



OceanCare Statement for the 21th Meeting of the United Nations Open-Ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea, on Sea Level Rise and its Impacts

Virtual, 10-18 June 2021

Distinguished Co-Chairs and delegates,

I have the honour to address you on behalf of OceanCare, an international marine conservation organisation with a strong commitment to realistic and cooperative efforts to tackle marine environmental challenges.

We have read the Secretary-General's Report on Oceans and the Law of the Sea relating to this year's theme for the Twenty-first Meeting of the United Nations Open-ended Informal Consultative Process, "Sea level rise and its impacts" with great interest but also grave concern. From the Report it becomes clear that sea level rise is increasingly becoming a threat to coastal communities and low-lying islands around the globe. We have noted in particular the acknowledgement that "the majority of the global sea-level rise is attributable to anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions" (page 3). This conclusion is worrisome yet given the overwhelming human-induced nature of the problem, we are also responsible for the solution and for preventing an uncertain future.

Preventing the root causes:

While curative mitigation and adaptation measures are of utmost importance to mitigate the devastating impacts of sea level rise, we must take immediate and ambitious action to curb further anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions which are otherwise exacerbating the situation indefinitely.

Banning fossil fuels – reducing greenhouse gas emissions and underwater noise pollution

Two of the most prominent contributors of greenhouse gas emissions are the maritime transport sector and the fossil fuel industry. The maritime shipping sector emits around 940 million tonnes of Co₂ per year and is responsible for an estimated 2-3%¹ of global greenhouse gas emissions² annually and the fossil fuel industry emits approximately 3.6%³. Both sectors are also responsible for generating high levels of underwater noise pollution that has potential significant adverse impacts on living marine resources and marine life, in turn threatening ocean health, human livelihoods and food security, as well as the ability of the ocean to absorb more Co₂. Thus, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is not only a key aspect in tackling the causes of sea level rise, but also in the reduction of underwater noise.

In the case of shipping, for example, it is widely agreed that if commercial ships reduce speed, they would at the same time reduce Co₂ emissions. A recent publication (Leaper 2019)⁴ estimates that reducing speed of the global cargo shipping fleet by 10% at average would lead to a reduction in emissions by 13% (and emit 40% less noise pollution), which would likewise lead to the reduction in sea level rise. The burning of fossil fuels is one of the primary causes of global warming as it significantly contributes to heat absorption in the ocean, leading to warmer water and ultimately to sea level rising across the globe. It therefore follows, that countries should put themselves in line with the Paris Agreement and set an end to the era of fossil fuels and work towards decarbonization. A first step would be an immediate ban on all new oil and gas exploration activities, a step that several countries have already taken, with Spain

¹European Commission (2019) "Commission publishes information on Co₂ emissions from maritime transport", available at: https://ec.europa.eu/clima/news/commission-publishes-information-co2-emissions-maritime-transport_en.

² See also Fourth IMO Greenhouse Gas Study (2020), available at: <https://wwwcdn.imo.org/localresources/en/OurWork/Environment/Documents/Fourth%20IMO%20GHG%20Study%202020%20-%20Full%20report%20and%20annexes.pdf>.

³ See "Emissions by Sector" for an overview, available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/emissions-by-sector>.

⁴ See Leaper's "The Role of Slower Vessel Speeds in Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Underwater Noise and Collision Risk to Whales", available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2019.00505/full>

being the most recent example. As States make the transition to renewable energy sources there is also a need to consider the potential significant adverse impacts on marine life resulting from underwater noise pollution arising from the construction of renewable energy structures, underscoring the importance of an Environmental Impact Assessment and preventative mitigation measures.

Global Framework to reduce plastic along its entire lifecycle

If the current strong growth of plastics usage continues unabated, the consumption of oil by the entire plastics sector will account for 20% of the total consumption by 2050. In 2019, the overall lifecycle of all plastic – from the extraction of fossil fuels for the production of plastic to the final waste management – is estimated to have added 0.86 Gt CO²-e (= Co₂ equivalent) to the atmosphere⁵. Considering that plastic production is expected to increase considerably over the next decades, so are its greenhouse gas emissions. At current expansion rates they are estimated to reach about 1.34 Gt CO²-e in 2030 and further increase to more than 2.75 Gt CO²-e by 2050⁶.

Threats from landfills due to coastal erosion

We already know that landfills are particularly harmful to the environment and, amongst other issues, produce methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. However, coastal landfills have an additional problem of being compromised by flooding and coastal erosion with the potential of dangerous substances spilling into rivers, streets, and beaches. In addition, if a coastal landfill area is not adequately managed, the combination of sea levels, storm events and coastal erosion could result in contaminants becoming mobile and therefore able to enter coastal ecosystems. Risks from regular municipal waste landfills, but also from hazardous waste landfills and other facilities where incineration ash is stored (given the high concentration in dioxins, furans, PCBs and other persistent organic pollutants) will need to be mitigated. At the same time, waste, and in particular plastic pollution as a hazardous material at each stage of its life cycle, needs to be addressed through source reduction. This could be achieved through bans on single-use plastics, and support for reuse and refill systems, rather than adopting an end-of-pipe approach limited to waste management.

Ocean Governance to protect 50% of the planet that is the high seas to improve ocean resilience:

A new treaty will establish a global framework to conserve and manage biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, which constitutes almost two-thirds of the global ocean, covers nearly half of the planet, and is a global common. This area faces increasing threats from multiple sources, including chemical, noise, and plastic pollution, overfishing and destructive fishing practices, and a host of new and emerging uses, all of which are compounded by the growing impacts of climate change and ocean acidification, undermining vital ecosystem services. OceanCare calls for bold action to enhance ocean resilience and to strive for an ambitious treaty text with robust Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for all activities that have an impact on areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ), irrespective of the origin of the activity. In the absence of such measures, it will remain inherently difficult to properly manage and mitigate transboundary forms of pollution threatening a healthy ocean as our life support system.

Precautionary Principle in the face of cumulative threats:

As countries respond and adapt to the impacts of sea level rise (e.g., coastal protection), OceanCare calls on governments to apply the precautionary principle and to avoid operations aimed at protecting against sea level rise which add stressors to the marine environment and yet another element to the myriad of cumulative impacts.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2, p. 5.



Recommendations:

Rising sea levels are already having, and will continue to have, wide-ranging and significant environmental and social impacts. OceanCare therefore proposes the following important actions, and the implementation thereof, to tackle the threat posed by rising seas and its impacts:

1. Apply the precautionary principle, by carefully and thoroughly assessing all future activities and to develop Best Available Technology (BAT) and Best Environmental Practice (BEP) to be used for any activities that may directly or indirectly contribute to sea level rise.
2. Apply robust, comprehensive and mandatory Environmental Impact Assessments prior to the approval of any given project ensuring that such assessments also take into account how such activities exacerbate climate change and thus sea level rise.
3. Implement operational/technical measures such as ship speed reductions to reduce GHG emissions and underwater noise pollution as threat to ocean health and ecosystem services.
4. Impose a ban on the exploration of new hydrocarbon resources/activities and develop a legally binding phase out plan for the exploration and exploitation of the seabed.
5. Address plastic pollution along its entire lifecycle through a global, legally binding plastic treaty.

We thank you for your attention and look forward to the deliberations this week to bring this urgent issue and possible solutions to the attention of the General Assembly.

Thank you for your attention.

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