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The Pacific environment, sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures.

Twelfth meeting of the Noumea Convention

Twelfth ordinary meeting of the contracting parties to the convention for the protection of the natural resources and environment of the South Pacific Region and related protocols (Noumea Convention)

Majuro, Marshall Islands

26 September 2014

Agenda Item 7.6: Oceanscape and the role of SPREP

Purpose

1. To understand how the Pacific Oceanscape provides a framework for implementing management efforts that reflect the ecological connectivity across Pacific island countries and territories, and allow sharing of resources and cross-learning from marine management efforts, in the establishment and effective management of marine and coastal areas.

Background

2. It is now widely recognised that the world's oceans are in crisis. Despite ever-increasing effort and new technologies, global fish catches have reached a plateau and most commercial fish stocks are now fully-exploited or over-exploited. It is estimated that 90% of the large predatory fish have vanished from the seas in the last 40 years, and that the populations of some shark species in the Pacific have crashed to 10% of initial abundance over the past 30 years. In addition to over-fishing, the oceans are suffering from other human-induced impacts, especially pollution. Climate change results in rising seawater temperatures, leading to melting ice-caps, bleaching of coral reefs, and the latest threat to be identified - ocean acidification.

3. The SPREP region covers some 10% of the global ocean, most of which is within the EEZs of SPREP members. Pacific island economies and populations may be small by global standards, but they are all Large Ocean States.

4. Although Pacific island countries produce less than 0.03% of global emissions of CO₂, they are suffering disproportionately from the impacts of climate change on the oceans. From inundation of low-lying atolls to depleted fish stocks and threats to coral reefs from bleaching and acidification, the Pacific islands are threatened like never before by the declining health of the oceans. To arrest and reverse this decline will take bold and concerted action, and that is the background to the Pacific Oceanscape framework.

5. SPREP's leading role in ocean conservation in the region was recognised by the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, when he issued an invitation to the SPREP Director-General to attend the global Our Oceans conference he convened in Washington DC mid-June.

SPREP's role and contribution to the Pacific Oceanscape

6. The idea of seascapes is not new - national governments, intergovernmental organisations and NGOs have undertaken integrated planning and management for discrete areas of coastal seas for over two decades, often with considerable success. Concepts such as community-based management of fisheries, ridge-to-reef planning and no-take reserves are widely used in seascapes in many parts of the world.

7. However, the idea of upscaling the experiences and lessons learned from seascapes to an oceanic scale is a far more daunting challenge, and it is to the credit of President Anote Tong that he had the courage to propose such an idea to the 40th Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting in 2009. His proposal struck a chord with Leaders and by 2010, a framework for the Oceanscape was developed, based on important policy documents, most notably the Pacific Island Regional Ocean Policy (2002) and the Pacific Plan (2005). Faced with the problem of managing over 10 percent of the Earth's ocean surface, the Heads of State of the Pacific Islands region have all endorsed and strongly support the Pacific Oceanscape Framework.

8. The Oceanscape covers nearly 38 million sq km – an area larger than the moon – and provides a framework for the integrated conservation management of the Pacific Ocean and Islands, covering ocean health and security; governance; sustainable resource management; increased research and knowledge investment; and facilitating the partnerships and cooperation needed to support the conservation of this vast ecosystem. It also provides support for the various sub-regional initiatives that have been launched in recent years, such as the Micronesia Challenge and large Marine Protected Areas in the EEZs of Kiribati and the Cook Islands, and the western portion of New Caledonia's EEZ that is part of the Coral Sea. The Oceanscape is a globally significant vehicle of international collaboration and provides an example of how the whole of the Pacific Islands region becomes much greater than the sum of its parts, through a collaborative approach by all SPREP members in the following areas:

1. Jurisdictional rights and responsibilities;
2. Good ocean governance;
3. Sustainable development, management and conservation;
4. Listening, learning, liaising and leading;
5. Sustaining action;
6. Adapting to a rapidly changing environment.

9. SPREP is fully committed to the implementation of the Oceanscape, and is involved in several major initiatives that contribute directly to its goals and objectives. SPREP has the lead role within CROP agencies in the following key areas that are fundamental to achieving the objectives of the Oceanscape:

- Marine protected areas;
- Conservation and management of threatened and migratory species;
- Marine pollution, including marine debris;
- Impacts of climate change on marine biodiversity, including ocean acidification;
- Developing new tools for sustainable development, including marine spatial planning.

