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DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION: ENVIRONMENT

Marine pollution

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly the report of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme concerning problems relating to marine pollution, submitted in accordance with paragraph 5 of Assembly resolution 34/183 of 18 December 1979.

* A/36/150.

ANNEX

MARINE POLLUTION 1/

Report of the Governing Council of the
United Nations Environment Programme

By resolution 34/183 of 18 December 1979, the General Assembly requested the Governing Council to report to it at its thirty-sixth session, through the Economic and Social Council, on the problems relating to marine pollution. By paragraph 6 of decision 9/10 A of 26 May 1981, the Council authorized the Executive Director to transmit his report on the subject (UNEP/GC.9/5/Add.4), on its behalf, in response to the above resolution. For the views of delegations concerning the question of marine pollution, see chapter V of the report of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme on the work of its ninth session (A/36/25, paras. 295-299).

1/ The definition of marine pollution long employed by the United Nations, as set forth in the general principles for assessment and control of marine pollution (United Nations publication, Sales No. E. 73. 11. A. 14, annex III) recommended by the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Ibid., Chap. II, recommendation 92) is "the introduction by man, directly or indirectly, of substances or energy into the marine environment (including estuaries) resulting in such deleterious effects as harm to living resources, hazards to human health, hindrance to marine activities including fishing, impairment of quality for use of sea water, and reduction of amenities". With little variation, this definition has been incorporated in all relevant conventions adopted as a result of UNEP's regional seas programme.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Problems of marine pollution have not altered greatly in the last decade, but man's perception of them has changed markedly. Improvements in marine environmental quality have been achieved in many coastal areas through pollution control, and severe degradation in some areas has been avoided through the application of stringent restrictions on waste discharges. Regional agreements aiming at the protection of enclosed and semi-enclosed seas, such as the Helsinki, Barcelona and Kuwait Conventions, have entered into force providing the legal basis for co-operation among States on this subject.

2. National priorities have shifted since the 1960s and the early 1970s. The acute energy shortages in many parts of the world have necessitated measures to provide new sources of energy, and these have sometimes introduced new pollution problems, and at other times required relaxation of existing strict regulatory controls.

3. Protection of coastal waters, in particular those in closed and semi-enclosed seas, against environmental damage deserves high priority. The impact on the marine environment of conventional energy sources, for example through the exploitation of different sections of the continental shelf for fossil fuels, the transport of liquid and gaseous hydrocarbons by tanker and pipeline, and the use of coal for thermal power, must be fully understood. The environmental effects of nuclear power reactors located on rivers discharging into coastal waters, constructed on the coast or mounted on offshore structures must be carefully evaluated before construction proceeds, and these impacts should be minimized by careful selection of sites and development of design to incorporate environmental requirements.

4. The main thrust in the 1980s must continue to be towards protection of coastal waters, estuaries and other inland waters, along with restoration of already degraded coastal marine environments. Most of the living resources of the sea are found in these vulnerable coastal zones. Coastal resources could be severely reduced by pollution long before adverse trends can be detected in the open oceans. Human populations are generally growing throughout the world, and pressures on the coastal zones are increasing as a larger proportion of the population moves to the coast. Coastal developments for industry and for human habitation can permanently destroy vital estuarine and inshore coastal habitats for marine organisms. The impact can be especially severe in sensitive coastal ecosystems, such as sea-grass beds, mangrove swamps and coral reefs. Often the effects are of a chronic nature, and their impact can only be assessed after long-term studies.

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5. The choice of alternative energy sources may lead in the next decade or two to utilization of the sea as a source of energy. Tidal power is already being harnessed in significant quantities in at least two coastal areas of the world. Preliminary feasibility studies have demonstrated that energy can also be generated by wave action, coastal winds, salinity gradients and vertical temperature gradients. The utilization of marine biomass (large algae) for methane production is another potential source of energy in the sea. However, thorough environmental impact studies will be required before any of the potential energy resources of the sea can be considered as safe from the standpoint of protection of the marine environment and of coastal ecosystems.

6. Finally, the effects of marine pollution on human health and the quality of life must be fully considered. The elimination of possible transmittal of pathogens through sea water and seafood must receive high priority. The aesthetic quality of coastal waters should not be ignored. Sewage treatment and improved methods of waste disposal into the sea should be introduced whenever necessary to make the use of coastal regions safer for residents and visitors and more attractive for tourism.

II. SOURCES OF MARINE POLLUTION AND POSSIBLE TRENDS OF CHANGES IN THEIR OCCURRENCE

7. The chief sources of marine pollution are land-based and may reach the sea through rivers, direct coastal out-falls, coastal urban and agricultural runoff, and precipitation of atmospheric emissions. Pollutants may also be introduced by shipping and by structures such as oil drilling rigs mounted on the continental shelf.

