



SEA VIEWS

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Seas under siege

As World Oceans Day 2010 - which will be celebrated on June 8 – approaches, Nazery Khalid ponders the fate of the oceans and calls for urgent, decisive actions to protect the seas from the perils they face

Mighty oceans, massive challenges

The oceans provide sustenance, resources and employment to many people. They also act as a conduit to migration of people and movement of goods that have shaped human civilization and facilitate global trade and economic growth. In addition to these pivotal roles, the seas also act as a regulator of the world's weather pattern. The importance of oceans that give the earth the moniker 'the Blue Planet' to civilization cannot be overemphasized.

Despite this, mankind has been nonchalant towards the upkeep of the oceans. We count on the seas to provide us with riches aplenty. We only want to extract them but care little to protect them. We seem to think that the seas can offer infinite amount of resources and have endless regenerative powers to replenish them and give us more. The massive oil spill in the Gulf of

Mexico and the stranding of a Chinese oil tanker in Great Barrier Reefs that happened recently underline mankind's lackadaisical attitude towards protecting the very marine environment which it depends so much on.

These provide just a few of the many worrying signs that the oceans are under enormous strain arising from our intensifying use and growing demand for their resources, and our antagonistic and irresponsible attitude towards their maintenance. Many symptoms are there for all to see that suggest the oceans are increasingly embattled and face enormous challenges that threaten the oceanic resources and marine ecosystems. They include dramatic depletion of fish stocks, eroding coastal lines, increasing pollution from sea- and land-based sources, presence of invasive alien species, deforestation of mangrove areas, and destruction of coral reefs, among many other telltale signs.

The need for the 'stakeholders of the seas' – which include users, governments, coastal communities, industries, fishermen, maritime-related organizations, environmentalists, scientists, regulatory and enforcement agencies, among many others - to step up efforts to mitigate the manifold threats faced by the oceans is a matter of pressing urgency. At the rate and intensity the seas are being used and their resources exploited, even the amazing recuperative power of Mother Nature cannot be perpetually relied upon to replenish the oceans' riches and restore their health.

The intense use of the seas and growing reliance on them for trade, resources, transportation, recreation, strategic interests and many others are increasingly threatening their resources and environmental integrity. In our relentless use of the seas and insatiable demand for their resources, we have exposed the fragile marine ecosystems to pollution, erosion and potentially irreversible damages.

If these threats are not worrying enough, the regional seas are now facing the growing specter of climate change that can cause irreplaceable loss and damage to their resources, habitat and ecosystems. Recent events such as typhoons, hurricanes and tsunami underscore the devastating havoc that angry seas can wreak. The imprints of global warming arising from mankind's rapacious exploitation of Mother Nature and irresponsible behaviors towards it can be seen in some of these so-called 'natural disasters'. The vulnerability of the seas to this cornucopia of threats requires nothing less than urgent, sustainable and serious actions to prevent the oceans from becoming a sea of troubles.

Malaysia and the sea

By virtue of an extended Exclusive Economic Zone, Malaysia's sea area is larger than its landmass. The nation's seas teem with a stunning range of fish and marine life that provide valuable protein source to its population. Malaysia lies within the Sulu-Sulawesi coral system, also known as Coral Triangle, which hosts two thirds of the world's coral reefs and the highest concentration of marine biodiversity.

The nation's seas also act as an economic lifeline and provide crucial trade waterways that enable the transportation of much of its international trade. The Straits of Malacca and South China Sea that border our shores are pivotal sealanes that facilitate much of the world's trade and host tremendous strategic importance to us and the international community. Much of the population's protein source comes from living resources in the seas. The seas also facilitate a stunning array of economic activities such as tourism, transportation, port operations, merchant shipping, shipbuilding, power generation, fishery, refining activities, offshore oil and gas and many others that generate revenue to the economy and provide employment to many. In addition, the importance of the seas to the strategic interests of the nation cannot be overemphasized. To underscore the value of the seas to the nation, the Malay term '*tanah air*' for 'motherland' consists of the words *tanah* which means land and *air* which means water.

Much effort has been undertaken by various stakeholders including government agencies, the research community, industry players and NGOs to protect and manage Malaysia's seas and protect their resources. However, the country's seas continue to be vulnerable to the effects of overuse of marine resources, rampant development of coastal areas and discharges of wastes. These combine to pollute the seas and deplete their resources, and threaten the delicate balance of marine ecosystems.

