

S.acred O.ceans & S.eas

National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs

Earth Day Sunday • April 24, 2005

The oceans, teeming with sea life, vibrant coral communities, and vast beauty, are part of God's treasured creation. When God created the oceans, God declared them "good." We receive the oceans' bounty on our tables and experience the ocean's beauty as we participate in recreational activities. As God's stewards, we are called not only to enjoy the oceans, but also to care for them as a sacred gift from God. Because we are people of God, we are to maintain the bounty of the oceans' waters and the integrity of oceanic systems that contain beauty and support an abundance of life.

God's Living Seas and Oceans

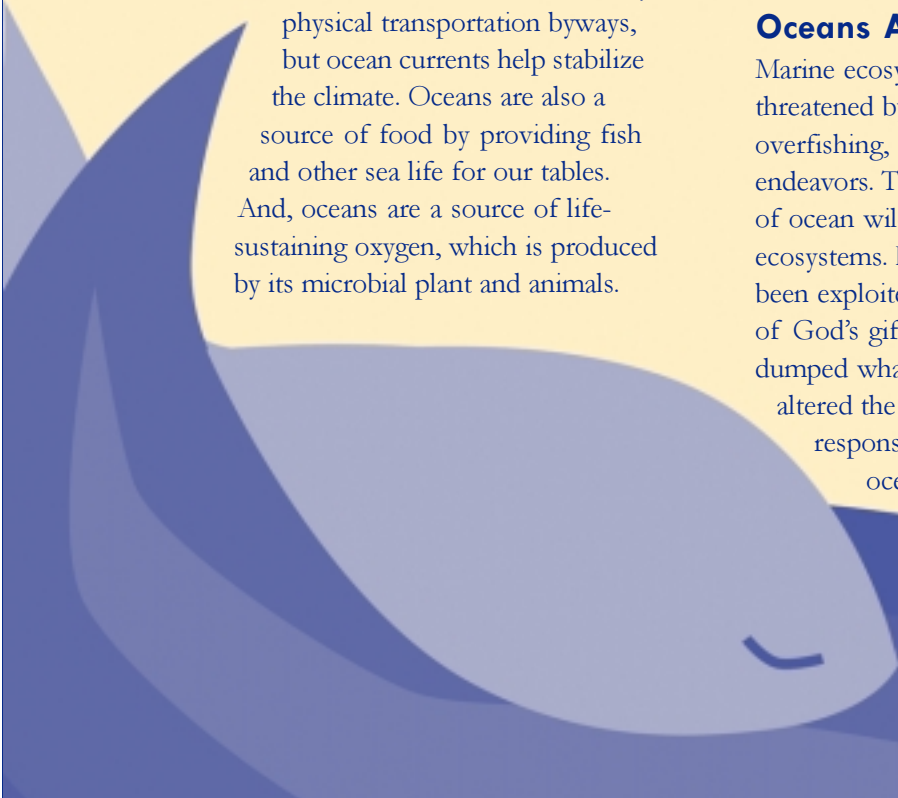
The oceans' influence are felt by every living thing on Earth, no matter the distance from the seashore. Oceans often define the cultural identity of island and coastal communities. Even for communities far from the shore, oceans are invaluable. Oceans are not only

physical transportation byways, but ocean currents help stabilize the climate. Oceans are also a source of food by providing fish and other sea life for our tables. And, oceans are a source of life-sustaining oxygen, which is produced by its microbial plant and animals.

- ◆ The living oceans cover more than 70 percent of our planet, have mountains taller than Mt. Everest and canyons deeper than the Grand Canyon, and contain 97 percent of all living matter.
- ◆ The diverse and fragile marine ecosystems have an impact on people since oceans help determine weather patterns, serve as the Earth's "lungs," produce food, and contribute to tourism and recreational opportunities.
- ◆ The United States ocean territory spans 4.5 million square miles, an area 23 percent larger than the United States land territory.

Oceans At Risk

Marine ecosystems around the world are being threatened by coastal development, pollution, overfishing, tourism, and a host of other human endeavors. These activities have led to the decline of ocean wildlife and the near collapse of ocean ecosystems. For generations the living oceans have been exploited as a resource, not honored as one of God's gifts. We have consumed without regard, dumped what we no longer needed, and physically altered the marine environment. We all share the responsibility to be good stewards of God's oceans for current and future generations.



