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***Ecosystem Approach to the  
Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans***

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# Ecosystem Approach to Regional Seas

## I. REGIONAL SEAS PROGRAMME

1. The UNEP Regional Seas Programme<sup>1</sup>, launched in 1974, is one of UNEP's most significant achievements in the past 35 years. It aims to address the accelerating degradation of the world's oceans and coastal areas through sustainable management and use of resources and by engaging littoral countries in specific actions to protect shared marine environments. It has accomplished this by stimulating the creation of regional seas programmes for sound environmental management coordinated and implemented by countries sharing a common body of water.
2. Today, more than 143 countries participate in 13 Regional Seas programmes (Black Sea, Wider Caribbean, East Asian Seas, Eastern Africa, South Asian Seas, ROPME Sea Area, Mediterranean, North-East Pacific, Northwest Pacific, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, South-East Pacific, Pacific, and West and Central Africa) established under the auspices of UNEP.. Secretariats of seven of these regional seas programmes are administered by inter-governmental organisations or regional centres while the remaining six are administered by UNEP. These regional seas programmes received financial and technical support from UNEP in the initial phases of development of an action plan and its initial implementation.
3. The Regional Seas programmes function through an Action Plan. In most cases, such Action Plans are underpinned with strong legal frameworks in the form of regional Conventions and associated Protocols addressing specific problems. In addition to the 13 Regional Seas programmes, 5 partner programmes in the Antarctic, Arctic, Baltic Sea, Caspian Sea and North-East Atlantic regions participate in UNEP's coordination activities under the Regional Seas Programme.
4. At the regional level, the regions, the Regional Seas programmes work through Secretariats or Regional Coordinating Units (RCUs) and Regional Activity Centers (RACs). An RCU is a nerve center and command post of the action plan's activities and has the overall and practical responsibility for the implementation of the decisions of member States (or contracting parties) regarding the operation of the action plan. The RCU is responsible for the follow-up and implementation of legal documents, the programme of work, and strategies and policies adopted by the member States. The RCU also carries out the diplomatic, political and public

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<sup>1</sup> The term "a regional seas programme" is used to denote a programme for specific regional seas, normally governed by Inter-Governmental Meetings of littoral states and, in some cases, by legally binding instruments, such as a framework convention and associated protocols. All regional seas programmes seek their programmatic activities in the Action Plans and supportive thematic action plans (such as marine litter action plans, LBS action plans, etc.). The terms "*UNEP Regional Seas Programme*" refers to the coordination programme of UNEP over UNEP-administered and non-UNEP-administered regional seas programmes. Currently, 18 regional seas programmes are participating in this coordination programme (see [www.unep.org/regionalseas](http://www.unep.org/regionalseas)).

relations functions of the action plan. Finally, the RCU cooperates with governments, other UN and non-UN agencies and NGOs and facilitates the capacity building of its own regional activity centers and member governments. The RACs serve all member states by carrying out activities related to the action plan as agreed and guided by the Conference of the Parties or intergovernmental decisions. The RACs play key roles in the implementation of various components and activities of the action plan at regional, sub-regional, national and, sometimes, local levels. The RACs are an integral part of the action plan and report directly to the RCU. They are usually financially supported by the contracting parties and by the host country through the financial mechanisms of the action plan<sup>2</sup>.

5. At its onset, the regional seas programme was conceived as an action-oriented programme encompassing a comprehensive, inter-sectoral approach and to environmental problems in marine and coastal areas addressing not only the consequences, but also the causes, of environmental degradation. Each regional programme is shaped according to the needs of the region concerned. The overall strategy to be followed was defined by UNEP's Governing Council as<sup>3</sup>:

- *Promotion of international and regional conventions, guidelines and actions for the control of marine pollution and for the protection and management of aquatic resources;*
- *Assessment of the state of marine pollution, of the sources and trends of this pollution, and of the impact of the pollution on human health, marine ecosystems and amenities;*
- *Co-ordination of the efforts with regard to the environmental aspects of the protection, development and management of marine and coastal resources; and*
- *Support for education and training efforts to make possible the full participation of developing countries in the protection, development and management of marine and coastal resources.*

6. In order to fulfill the coordination function, UNEP organises annual global meetings of the regional seas conventions and action plans. At s the ninth global meeting of regional seas conventions and action plans in 2007, new global strategic directions for the regional seas programmes 2008-2012: enhancing the role of the regional seas conventions and action plans were adopted<sup>4</sup> The strategic directions include the following elements:

- Enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of Regional Seas Programmes through increasing country ownership, incorporating regional seas conventions and protocols into national legislation, promoting compliance and enforcement

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<sup>2</sup> These financial mechanisms are normally in the form of regional seas trust funds. For the regional seas programmes administered by UNEP, UNEP functions as trustee of the fund.

<sup>3</sup> UNEP. 1982. Achievements and Planned Development of UNEP's Regional Seas Programme and comparable programmes sponsored by other bodies. UNEP Regional Seas Reports and Studies No.1.

