



THE SECRETARY-GENERAL
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MESSAGE ON WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY
5 June 2004

The marine environment is facing challenges that, if not addressed immediately and effectively, will have profound implications for sustainable development. The theme of World Environment Day 2004 — *Wanted! Seas and Oceans: Dead or Alive?* — emphasizes that society can no longer view the world's seas as a convenient dumping ground for our waste, or as an unlimited source of plenty.

The facts are clear. The world's seas and oceans are becoming increasingly tainted by untreated waste water, air-borne pollution, industrial effluent and silt from inadequately managed watersheds. Nitrogen overload from fertilizers is creating a growing number of oxygen-starved "dead zones" in coastal waters across the globe. Marine litter is killing up to a million seabirds and 100,000 sea mammals and turtles each year. With more than 40 per cent of the human population already living within 60 kilometres of a coast, and the proportion growing, these problems are likely only to increase. Moreover, despite the growing reach and intensity of commercial fishing operations, total global fish catch is declining. Nearly three quarters of world fish stocks are being harvested faster than they can reproduce.

There is an urgent need for concerted action, on land and sea, at the national, regional and international levels. Mechanisms already exist, including the Global Plan of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and UN Food and Agricultural Organization action plans for fisheries. Nevertheless, the continuing depletion of the world's fish stocks and the increasing degradation of the marine environment indicate that these and other instruments, binding or non-binding, are not being sufficiently implemented and enforced.

Less than two years ago, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, governments committed to time-bound goals to end unsustainable fishing practices, restore depleted fish stocks, establish a regular global assessment of the marine environment, and create a representative network of marine protected areas. This last goal, to be achieved by 2012, is particularly important.

Less than one-half a per cent of marine habitats are protected — compared with 11.5 per cent of global land area. Yet studies show that protecting critical marine habitats, such as warm- and cold-water coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangroves, can dramatically increase fish size and quantity, with obvious benefits to large-scale commercial as well as local fisheries.

On this World Environment Day, I urge governments, businesses and individuals everywhere to show renewed respect for the seas and oceans from whence all life on earth originated. Let us all do our utmost to ensure that the world's most prolific natural resource is protected and sustainably managed for generations to come.

Kofi A. Annan
United Nations Secretary-General