Overfishing. Fishing, done by humans for thousands of years, not only supplies food for those who fish, but also is commercially and culturally important in many countries around the world. Unfortunately, inadequate management policies and practices have resulted in widespread overfishing. Today, most populations of commercially caught fish are in decline. By encouraging the seafood industry and government regulators to engage in sustainable fishing practices and by making conscientious consumer choices we can help conserve the oceans' fish bounty. (Learn more at the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch at www.mbayaq.org/cr/seafoodwatch.asp)

Coastal Development. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in 2002, more than 50 percent of people in the United States lived within 50 miles of an ocean or Great Lake. Coastal areas tend to be some of the most highly developed regions of the world and country. This development has often had a disruptive impact on marine and lake ecosystems. By ensuring that coastal development is done with care for God's oceans, we can help protect valuable seas and shores.

Pollution. Ocean pollution directly affects sea life and ultimately affects human health. Pollutants—including trash, oil, pathogens in sewage in medical waste, fertilizers, pesticides, toxic industrial wastes, and sediments—make up a deadly stew that contaminates our coastal waters. Some pollutants cause or contribute to “dead zones,” such as at the mouth of the Mississippi River in the Gulf of Mexico, where depleted oxygen levels in the water can create conditions such as “red tides” that make it necessary to close beaches and shellfish beds. Trash such as discarded plastics and toxic waste can also harm marine life. By taking care to prevent pollution, for example by limiting pesticide and fertilizer use, we can help protect God's oceans.

Today, more than ever, we understand the interconnectedness of all life and the disruptive impact humankind can have on this balance. As we gain an ever-deeper awareness of the connections between our activities on the land and the health of marine ecosystems, we also gain an understanding of how we can partner with God in the restoration and healing of creation. We must act on this knowledge in order to protect our oceans and seas not only to preserve God's creation but also so that future generations will be able to enjoy clean beaches, healthy seafood, abundant ocean wildlife, and thriving coastal communities.

- ♦ **Coastal marshes, which trap floodwaters, filter out pollutants and serve as “nurseries” for wildlife, are disappearing at a rate of 20,000 acres per year. Louisiana alone has lost half a million acres of wetlands since the 1950s.**
- ♦ **Rebuilding U.S. fisheries has the potential to restore and create tens of thousands of family wage jobs and add at least 1.3 billion dollars to the U.S. economy.**



Sermon Notes: God's Seas

“And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures . . . So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm . . . And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas . . . ’” (Genesis 1:20-22)

“Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great.” (Ps. 104:25)

In comparison to the land, God's oceans are indeed vast, occupying 70 percent of the Earth's surface, and they are home to over 90 percent of all life on Earth. Psalm 104:25 states that the sea, great and wide, is teeming with creatures both large and small beyond number. Even with such passages of Scripture to remind us of this, when we talk about the Earth, we usually are referring to just that 30 percent of the Earth's surface we call land. We know little or nothing about much of ocean life. Scientists hope to identify many of the estimated million-plus species of life in the oceans (only a small fraction of which have been identified to date) through a comprehensive global study, and expect to identify at least 5,000 new species of fish.

God, with an overflowing love for us, has provided an oceanic world as part of our earthly heritage. As God's stewards, guided by the Spirit that hovers over the waters, Christians are to care for the oceans bequeathed to us by God as much as we care for the land and the air. In so doing, we will be helping to share the extravagance and beauty of God's love with others by maintaining the productive capacity of the oceans' waters and the integrity of oceanic systems that support an abundance of life and have an untold wealth of beauty.

Current industrial fishing practices and pollution are leading to the exact opposite of proper Christian stewardship, diminishing the glory to God that God's ocean creatures proclaim. Nearly one-third of the

world's fisheries have collapsed or are near collapse, and about half of the world's fisheries are being fished at their maximum level. By overfishing, we are in effect stealing from the people in poverty and from future generations. Fish is the primary source of protein for coastal communities and is especially important for those living in poverty. Fish make up about 19 percent of the total animal protein consumption of developing countries as a whole.

As Christians, we are called to be especially concerned for the poor and vulnerable. Marine pollution caused by our personal choices as consumers (especially as drivers), by improper land use and development planning, and by agricultural runoff affects “neighbors” downstream who live near or depend on the oceans for their livelihoods and health. We must begin to truly care for the oceans by insisting on the protection of coastal areas.