While some of the local actions and initiatives to protect the oceans and its resources have borne results, our seas and their ecosystems and resources are still vulnerable to many man-made threats, and coastal zones are exposed to natural threats. Increasingly, the seas also face the emerging threat of global warming and rising ocean levels which are already affecting marine ecosystems and resources and coastal communities in some parts of the world.

Protecting the seas from perils

Given the multiple threats they face, it is imperative that more concrete and urgent actions are taken to mitigate the risks and address the challenges emanating from overexploitation and poor maintenance of the seas. As the seas come under tremendous strain from overuse and overexploitation, the need to take concrete, meaningful actions to protect the seas has become extremely urgent.

To this end, the stakeholders of the seas must increase their efforts to ensure that offshore activities and along the seas are carried out in a sustainable and environmentally friendly fashion. It is critical that concrete steps are taken to protect maritime life support systems and manage coastal and marine resources. This is imperative to ensure those whose livelihood depends on the seas can continue to harvest their riches, and the nation's socio-economic and strategic interests are safeguarded.

For this to happen, an all-out approach needs to be undertaken not only to address the issue of pollution and overuse of the oceans but to instill awareness among the members of the public of the importance of protecting the seas. Adequate resources and strong political will must be in place to ensure the seas are well protected, managed and maintained. Constant efforts must be carried out to educate the public of the need to use the seas in a responsible fashion and to

inculcate a love for the oceans. Only through a comprehensive, concerted, committed and consistent approach to protect the oceans can we heal the scars we have inflicted on them and leave behind healthy, clean, safe and prosperous seas for future generations to inherit.

To protect the seas from the manifold threats they face, a common national vision articulating sustainable use of coastal and marine resources in the country must be articulated. It is becoming apparent that Malaysia needs to have a National Ocean Policy that provides a blueprint for the good management, responsible and sustainable use and protection of the nation's seas. It is encouraging that the National Oceanography Department under the Prime Minister's Department has kickstarted efforts to establish such a policy to help government agencies, policymakers and other stakeholders to address the gaps in the use, management and protection of the seas and harmonize initiatives towards forming a common vision to explore, exploit and conserve our marine resources. Given the fluid, expansive and trans-boundary nature of the seas, and the multiplicity of complex issues and challenges they face, governing the seas using a piecemeal basis is no longer effective.

For such a policy to be established, solid partnerships arrangements, strong regulatory framework, effective mechanisms, adequate technical capacity and resources, political will and strong public support must be put in place. To ensure the success of ocean conservation, protection and sustainable development programs, there must be strong partnership among regulatory agencies, NGOs, conservation and management programs, research institutions, private sector groups and coastal communities across all levels.

In this respect, the Putrajaya Declaration of Regional Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Seas of East Asia, signed during the East Asian Seas Congress held at the Malaysian administrative capital in 2003, could guide the stakeholders of the seas in developing a framework of actions to protect the seas and their resources. The Putrajaya Declaration spelled out targets for sustainable development, implementation of integrated ocean and coastal management approaches, and action programs aimed at solving problems and deficiencies in ocean and coastal governance.

In any initiatives to protect and manage the seas, it is crucial to educate the youths of the country of the importance of developing an understanding and appreciation of the oceans. Today's young generation will inherit the seas from the current one and will continue the efforts to protect the seas and their resources and ecosystems. As such, the love and care for the seas need to be nurtured in them from an early age.

To this end, it is heartening to note that many initiatives to promote sustainable use and management of marine resources and environment have been carried out at the national, regional and international levels. Some of the efforts are still nascent and will take a considerable amount of time and enormous commitment to bear fruit. However, it is encouraging to observe the growing awareness among agencies and the public of the need to put in place nuanced strategies and undertake long term actions to protect and manage the nation's seas and their resources. Work carried in out in areas such as reversing beach erosion, replanting of mangrove saplings, and protection of endangered species have shown some success. These should provide

encouragement to those who tirelessly put in efforts to conserve and manage the seas and their resources.

Make no mistake: the challenges facing the seas are manifold and complex, the amount of resources required to address them enormous, and the solutions not easily forthcoming. However, we must make it a priority to act quickly to protect the beleaguered seas. The task to reverse the damage already inflicted by mankind to marine ecosystems and the resources is no doubt daunting, but it is pivotal that we take measured steps now to protect and preserve the oceans and their contents.

It is a matter of deep concern to those who care for the seas that mankind's treatment of the seas desperately fail to match our aggressive use of and high dependence on them. The fate of the seas will depend on the actions we take today. The choice is ours: either we leave future generations clean, safe and healthy seas, or we will be held accountable for saddling them with problems and quandaries due to our recklessness, irresponsibility, indecisiveness and inaction.