

Abstract for UNICPOLOS Discussion Panel “Ecosystem approaches and Oceans”

Demystifying the concept and understanding its implications

WWF

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Over the past 50 years, most efforts to regulate fishing and conserve our oceans have had limited success in preventing over-fishing, degradation of the marine environment, and irreversible loss of marine biodiversity. Ecosystem-Based Management (EBM) of the oceans is an approach that is likely to succeed where many other initiatives have failed, because of its focus on managing human issues and impacts in order to achieve the maintenance of biodiversity. Fishing is an important use of the world’s oceans, but the concept of EBM for marine capture fisheries has not been clear or fully operational. WWF has a comprehensive Policy Framework⁵ designed to inform global debate and providing a workable approach for individual fisheries in a manner consistent with integrating global and regional policy initiatives into national activities.

Many different ways to refer to the idea of EBM of fisheries have successfully entered the politically correct scientific/managerial jargon⁶ however, this apparent triumph conceals a bitter reality: the lack of a scientific and political consensus on the conceptual basis and limits of EBM, and the unavailability of an agreed operational framework generating clear rules for its practical implementation. Defining reference levels for fisheries management, based on indicators of overall ecosystem structure and functioning, and followed by the establishment of thresholds for overfishing an ecosystem, is crucial, to prove that EBM is much more than an appealing concept. This scientific advance must accompany the development of effective management approaches and operational tools (the EBM ‘tool kit’) as well as political understanding of the nuances (and their operational effects) in the terminology employed by different stakeholders. These interrelated processes are key to the delivery of a truly functional approach that at its core enables society to continue to derive services from healthy functioning marine ecosystems.

Should the story of EBM become that of an interesting debate but a failed approach; the risk of a complete failure in ocean health and productivity is real. Our society, as users of the global marine resources, cannot afford a failure of EBM given the cumulative scientific evidence on the degraded state of marine ecosystems and the way this compromises the future of the world’s food supplies.

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⁵ *Policy Proposals and Operational Guidance for Ecosystem-Based Management of Marine Capture Fisheries*. (2002). Ward, T., Tarte, T., Hegerl, E. and Short, K. WWF, Sydney, Australia. pp80.

⁶ *Paradigm shifts, gaps, inertia, and political agendas in ecosystem-based fisheries management* (2005). Marine Ecology Progress Series 300: 241-296.. Politics and socio-economics of ecosystem-based management of marine resources