<sup>4</sup> UNEP. 2007. Global Strategic Directions for the Regional Seas Programmes 2008-2012: Enhancing the Role of the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans. UNEP(DEPI)/RS.9/6.

mechanisms, involving civil society and the private sector, building capacities, ensuring viable national and international financial arrangements, as well as developing assessment/evaluation procedures, where appropriate;

- Contribute to the implementation of the Beijing Declaration of the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities, especially the provision related to the development and implementation of protocols addressing land-based pollution sources and activities;
- Strengthen regional cooperation on preparedness and response to pollution from maritime accidents with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and promote the implementation, as pertinent, of IMO conventions;
- Contribute to the effective implementation of the 2010 biodiversity targets and the WSSD Plan of Implementation targets for promoting the establishment of networks of marine and coastal protected areas and planning of proper coastal land and watershed use by 2012 including the designation of important wetlands under the Ramsar Convention;
- Emphasize the need to implement the ecosystem approach in integrated marine and coastal management (IMCAM) as an overarching management framework for addressing threats to the sustainability of regional seas;
- Assess and address the impact of climate change on the marine and coastal environment, in particular, the potential social, economic and environmental impacts and consequences on fisheries, tourism, human health, marine biodiversity, coastal erosion, and small islands ecosystems. Promote cooperation for formulating regional climate change adaptation strategies;
- Intensify regional activities in support of the WSSD Plan of Implementation and the Jakarta Mandate of the Convention on Biological Diversity, notably by identifying critical issues of marine biodiversity, protecting its major components, and promoting its sustainable use; more specifically, focusing on:
  - a. Addressing the protection of i) marine biodiversity beyond areas of national jurisdiction; and ii) deep-sea biodiversity at the regional scale;
  - b. Cooperation with FAO and regional fisheries management organisations (RFMO) to address environmental impacts of fisheries and promote an ecosystem management approach;
  - c. Participation in the Coral Reef Initiative and the implementation of the SIDS Mauritius Strategy, as appropriate;
- Recognize the need for economic valuation of marine and coastal ecosystem services for decision making and policy formulation; and

- Facilitating the mainstreaming of its activities within broader development and economic planning processes including the poverty reduction strategies in developing countries.
7. It is understood that each regional seas programme has achieved a differing level of implementation of its Action Plan. Unfortunately, no centralized information exists to indicate the level of achievement of the implementation of Action Plans in different regions. While these Action Plans are under implementation, there are a number of developments in a global and regional marine policy debates that could provide additional opportunities for the regional seas programmes to enhance their respective programme directions and developments. Of particular importance are following discussions, decisions and actions:
- i. **Regular Process:** At the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 26 August to 4 September 2002, States agreed, in paragraph 36 (b) of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI), to “*establish by 2004 a regular process under the United Nations for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment, including socio-economic aspects, both current and foreseeable, building on existing regional assessments*” (the so-called “Regular Process”). At the first meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group of the Whole, States discussed options to achieve the deadline of 2014 for the completion of the first cycle of the Regular Process. Based on the Ad Hoc Working Group recommendations, the General Assembly decided to organise workshops at the earliest possible opportunity in order to inform the first cycle of the Regular Process. It is important to note that the original JPOI indicated that the regular process would be established based on the “regional assessments” and that most of the regional seas programmes have mandates to issue regular state of the marine environment reports.
  - ii. **Ecosystem approach:** The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation adopted at the World Summit reaffirmed the Millennium Declaration and its associated development goals. Furthermore, in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation the international community agreed, among other things, to:
    - Paragraph 30 (d) “*Encourage the application by 2010 of the ecosystem approach*”; and
    - Paragraph 30 (e) “*Promote integrated, multidisciplinary and multisectoral coastal and ocean management at the national level and encourage and assist coastal States in developing ocean policies and mechanisms on integrated coastal management*”.

The Convention on Biological Diversity has also endorsed the ecosystem approach. Both the second and third Intergovernmental Reviews of the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities advocated the adoption of an ecosystem approach.