Marine protected areas

10. Marine protected areas, both large and small, present tremendous opportunities for Pacific Islands to improve the resilience and conservation of biodiversity in the face of increasing threats from climate change and over-exploitation. SPREP supports the decisions by Kiribati, Cook Islands and New Caledonia to declare large MPAs within their EEZs, and acknowledges that MPAs can help to preserve important ecosystem services including efficient carbon sequestration, resilience for coral reefs and other marine biodiversity from the impacts of global warming, coastal protection from storms, and replenishment of local fisheries. SPREP has recently conducted marine BIORAPs (Rapid Biodiversity Assessments) in Nauru and the Vava'u archipelago in Tonga, as precursors to developing proposals for smaller MPAs, which may also be very successful, as demonstrated by the LMMA network and community-based approaches to fisheries management.

Conservation and management of threatened and migratory species

11. The populations of many species of cetaceans, turtles and sharks in the region are at historically low levels. Many Pacific Island Governments have taken affirmative action to protect threatened species within their own jurisdictions, but migratory species are particularly vulnerable because their journeys between breeding grounds and feeding grounds often take them through the EEZs of various Pacific Island countries and international waters. Efforts to protect and conserve iconic migratory marine species within EEZs may be nullified without similar measures being taken on the high seas. SPREP has made a significant contribution to developing a common position for the region in the UN discussions on Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) and now on the Post-2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

12. The Pacific Oceanscape recognises these problems through its Pacific Voyagers concept. SPREP has been actively engaged in several relevant initiatives in 2014, including: implementing a community-based programme to protect turtle nesting beaches and develop ecotourism in Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Tonga; partnering with the Dugong Secretariat of the Convention on Migratory Species to develop a GEF-funded programme to protect dugong and seagrass habitat in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; and providing training in managing whale strandings and disentangling whales caught in netting and rope. Additionally, SPREP has supported the introduction of a web-based system (www.apodstrandings.org) to report whales strandings and a mobile phone application (currently only in French) - rapport.mobi@gmail.com - for identification of cetaceans at sea that will encourage a broader sightings network in the region.

Marine pollution, including marine debris

13. While the impacts of some forms of marine pollution, such as oil spills, are generally obvious, the insidious effects of marine debris are often far less apparent. And while much is known about the provenance and distribution of marine debris such as plastics and discarded fishing gear in the North Pacific, surprisingly few studies have been conducted in the South Pacific. SPREP is co-sponsoring a Ph.D. student at Auckland University to carry out such a study specifically for the SPREP region. Additionally, the Director of WPMC and the Threatened and Migratory Species Adviser attended an international workshop on marine debris convened by the International Whaling Commission in August, where commitments were made to collaborate more actively with a number of government and non-government organisations.

Impacts of climate change on marine biodiversity, including ocean acidification

14. There are several impacts of climate change on marine biodiversity, including the bleaching of corals and feminisation of turtle eggs by rising water and sand temperatures respectively. However, ocean acidification is a special concern. Much of the carbon dioxide generated by burning fossil fuels is dissolved into the ocean, where it forms a weak acid. As more carbon dioxide is emitted, the ocean becomes more acidic. The future impacts of ocean acidification are unknown, but may be very profound. It is already known that corals and shellfish grow more slowly and may have weaker shells in more acidic seawater. The larvae of important fish species have also been shown to die or develop defects if the water becomes too acid. Potential impacts on other keystone species such as squid are unknown.

Developing new tools for sustainable development

15. SPREP is at the forefront of new approaches to support sustainable development and mitigate the impacts of climate change, such as ecosystem-based adaptation and marine spatial planning. We are working with IUCN, CSIRO and member countries to undertake marine spatial planning at oceanic, and national scales under the French-funded PACIOCEA and German-funded MACBIO projects.

Conclusions

16. SPREP has embraced the Oceanscape vision and Framework, which we consider to be an endeavour of global significance, as its guiding framework for work in the marine environment. SPREP will continue to deploy such resources as are available to achieve the Oceanscape's goals, because, in the words of Epeli Hau'ofa:

"No people on Earth are better suited to be the guardians of the world's largest ocean than those for whom it has been home for generations."

Recommendation:

17. The Parties are invited to:

- **note** the importance of the Pacific Oceanscape Vision and Framework for the Region; and
- **continue** to expand their support for use of the Pacific Oceanscape Vision and Framework for guiding implementation of the Pacific Plan and the new Pacific Regionalism.

19 August, 2014