

Taking care of our oceans

JO-ANNE NINA SEWLAL

Dept of Life Sciences,
University of the West Indies



FIRST proposed in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro by the Canadian Government, this year will make it the first time World Ocean Day is being celebrated as an official United Nations observance.

On the 8th June countries all over the world will use this day as an opportunity to highlight the contribution of oceans to our life and the challenges that faces their well-being and existence. This year's theme is "Our Oceans, Our Responsibility", highlighting the intense impact humans have on our oceans. To fully understand the importance of this day we will look at the functions of oceans, the threats they face and how we can help.

It isn't hard to see why oceans are important to us.

Over 116 million people live within 100km of the sea. The world's oceans include the Atlantic, Pacific, Arctic and Southern (formerly referred to as the Antarctica), and cover approximately two-thirds of the Earth's surface. Therefore it comes as no surprise that they play a major role in our atmosphere, environment and our way of life, especially since 90% of the world's goods are transported by sea. The functions of oceans are numerous and varied, with the most obvious resource being their provision of food, evident by the great variety of seafood they contain.

Oceans also act as a carbon dioxide sinks, so like forests they absorb this gas in the atmosphere, thus helping in regulating our climate. Again like rainforests, they hold much flora and fauna that can be used as potential medicines. Our oceans also provide an important source of income to countries that rely on it for

commercial fishing and tourism, for example, whale watching or sport fishing. In some countries where water is scarce, oceans can also become a source of drinking water through the process of desalination.

Some threats that our oceans face include, non-sustainable fishing practices such as, over fishing, destructive fishing using poisons or explosives and illegal fishing. Other threats like climate change causes effects such as a rise in sea level and water temperature as well as ocean acidification from the absorption of excessive amounts of carbon dioxide gas being emitted into our atmosphere.

Pollution of our oceans is also hazardous to the organisms that reside in them or depend on them for food including humans. Plastic rings from drinks choke many seabirds causing their death. However, we should bear in mind that some marine ecosystems are

also more vulnerable than others, such as, coral reefs. Improperly treated sewage can easily find its way into water courses and eventually end up in the sea causing environmental and human health risks.

The Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon in a statement on this year's World Ocean Day celebrations, emphasized that countries enforce the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This international agreement came out of the third UN conference on the Law of the Sea convention (UNCLOS III) which took place between 1973 through to 1982. This convention basically defines the responsibilities of nations and their rights when it comes to the use of oceans in the areas of its natural resources, business and the environment. Since then it has undergone 60 ratifications.

The UNCLOS is by no means the first of its kind when it comes to protecting the world's

oceans. It replaced the older "Freedom of the Seas" concept which dated as far as the 17th century, where basically a nation was responsible for a thin strip of water surrounding their coastline about three nautical miles which was approximately five and a half kilometres wide.

This width was chosen as it was the distance a cannon ball would travel when shot out at sea. However, the waters outside this strip were regarded as "international". But by the 20th century some countries wanted to expand their claim to cover offshore resources including oil, gas and mineral deposits as well as fish stocks. This call for expansion of territory was also to protect their shores and resources from pollution.

Our claim and need to defend the oceans may have started as a fight for land and power but it may end in a fight for our survival and the survival all the organisms that call this planet home.