

The ship has reached the shore

By Silke Humbert, Sustainability Economist

The Guardian, a British daily newspaper, called it “the most important talks no one has heard of”. After two decades of tough negotiations, in March consensus was reached on a deal to protect biodiversity on the high seas. Conference president Rena Lee of Singapore summed it up poetically: “The ship has reached the shore” were her words as she presented the agreement to tumultuous applause.

Are more agreements needed to protect the environment?

More than 40 years ago, the global community passed the last high seas treaty (UNCLOS, United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea). Although the 1982 deal included protection of the sea, at the time the focus was on allocating the use of oceans and their resources. While it is easy to draw borders and build fences on land, this is not possible for the world's oceans. There were repeated conflicts among nations about who could fish, carry out research or navigate in which areas. The UNCLOS treaty defined national economic exclusion zones of 200 sea miles from the coast out to sea – the remaining two thirds of the oceans were designated as international waters that every country could use for fishing, research and shipping. This left the door wide open for exploitation of the marine ecosystem on the high seas. Garrett Hardin, who researched the commons in the 1960s – i.e. goods available for use by all and for which users compete with one another – put it like this: “Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.”

Is the ocean experiencing the tragedy of the commons?

The “ruin” can be described on three levels. First, it affects fish stocks. Since 1970, global stocks of marine species used by humans have been halved on average. One third of fish stocks is suffering from overfishing; in other words, stocks are not regenerating fast enough and are shrinking. This affects – secondly – all those employed in the fishing industry. Roughly 600 million people depend on fishing. For them, today

this is a more expensive and simultaneously less productive activity than previously. Third, everyone not directly employed in the fishing industry is also affected by the declining biodiversity of the high seas. Currently, the oceans absorb almost half of the carbon dioxide and produce more than half of the world's oxygen. Studies show that the diminishing biodiversity of the seas leads to a reduction in a function of the seas that is central to human survival. Protecting the oceans is no longer merely a matter of maintaining biodiversity for idealistic reasons – it is a matter of our livelihoods.

All's well that ends well?

The centrepiece of the new agreement on biodiversity in international waters calls for limiting “freedom for all” on the high seas by forming marine protected areas. At present approximately 1% of international waters is protected, but in future the figure should be 30%. Certain research results are optimistic about the regeneration of fish stocks in these protected areas. Is the new treaty thus really one of the most important deals that no one has heard of? The fact that all the parties reached an agreement is certainly a major breakthrough. The negotiating partners that are already feeling the effects of the decline in biodiversity in the oceans and hence have the greatest need for a new agreement appear to be satisfied. “Overall, we, as small island states, are very happy with the treaty,” says Ismael Zahir, the representative from Samoa and advisor to the Alliance of Small Island States. The concrete implementation is still unclear, but for the first stage of an international agreement, the ship has successfully reached the shore.

¹High seas treaty: historic deal to protect international waters finally reached at UN | Environment | The Guardian

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