8. Because of the paucity of reliable baseline data on the levels of major marine pollutants in the world oceans, the trend in their occurrence is barely understood. However, intensive regional baseline studies carried out during the last decade in some areas (e.g. the North Atlantic, the Baltic, the Mediterranean) are shedding more light on the situation in the areas studied.

9. The major categories of pollutants which may have a long-term impact on the global oceans are: petroleum hydrocarbons, halogenated hydrocarbons, metals, radionuclides and persistent solids.

10. Petroleum hydrocarbons reach the sea through various routes, with only a small part of the total coming from ships, even though catastrophic oil spills from large tankers are most dramatic. The total amount of oil introduced into the sea annually has been estimated at 6.113 million tonnes, of which 2.133 million tonnes come from various sources involved in transportation of oil by sea: only 0.2 million tonnes of that is attributable to tanker accidents. Rivers introduce about 1.6 million

tonnes annually, while natural seeps are estimated to contribute 0.6 million tonnes of petroleum hydrocarbons annually, the same amount reaching the sea from the atmosphere. The balance of the annual input is variously contributed by various sources, including coastal refineries and coastal municipal wastes.

11. There has been an increase during the last decade in the amount of petroleum hydrocarbons transported on the world oceans. The number and volume of spills have also grown. Nevertheless, the amount of oil introduced into the oceans in 1980 has probably not increased greatly since the early 1970s.

12. Halogenated hydrocarbons in the sea originate largely from terrestrial application of chlorinated-hydrocarbon pesticides in agriculture and forestry. These synthetic chemicals may reach the sea through agricultural runoff and rivers, but a comparatively large proportion is transported seaward in the atmosphere by winds and is ultimately washed out by rain. In addition, industrial chemicals, such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), used in electrical transformers and condensers, leak into the environment and eventually reach the sea through direct discharges and through rivers and urban and industrial runoff, as well as from the atmosphere.

13. In the northern hemisphere at least at middle latitudes, the use of such halogenated hydrocarbons as DDT and PCBs was curtailed around 1972 (although other pesticides, e.g. toxaphene, have taken the place of DDT) and they have thus generally shown decreased concentrations in estuaries and coastal waters along the North Atlantic and Pacific during the last decade. Their application in tropical and subtropical areas has, however, not substantially abated, and in the southern hemisphere it has increased, particularly in South America. Therefore, it can be expected that concentrations of these compounds may increase in southern hemisphere and low-latitude northern hemisphere seawaters.

14. Pollution by metals arises from various land-based operations such as mining, milling and smelting activities, metal plating and assorted manufacturing processes. Some of the metals may enter the sea through the aquatic route, while a certain proportion reaches the oceans via the atmosphere and is washed out by rain. The amount of iron, manganese, copper, zinc, lead, tin and antimony entering the sea through river discharges is an order of magnitude higher than the amount discharged through natural geological processes. Smelter emissions may transmit substantial quantities of metals into the atmosphere. The same holds true for coal-burning thermal plants and metallurgical industries. Nevertheless, seawater concentrations of metals in oceanic areas are still regarded essentially as at "background" levels. The problem of mercury is discussed below.

15. Lead is the only metal whose natural geochemical cycling has been clearly altered by man, leading to concentrations of lead in the surface waters of some parts of the oceans at above background levels. The use of tetraethyl lead as an anti-knock agent in gasoline and the emissions from steel plants have increased the flux of lead to the atmosphere by an order of magnitude (0.44 million tonnes per year) over the natural flux. Other metals may exhibit comparatively high local concentrations in nearshore waters, where there may be industrial or urban sources of these metals, but their global budget has not been significantly altered.

16. Radionuclides have been reaching the sea through fallout from atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. The annual deposition of fission products from nuclear tests reached a peak in 1963, but since the partial Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water of 5 August 1963, this source of radionuclides has been steadily declining, although there have been a few small peaks superimposed on the decreasing trend as a result of atmospheric tests of nuclear weapons by countries which were not signatory to the Treaty.

17. Radioactive contributions to the marine environment from peaceful uses of radioactivity have been comparatively small, and reach the sea through rivers or direct coastal discharges. New nuclear power reactors, when operating normally, release little radioactivity into the atmosphere or into nearby waters. Consequently, emissions of radionuclides from nuclear power reactors have not substantially increased during the last decade. However, reactor accidents may lead to unpredictably high releases.

