

Making the deep blue sea green again

By Inter Press Service

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In Photo: A young boy stands near mangroves planted near his home in the village of Entale in Sri Lanka’s northwest Puttalam District.

UNITED NATIONS—Kids growing up in the Seychelles think of the ocean as their backyard, says Ronald Jean Jumeau, the Seychelles ambassador to the UN.

“Our ocean is the first and eternal playground of our children, they don’t go to parks, they go to the ocean, they go to the beach, they go to the coral reefs and all that is just collapsing around them,” Jumeau told Inter Press Service (IPS).

The tiny country off the East Coast of Africa is one of 39 UN member-states, known as small island states, or as Jumeau likes to call them: “large ocean states”.

Ambassadors and delegations from these 39 countries often speak at UN headquarters in New York steadfastly, sounding the alarm about the changes to the world's environment they are witnessing first hand. Jumeau sees these island states as sentinels or guardians of the oceans. He prefers these names to being called the canary in the gold mine because, he says: "the canaries usually end up dead".

Yet, while much is known about the threats rising oceans pose to the world's small island states, much less is known about how these large ocean states help defend everyone against the worst impacts of climate change by storing "blue carbon".

"We are not emitting that much carbon dioxide but we are taking everyone else's carbon dioxide into our oceans," Jumeau said.

Despite decades of research, the blue-carbon value of oceans and coastal regions is only beginning to be fully appreciated for its importance in the fight against climate change.

"There's proof that mangroves, seas salt marshes and sea grasses absorb more carbon [per acre] than forests, so if you're saying then to people don't cut trees than we should also be saying don't cut the underwater forests," Jumeau said.

This is just one of the reasons the Seychelles has banned the clearing of mangroves. The temptation to fill in mangrove forests is high, especially for a nation with so little land, but Jumeau says there are many benefits to sustaining them.

Mangroves guard against erosion and protect coral reefs. They also provide nurseries for fish.

But it's not just coastal forests that take carbon out of the atmosphere. Oceans also absorb carbon, although according to National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa), their role is more like inhaling and exhaling.

The Seychelles, whose total ocean territory is 3,000 times larger than its islands, is also thinking about how it can protect the oceans, so they can continue to perform this vital function.

The nation plans to designate specific navigation zones within its territories to allow other parts of the ocean a chance to recover from the strains associated with shipping. The navigation zones will "relieve the pressure on the ocean by strengthening the resilience of the oceans to absorb more carbon dioxide and ocean acidification," Jumeau said.

He acknowledges the plan will only work if all countries do the same, but says you have to start somewhere.

Fortunately, other countries are also beginning to recognize the importance of protecting the world's oceans.

Isabella Lövin, Sweden's deputy prime minister and climate minister, told IPS that the world is going "in the totally wrong direction" when it comes to achieving the goal of sustainable oceans and life below water.

"If you look at the trends right now, you see more and more overfishing, we are seeing more and more pollution, plastic litter coming into our oceans and we're also seeing all the stress that the ocean is under due to climate change, acidification of the water, but also the warming and sea-level rises and, all of this is putting a tremendous, tremendous pressure on our oceans," Lövin said.

Together with Fiji, Sweden is convening a major UN Ocean Conference in June this year.

The conference aims to bring together not only governments, but also the private sector and nongovernmental organizations to create a more coordinated approach to sustaining oceans. It will look at the key role that oceans play in climate change, but also other issues, such as the alarming prospect that there will be more plastic in our seas than fish by 2050.

“There’s 3 billion people around the world that are primarily dependent on marine resources for their survival, and so they depend on what the ocean can produce, so it’s about food security, it’s also about livelihoods for hundreds of millions of people that depend on small scale fisheries mostly in developing countries,” Lövin said.

Lövin also noted that rich countries need to work together with developing countries to address these issues, because the demand for fish in rich countries has put a strain on the global fish stocks that developing countries rely on.

“Rich countries...have been overfishing with industrial methods for decades and now, when the European oceans are being emptied more or less, we have depleted our resources and then we import and we fish [over long distances in] developing countries’ waters.”

“We need to make sure that fish as a resource is conserved and protected for future generations.”

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