

Headline: A year of ocean regeneration

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OXFORD—The importance of the world's oceans cannot be overstated. They supply 50 percent of the oxygen we breathe, feed billions of people, and provide livelihoods for millions. They are the great biological pump of global atmospheric and thermal regulation, and the driver of the water and nutrient cycles. And they are among the most powerful tools for mitigating the effects of climate change. In short, the oceans are a critical ally, and we must do everything in our power to safeguard them.

This is all the more important, given the unprecedented and unpredictable threats that we currently face. Though the ocean has been integral to slowing climate change, absorbing over 30 percent of the greenhouse-gas emissions and 90 percent of the excess heat generated since the Industrial Revolution, the cost has been huge. Ocean acidification and warming have been occurring at alarming rates, and are already having a serious impact on some of our most precious marine ecosystems—an impact that will only intensify.

Today, vast swaths of the world are experiencing what is likely to be the strongest El Niño on record. The adverse weather resulting from the phenomenon—which originates in the Pacific, but affects all oceans worldwide—is expected to affect adversely over 60 million people this year, compounding the misery wrought last year. It is a sobering reminder of our vulnerability to both natural and human-induced shocks to the earth's systems.

Despite all of this, we continue to degrade our oceans through the relentless destruction of habitats and biodiversity, including through overfishing and pollution. Disturbingly, recent reports indicate that the oceans may contain one kilogram of plastics for every three kilograms of fish by 2025. These actions are facilitated by chronic failures of global governance; for example, one-fifth of all fish taken from the oceans are caught illegally.

Urgent action must be taken not just to address climate change broadly by reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, but also to enhance the health and resilience of our oceans. Fortunately, in 2015—a watershed year for global commitments—world leaders established conservation and restoration of the world's oceans as a key component of the new United Nations development agenda, underpinned by 17 so-called Sustainable Development Goals.

Specifically, SDG 14 commits world leaders to end overfishing, eliminate illegal fishing, establish more marine protected areas, reduce plastic litter and other sources of marine pollution, and increase ocean resilience to acidification. The Global Ocean Commission celebrated this strong endorsement of urgent action to protect the oceans, which closely reflects the set of proposals contained in its 2014 report "From Decline to Recovery: A Rescue Package for the Global Ocean."

So the world now has an agreed roadmap for ocean recovery. But how far and how fast we travel are yet to be determined. And the task ahead—translating admirable and ambitious commitments into effective collaborative action at the local, national and international levels—is immense.

The challenge is compounded by the weak and fragmented state of global ocean governance. Unlike other SDGs—such as those related to health, education or hunger—there is no single international body charged with driving forward the implementation of the ocean SDG. As a result, it is not clear who will be responsible for monitoring and measuring progress and ensuring

accountability.

To ensure that SDG 14 does not fall by the wayside, the governments of Fiji and Sweden proposed convening a high-level UN conference on oceans and seas in Fiji, with Swedish support, in June 2017. Their proposal was subsequently co-sponsored by 95 countries and adopted unanimously in a UN General Assembly resolution.

By drawing attention to the progress being made toward meeting SDG 14 targets and shining a spotlight on where results are lagging, the conference will provide a much-needed “accountability moment.” At the same time, by bringing together relevant stakeholders, it will help to catalyze deeper cooperation among governments, civil society and the private sector.

This is a promising step forward, reflecting the tremendous momentum that efforts to protect the oceans have gained in recent years. As the Global Ocean Commission's work comes to a natural conclusion, its many partners and supporters will be working hard to sustain this momentum, ensuring that building healthy and resilient oceans remains a global priority until it is a global reality. The key to success, according to the Global Ocean Commission's final report, will be the creation of an independent, transparent mechanism for monitoring, measuring, and reporting on the essential actions needed to achieve the SDG 14 targets, as well as additional UN conferences between now and 2030.

Current and future generations alike need—and deserve—a healthy, resilient ocean. Growing awareness of—and strong commitments to resolve—the challenges facing our oceans is heartening. But it is just the beginning. One hopes that 2016 turns out to be the year when the world enters a new era of ocean regeneration. Project Syndicate

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