By restoring the beauty and regenerative capacity of God's oceans, we will expand our view of God. We can do unto others and help care for our neighbors and God's other creatures by making choices that minimize the impacts we have on these great bodies of water. Then we will help the sea and all that is in it to resound to the glory of God.

The oceans are one of God's masterpieces and home to an outstanding array of life. God's oceans also provide for all of us, supplying food and atmospheric control for the planet that we all depend on.

Ocean Facts:

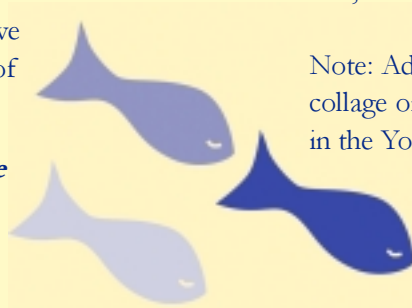
♦ Oceans cover almost three-fourths of our planet, and have mountains taller than Mt. Everest, and canyons deeper than the Grand Canyon.

♦ Oceans contain 97 percent of all living matter on Earth, from microscopic organisms to the largest animals on Earth including the Blue Whale, which can reach 100 feet in length and weigh 160 tons.

Globally, the gap between those who will be able to withstand environmental change and those who will not is widening. The poor and disadvantaged will be hurt most by depletion and degradation of our oceans. However, we will all suffer as God's oceans are diminished. And God's other creatures will also suffer. As Christians we need to pray and act for the conservation of the Earth's oceans.

The current state of God's oceans is a call to action. We cannot forget God's oceans, nor can we think of them as indestructible and not in need of our care and protection.

Adapted from *Creation Care* magazine article by Rev. Jim Ball. Scripture verses are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.



Note: Adults may also enjoy the collage or mural activity described in the Youth Activities below.

“And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place’ . . . and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:9-10).

Ideas for Youth Groups or Sunday School

Ocean Collage or Mural

Make an individual collage or a class mural of God's oceans, including various sea life such as whales, jellyfish, algae, etc. Close the session with a prayer for God's oceans.

Stream Cleanup

Bring a youth group on a mission day trip to clean up a nearby stream. For more information on locating appropriate sites, see “Take Action” on the next page.

Ocean Treasure Hunt

In teams of two or more, have youth locate Bible passages with the word “sea” or “ocean” based on clues such as:

- ♦ In this passage, God created both winged and finned creatures. (answer Gen. 1:21)
- ♦ In this passage, Moses created a path for the Israelites through the water. (answer Ex. 14:26)
- ♦ In this passage, Jesus walks across the water. (answer John 6:19, Mark 6:49, Matthew 14:26)
- ♦ In this passage, Jonah is thrown overboard. (Jonah 1:15)

Questions for Adult Study

1. In pairs, discuss how oceans have played a part in your life (recreationally, spiritually, or occupationally). Share with the larger group.
3. How is ocean stewardship also a social justice issue and a call to “love our neighbor as ourselves?”
4. How can we, as God's children, honor God's call to care for the Earth, and thus ocean stewardship?

Sea Tales

Read one of the numerous stories in the Bible that feature oceans or sea creatures.

- ♦ The Miracle of the Loaves & Fishes, Matthew 14
- ♦ Money Found In a Fish, Matthew 17
- ♦ Ocean Creation Story, Genesis 1
- ♦ Jonah and the Whale, Jonah 1-2

Discuss how God's oceans and sea creatures played a role in the story. Have the group act out the story with a skit or create a game of charades using the names of the stories as answers.

Resources

The United States Commission on Ocean Policy

www.oceancommission.gov

The Ocean Conservancy

www.oceanconservancy.org

Pew Ocean Commission Report

www.pewoceans.org

World Wildlife Fund

www.worldwildlife.org

Take Action to Protect God's Oceans and Seas

Recycle or dispose of trash properly.

Every year, millions of pounds of trash degrade habitat and can strangle, poison, or otherwise harm ocean wildlife. As one example, we improperly dispose of 161 million gallons of used motor oil—more than the Exxon Valdez spill—every year. Carefully disposing of motor oil will help keep ocean waters clean. Hands-on efforts to clean up our marine ecosystems are making a difference. Hundreds of thousands of volunteers, participating in the annual International Coastal Cleanup, remove as many as eight million pounds of trash from beaches, reefs, underwater areas, and inland waterways on a single day. To join a cleanup in your area, visit www.coastalcleanup.org.