18. Low-level radioactive wastes sealed in containers were dumped in the Atlantic and Pacific coastal waters of the United States of America between 1945 and 1962. Such ocean dumping of radioactive material ceased after 1962, partly for economic reasons. However, dumping of radioactive wastes in the North-East Atlantic has continued, and is now being conducted under the auspices of the European Nuclear Energy Agency. Ocean dumping of low-level and intermediate-level radioactive wastes from European sources will probably continue under the Convention for the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping from Ships and Aircraft, 15 February 1972 (the Oslo Convention), and the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter, 29 December 1972 (the London Dumping Convention).

19. As plans for new nuclear power reactors are implemented in many countries to supplement existing energy sources it is expected that the entry of radioactive materials into the sea will increase. Reprocessing of nuclear fuel from power reactors may also add some radioactive materials to the sea.

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20. Persistent solids, such as plastics, may have undesirable ecological effects in the sea and hinder maritime operations. In general, much of the persistent plastics and other litter entering the sea from land-based sources comes from garbage disposal and ordinary human refuse. Solid wastes, of which persistent plastics form only a part, are at present being introduced into the oceans in ever increasing amounts. Approximately 6.4×10^6 tonnes of shipboard litter are discarded annually into the world's oceans. At present, only 0.7 per cent of this litter is plastic. However, plastics production is doubling every 12 years, so that the amount of plastic litter can be expected to increase substantially unless controls are applied.

21. Nearshore marine pollution problems can also arise from a host of other agents that are not included in the above categories. While having perhaps little impact globally, they can have serious consequences in local areas. These are the materials that normally undergo degradation in the natural marine environment, but are often introduced in such quantities as to exceed the assimilative capacity of the local receiving waters. If there is a continuous discharge of such agents, chronic pollution can arise. These materials can be classified as:

- (a) Dissolved organic substances;
- (b) Particulate organic matter;
- (c) Particulate inorganic material;
- (d) Soluble inorganic substances including nutrient constituents;
- (e) Micro-organisms;
- (f) Thermal discharges.

Normally, these groups of substances are not considered to have a long-term, wide-ranging impact on the marine environment. They also may not have a serious effect on the nearshore environment, if they are effectively diluted with a large volume of receiving water and dispersed. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

22. Ocean mining is not yet a full-fledged reality. Nevertheless, the potential for such mining exists and it has been shown to be technically feasible. Pollution could arise from such mining operations through disturbance of the bottom and creation of turbidity by excavating nodules or dredging for metalliferous muds. Pollution could also result from the concentrating process. Whether the metals are extracted and concentrated at sea or on land, there would be tailings (pulverized rock) for disposal, which, if discharged into the sea, may create a turbidity problem. Moreover, metals may leach from the fine particles resulting from physical crushing and grinding of nodules followed by chemical treatment.

III. EFFECTS ON LIVING RESOURCES, ECOSYSTEMS, HUMAN HEALTH AND AMENITIES

A. Living resources

23. Clear-cut effects of pollution on the living resources of the sea have not been unequivocally documented. There are no known cases of pelagic species of fish, for example, where populations have been shown to suffer a decline due strictly to pollution. The effects of fishing intensity, natural environmental factors, and success or failure of a particular year-class because of a combination of favourable or unfavourable conditions, have always dominated the variables that determine the size of a given pelagic fish population. It would be difficult to identify any impact of pollution superimposed on such far-ranging effects of other factors. The only instance of possible effect of a pollutant on the population of a marine organism was reported in the reproductive failure of Baltic Sea seals, which showed high levels of DDT and PCB in their tissues.

24. The impact of pollution on fisheries resources is felt most in the nearshore zone. This is where the various shellfish stocks, molluscan and crustacean, are located. Anadromous fish species use the estuaries and other parts of the coastal zone as nursery grounds before they proceed out to sea. Adults of both anadromous and catadromous species must swim through estuaries in order to reach their spawning grounds, and many coastal species feed in estuaries. Hence, pollutants in the coastal waters, or developments that disrupt or destroy inshore habitats, can be disastrous for various coastal fish and invertebrate species. Long before impacts of pollution are recognized in offshore waters, the inshore fisheries resources can be severely reduced. This has happened to many stocks of oysters on both the Atlantic and the Pacific coasts of North America, while in Europe and on the east coast of North America, salmon and sea-run trout have vanished from streams where they were once abundant.

B. Ecosystems

25. The impact of pollution on marine ecosystems tends to be slow and insidious, and it is difficult to identify the most sensitive component of the ecosystem. The impact of pollution on Arctic and Antarctic ecosystems can be much more serious than in tropical and subtropical regimes.

26. Disruption of food chains can occur in coastal waters as a result of pollution or coastal area development. Food chains in estuaries in particular, are highly specialized and vulnerable to disturbance by man. They are extremely important from a practical point of view when they lead to economically valuable species such as salmon and oysters.

27. The impact of pollution and coastal area development on marine and estuarine food chains requires specialized and detailed investigation. Unfortunately, few such detailed, long-term studies have yet been conducted.