- iii. **Aichi Targets:** At its tenth meeting of the conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Parties decided on the biodiversity related targets. Of relevance to regional marine and coastal environment are the following:
- a. *“by 2020, at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscapes and seascapes;*
  - b. *by 2020, all fish and invertebrate stocks and aquatic plants are managed and harvested sustainably, legally and applying ecosystem based approaches, so that overfishing is avoided, recovery plans and measures are in place for all depleted species, fisheries have no significant adverse impacts on threatened species and vulnerable ecosystems and the impacts of fisheries on stocks, species and ecosystems are within safe ecological limits; and*
  - c. *by 2015, the multiple anthropogenic pressures on coral reefs, and other vulnerable ecosystems impacted by climate change or ocean acidification are minimized, so as to maintain their integrity and functioning.”*
- iv. **GEF International Waters** The International Waters focal area was created as one of the original focal areas of the Global Environment Facility in 1992. It is the only focal area in which the GEF does not function as a financial mechanism for a global multilateral environmental convention. The marine and coastal portfolio of GEF International Waters projects typically include projects targeting so-called Large Marine Ecosystems (LMEs) defined by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the USA and following the five-module approach of the NOAA LME Programme. GEF takes the approach of developing transboundary diagnostic analysis and strategic action programme for each LME, which is analogous to the assessment and regional seas Action Plans mechanisms within the UNEP Regional Seas Programme. The GEF international waters projects highlighted a need to apply an ecosystem-based approach at the scale of Large Marine Ecosystems and, possibly, follow up to address actual threats and sources of stress to the LME functions and integrity initially triggered by GEF funding and by associated and follow-up investments.
- v. **Rio+20 Sustainable Development Goals** At the Rio+20 conference, states decided to develop a set of sustainable development goals in addition to the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000. Sustainable development of oceans, marine and coastal resources and environments is a key to overall sustainable development. UNEP would be ready to assist the Regional Seas to establish their own sustainable development goals, particularly focusing on the environmental related issues in harmony with the globally-coordinated

development of the Rio+20 goals if the regional seas member states wish to develop regional goals in response to the Rio+20 outcomes.

- vi. **Marine biodiversity beyond National Jurisdiction** The UN General Assembly resolution 66/231 requested the Informal Working Group on Marine Biodiversity beyond National Jurisdiction to look into the possibility of developing a legal scheme for the protection of marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction in association with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. There is a growing conviction at the international level of the need to protect the biodiversity in the areas beyond national jurisdiction. Some of the regional seas programmes started work on this issue as far as their mandates allow and there is increased expectation that these issues could be discussed and acted on within their mandates as determined by the member states or parties.

## **II. INTRODUCING AN ECOSYSTEM APPROACH TO REGIONAL SEAS**

8. The ecosystem approach<sup>5</sup> to the management of marine resources has been endorsed by international bodies and initiatives such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment as a valuable conceptual framework for analysing and acting on the linkages between people and their environment. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation also adopted the target to encourage the application of the ecosystem approach by 2010 for the sustainable development of the oceans, particularly in the management of fisheries and the conservation of biodiversity. Numerous countries are acting to meet the ecosystem-related challenges and to address integrated marine and coastal management. Within UNEP, the ecosystem approach is defined as a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that provides sustainable delivery of ecosystem services in an equitable manner (UNEP Ecosystem Management Introduction of such an approach to different geographic scales and planning time spans require diverse considerations and stakeholder action.
9. The seventh meeting of the United Nations Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea (12–16 June, 2006, in New York, United States of America) addressed ecosystem approaches and oceans. The meeting agreed on elements relating to ecosystem approaches and oceans. The report, subsequently submitted to the UN General Assembly at its sixty-first session, proposes that the General Assembly invite States to consider that improved application of an ecosystem approach will require, among other things, capacity building through technology, knowledge and skill transfer, particularly to developing countries, including small island developing States and coastal

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<sup>5</sup> There are different terms used by different organisations and groups of countries, such as “ecosystem approach”, “ecosystem-based approach”, “ecosystem-based management”, “ecosystem management”, and “integrated ecosystem management”. The present paper uses the terms defined in various inter-governmental fora and would not endeavor to re-define or make clear the differences among, these terms.

African States, and the exchange of information, data and lessons learned. It will further require capacity-building in support of science, information management and exchange, monitoring, control and surveillance, assessment and reporting, as well as public outreach and education.

10. In response to the needs of the member States expressed in a number of inter-governmental forums dealing with the introduction of the ecosystem approach, the regional seas programmes introduced, to varying degrees, the ecosystem approach within their respective programmes. However, while not done in a globally coordinated manner, it is concluded that there exist plenty opportunities for the regional seas to fully incorporate the ecosystem approach and to respond to the recent inter-governmental discussions and decisions as outlined in Chapter 1 above.
11. Different regional seas programmes have different regional seas scales but, generally speaking, the following elements are identified to constitute an ecosystem approach to regional seas:
  - The geographic coverage of the management is not only based on the political boundaries, and should take into consideration of ecological functions and continuity;
  - Ecosystems are supported by inter-linked biological, geochemical and hydrological processes and their interaction with human activities and socio-economic events. The assessment of ecosystems should consider all these ecosystem processes and functions, including human socio-economic activities;
  - Ecosystems can produce goods and services that are used for human benefit. By introducing ecosystem-based management, optimal use of these ecosystem services as well as the generation and equitable sharing of additional benefits may be achieved; and
  - Ecosystems are vulnerable to internal and external stresses and drivers for change. The degree and extent of the production of ecosystem services is also subject to the magnitude of impacts of such stresses. In order to maintain the ecosystem integrity and to optimise the use of ecosystem services for human benefit, the ecosystem-based management would need to address the sources of stress and actual threats that are in many cases associated with human activities

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