

Headline: Asean, climate change, and our oceans

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With the Philippines hosting activities marking the 50th founding anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, it's time a regionwide climate change program was advanced.

Asean is the most successful intergovernmental organization in the developing world. It continues to demonstrate that, as interdependence among member-nations intensifies, collaborative cooperation is invaluable in boosting regional peace and prosperity.

What is remarkable is that Asean was founded at a time of turmoil and upheaval. Thailand was under martial law. Indonesia was recovering from a bloody military coup. The Philippines had broken off diplomatic ties with Malaysia over the issue of Sabah. And the Federation of Malaysia had just collapsed, forcing Lee Kuan Yew and Tunku Abdul Rahman to take separate paths toward democratic rule.

Yet under these turbulent circumstances Asean's founding fathers found common cause in the notion of a regional framework for peace and cooperation. Their humanism, genius and foresight gave us an institution that has allowed member-nations to develop conducive habits of working together for half a century now.

The region's politics has since matured, and priorities have shifted. Today, we live on a warming planet and scientists are marching to protest Donald Trump's disconnect with the value of science to society.

As a core issue, climate change has lagged behind in Asean's agenda. True, the association is mindful about integrating marine conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in its strategic programs. But so far, it has failed to give climate change the priority that the issue deserves, along with free trade and economic integration.

With the Paris Agreement entering into force, Asean would do well to invigorate its efforts on climate change resiliency. It may begin with a program to arrest the ongoing oceanic destruction and overfishing.

Our nations are interconnected by oceans, yet we are in the process of destroying the ecology of the very waters that sustain our planet, provide food for our populations, and absorb about half of the world's atmospheric carbon.

A study of 192 countries with ocean shorelines, based on 2010 data, identified Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia among the top 10 dumpers of plastic waste and synthetic materials into the oceans. At least 267 different species are known to have suffered from entanglement or ingestion of this debris including seabirds, turtles, seals, whales and fish.

As early as 1998, more than 1,600 marine scientists and conservation biologists from 65 countries warned that our seas are in trouble. Contamination of the marine environment has created immense concentrations of floating litter, such as the infamous Great Pacific Garbage Patch covering hundreds of miles in the north Pacific Ocean.

A second oceanic problem is the rapid decline of marine life. A 2003 study by the journal Nature indicated that the population of large fish species—such as tuna, swordfish and marlin—had seriously declined since 1950.

Worldwide, it is estimated that 90 percent of large predatory fish stocks have vanished. And marine biologists warn that some 80 percent of the world's fisheries are fully exploited or overexploited, depleted, or in a state of collapse.

According to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission in Australia, some tuna stocks are now so low they should not be fished. For instance, bigeye tuna is about 16 percent of its original spawning biomass, and bluefin tuna is at the highest risk, at about 3 percent of its original spawning biomass.

What effect will the garbage pollution have on the oceans? Marine scientists and biologists do not yet know. But they are certain that the accumulation of plastic fragments in the deep ocean, together with coral bleaching, will modify the oceans' ecosystem in ways that can only horrify our next generations.

Asean states and scientists should be duty-bound to examine this extraordinary stress on our waters—waters that once divided nations but now unite us in our frantic quest for survival.

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