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Press Conference

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Press Conference on World Oceans Day

The world had already consumed 90 per cent of the global stock of large fish on the high seas — a third of it caught by illegal, unregulated and unreported vessels, according to marine experts and legal scholars who spoke at a Headquarters press conference today as the United Nations kicked off the second annual World Oceans Day.

They said the rest of the fish could disappear by mid-century, threatening the well-being of oceans and humans alike, warning that, unless humankind reversed course soon, it could be too late. “The actions that will be taken, starting now, for the next 10 years, may be the most important in the next 10,000 years,” said Sylvia Earle, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence and Adviser to Disneynature on the film *Oceans*.

The Disneynature production, screened at Headquarters at 6 p.m. tonight, aims to raise public awareness about the need to better protect the sea. Also tonight, New York City’s Empire State Building was to be lit up in white, blue and purple to signify the entirety of the oceans, from the shallows to the darker depths. “Anything we care about — our economies, our health, our security, life itself — depends on the fact that this is a blue planet, Ms. Earle said. “It’s our responsibility as never before to enable the ocean to prosper.”

Noting that oceans regulated the global climate and were a critical part of the biosphere, she pointed out, however, that only 1 per cent of them were deemed protected areas. Humans had eaten not only 90 per cent of large fish, but also smaller species like tuna, swordfish, shark and herring, while dumping ever-increasing quantities of plastics and other garbage into the seas. That altered the seas in ways that scientists could not keep pace with, having merely scratched the surface of marine exploration, understanding and conservation, she said. Ignorance and complacency were a big part of the problem, she said. “There are a lot of people who still think it’s okay to put into the ocean whatever we want to, that it will be alright, and to take out of the ocean, without limit”.

David Freestone, Lobingier Visiting Professor of Comparative Law and Jurisprudence at George Washington University, said the need for better ocean protection would be addressed today, during a round table discussion titled “United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 15 years after its entry into force”. Panellists would discuss ways to address current challenges facing the Law of the Sea regime, such as deep ocean vents, cold seeps and cold water corals, as well as overfishing, the Gulf of Mexico oil spill and the use of the high seas for piracy.

He said regional fisheries management organizations were often blamed for overfishing from illegal, unregulated and unreported vessels, but those organizations only regulated two thirds of the fish caught. “This is a major challenge. This is not the fault of the Convention, this is the fault of implementation,” he said, adding that oceans were victims of climate change, but also played a major role in humankind’s response to it.

Isabelle Picco, Permanent Representative of Monaco to the United Nations, agreed. “We have the science, we have the rules, but what we’re lacking is real implementation. So let’s raise public awareness to enforce change at the policy level.” Monaco’s commitment to protect the oceans was long-standing, she said, adding that the principality’s Government had contributed to *Oceans* and would commemorate the 100th anniversary of Monaco’s Oceanographic Museum in November by launching the “Let the Mediterranean Sea Live” exhibition, focusing on desertification and jelly fish outbreaks, among other topics. Monaco had already prohibited the consumption of Atlantic blue fin tuna in restaurants and other commercial establishments, she said, adding that it had established, alongside Italy and France, the first protected marine area on the high seas.

Asked about practical tips for the film’s viewers who wished to help preserve the oceans, Mr. Freestone said certain fish should be left alone and all fish must be caught in a sustainable way. Eighty per cent of ocean pollution resulted from land-based sources such as sewage and nutrient runoff from gardens, he said, stressing that people must have more sustainable lifestyles to end the large-scale dumping of plastics into the sea.

Ms. Earle said people could contribute on the basis of individual capacity, from legal experts working to enact and enforce rules to schoolchildren tapping into the consciences of policymakers and societies through letter-writing to curb the overfishing of tuna, swordfish and shark and to support protected areas. Such countries as the Bahamas, the United Kingdom and the United States had already established protected ocean areas and others should follow suit, she said.

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