Reduce your energy consumption.

Air pollution particles created from power plants and automobiles fall into the ocean in raindrops, polluting the water with excess nitrogen and contaminating fish with toxic mercury. The carbon dioxide emitted because of our energy use also causes global warming and rising ocean temperatures, which, in turn, contribute to the collapse of ecosystems, including tropical coral reefs and Arctic ice sheets. Reduce your energy consumption by reducing your use of electricity, which is the largest source of carbon emissions in the United States. By replacing four standard bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs (CFLs) in your home or house of worship, you can prevent the emission of 5,000 pounds of carbon dioxide and reduce your electricity bill by more than \$100 over the life of those bulbs.

Reduce the use of pesticides and fertilizers.

Runoff from lawns, farms, streets, parking lots, and construction sites is a major source of ocean pollution. This runoff—containing silt, nitrogen, and phosphorous—robs ocean waters of light and oxygen, and is especially harmful to coral reef ecosystems. In the bays and estuaries near populated areas, chemicals including fertilizers contribute to “dead zones,” where nothing can live. Eliminate the

need for pesticides and fertilizers by practicing conservation landscaping at home, work, and church. To learn more about conservation landscaping visit Wild Ones (www.for-wild.org) or the National Wildlife Federation's Backyard Habitat program (www.nwf.org/habitats/). Buying organic produce or joining a community supported agricultural (CSA) farm is another way to encourage using of less pesticide and fertilizer. For more information on the USDA's National Organic Program, visit www.ams.usda.gov/nop/Consumers/Consumerhome.html. To locate a CSA farm near you, visit the Alternative Farming System Information Center at www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa/csastate.htm.

Enjoy Responsible Recreation.

Ocean lovers spend a lot of time on, in, and under the water—swimming, boating, fishing, diving, and enjoying the beach. These activities are often the most direct contact we have with ocean life, so how you engage in them determines whether your impact is negative or positive.

- ◆ **Retrieve all fishing line, lures, and gear**—even if tangled or broken. Fishing gear can entangle and injure seabirds, turtles, dolphins, manatees—even divers and swimmers.
- ◆ **Drive your boat as though life depended on it.** It does. Be aware that there is life under water. Damaging wake can tear up plants and erode shoreline, and slashing boat propellers injure countless sea turtles, dolphins, manatees, and whales every year.
- ◆ On trips to the beach, **carry out whatever you carry in.** Wildlife can ingest or become entangled in trash left behind.
- ◆ When snorkeling and diving, **don't touch, break, stand on, or attempt to collect coral or other marine organisms.** Instead, take only pictures and leave only bubbles.

Ocean Pollution and Human Health

Toxic chemicals such as mercury and Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) enter the oceans and can accumulate in marine animals and, when consumed by humans, can cause adverse health effects. Researchers found that the level of PCBs in the breast milk of Inuit women was the highest PCB level found in any human population except those in industrial accidents. The contamination, which originated far from the Inuit communities, had passed up the food chain from algae to fish to the marine mammals that Inuit eat. Children in Inuit villages are plagued with chronic infections, which they suffer at rates 10 to 15 times higher than children in southern Quebec. Studies found abnormalities in the immune systems in these children and documented that vaccinations for diseases often fail because these children do not produce the necessary antibodies.

Natural Protection

Coral Reefs and natural shoreline ecosystems such as mangrove swamps can protect human populations from storms and tsunamis. Although no amount of natural protection can prevent all destruction, environmental degradation almost certainly makes the impact worse. For instance, largely intact coral reefs in the Maldives are credited with sparing that island nation from the worst of the December 2004 tsunami's impact. Satellite images of Aceh, Indonesia, also show destruction of this tsunami was worse in areas where mangroves had been cleared for development and fish farms.

Local, state, and federal elected officials will consider legislation that impacts God's sacred oceans—from local zoning ordinances to fisheries management to international treaties. For information on current federal legislation and ways you can speak out, visit www.ncccojustice.org

**Eco-Justice Programs
National Council of Churches
110 Maryland Ave., NE
Suite 108
Washington, DC 20002**

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