solutions.

5. Ocean and climate action must be undertaken together. If you are not factoring in ocean impacts and solutions, you are not effectively addressing climate breakdown.

6. The degree of ocean change requires action now. We have no choice. We need to act now or risk closing off future options for action [1].

References:

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2. New Resources [Electronic resource]. – Mode of access: www.stateoftheocean.org/outreach/new-resources/ – Date of access: 23.03.2021