C. Human health and amenity values

28. Human health can be affected in a variety of ways by pollution in the marine environment. The most dramatic incidents are those where deaths or severe illnesses of humans are caused by consumption of contaminated seafood. Mercury, one of the more hazardous metals because of its neurological effect on human consumers when ingested in metallorganic form, has been widely studied in the last decade. Levels of mercury found in certain long-lived fish species in some regions (e.g. the Mediterranean) are up to four times higher (3 mg/kg) than the levels in the same species from open oceans. Nevertheless, it seems that these levels are a natural phenomenon not caused by man-made pollution.

29. Sewage effluents, or municipal wastewaters as they are sometimes known, contribute to perhaps the most universal form of marine pollution. Their impact is usually in inshore waters, which are used for growing and/or harvesting of shellfish as well as for recreation such as bathing and boating. The effect of sewage on such filter-feeders as oysters, clams and mussels is well known. These shellfish concentrate bacteria and viruses from sewage in the process of feeding. The consumption of raw or partially cooked shellfish which have been exposed to untreated sewage can thus lead to the transmittal of viral diseases such as hepatitis.

30. Sewage pollution in coastal waters affects water-related recreation and amenities. While cases of serious diseases, e.g. typhoid and cholera, due to sea bathing in sewage-polluted waters have never been conclusively proved, there is evidence of transmittal of certain mild afflictions, such as respiratory infections and gastro-enteritis, through this mode. The more undesirable aspect of sewage-pollution is its effect on amenity value of the water and beach. There may be visible turbidity, scum and other floatables on the water surface and beach, and an offensive odour, associated with the sewage discharge.

31. Oil spills are another form of pollution which has its undesirable visual and olfactory attributes, adversely affecting seashore residences and recreational areas, and sometimes causing severe set-backs to tourism.

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IV. ACTIONS TO ALLEVIATE MARINE POLLUTION PROBLEMS

32. The approach to solving marine pollution problems requires a series of steps, which may be summarized as follows:

(a) Identification of pollution problems through assessment of their sources, amounts, levels, trends and effects;

(b) Development of environmental quality criteria, based on levels of pollutants in seawater, marine biota and sediments that are not expected to damage marine organisms or ecosystems, or to be harmful to human health;

(c) Formulation and promulgation of national, regional and global legislation and regulations to control marine pollution, as an essential instrument of environmental management policies.

V. THE ROLE OF UNEP IN ALLEVIATING MARINE POLLUTION

33. UNEP, as the "focal point for environmental action and co-ordination within the United Nations system" (General Assembly resolution 2997 (XXVII)) assists in, and in many cases co-ordinates, the development and implementation at the global, regional and national levels of the steps outlined in paragraph 32 above.

34. Specifically, UNEP concentrates on problems of the marine and coastal environment of ten regional seas, through programmes involving the co-operation of more than 100 coastal States and eighteen United Nations bodies and specialized agencies, as well as intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. These efforts have led to the formal adoption of regional action plans for the protection and development of the Mediterranean (1975), the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (1976), the Kuwait Action Plan region (1978), the West African Region (1981), the Wider Caribbean (1981) and for the East Asian Seas (1981). (The action plan for the South-East Pacific may also be adopted in the second half of 1981). In some cases, within the framework of these Government-approved action plans, regional conventions for the protection and development of the marine environment and coastal areas, supplemented by protocols dealing more specifically with a particular source of pollution or environmental problem, have been adopted (Barcelona Convention, 1976; Kuwait Convention, 1978; Abidjan Convention 1981).

35. In addition, UNEP actively supports, contributes to, or is associated with, the efforts of other United Nations and non-United Nations organizations related to the protection of the marine environment, for example through support to the secretariat of the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea, GESAMP, GIPME, IGOSS, RIOS, the London Dumping Convention, the Oslo Convention, and the Conventions on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (Helsinki, 22 March 1974) and on the Prevention of Marine Pollution from Land-based Sources (Paris, 4 June 1974).

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

36. It is recommended that:

(a) The continued assessment of the sources, amounts and effects of marine pollutants should be actively pursued by UNEP as a component of Earthwatch, through support for national, regional and global efforts;

(b) The work on the development and implementation of regional action plans for the protection of enclosed and semi-enclosed seas, as well as of coastal waters of regions with defined common problems, should be intensified as the most rational approach to controlling marine pollution at its source through the full mobilization of national resources;

(c) The trends in marine pollution should be kept under constant review using existing mechanisms (e.g. GESAMP, SCOR, regional action plans) and periodic reports prepared on the state of the marine environment at both regional and global levels;

(d) Full support should be given to the activities defined by the Law of the Sea Conference as related to the protection of the marine environment.
