

# Ocean noise pollution

*From science to regulation...*

**O**cean Noise Pollution (ONP) – a marine pollutant in the form of acoustic energy – has garnered international recognition in recent years. Initially, the issue was addressed only from a scientific angle, and the international community lagged behind. There was in fact considerable scepticism from the part of states in discussing an issue that they regarded as awkward. Progressively though, several international fora have started to turn their attention to ONP. Specifically it was the consideration given to ONP by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) that built momentum and made possible the inclusion of ONP on the international agenda. Most recently, the meeting of the states parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity discussed ONP, and the impetus by UNGA is now expected to prompt the Food and Agriculture Organisation to follow suit at the 29th session of the Committee on Fisheries.

Science studies have established that various sources of ONP, ranging from shipping to seismic airguns used in the exploration of offshore oil and gas reserves, can have negative impacts on marine ecosystems and their living resources. Although the full scale of these impacts is difficult to quantify at present, some of the scientific studies conducted thus far concluded that ONP poses a threat to cetaceans, fish stocks and also to other living resources such as corals. UNGA, since 2005, has consistently advocated the need for more scientific studies through its annual 'Oceans and the Law of the Sea' resolution. This call by UNGA is instrumental with regard to the adoption of mitigation measures in the future. On one hand, states are

aware that additional scientific findings might make the picture more clear; on the other, they will not be able to adopt regulations until when they are certain that a given mitigation measure will efficiently counter ONP. To a certain extent, they are stalling while awaiting the right moment to take action. Action, however, is needed.

In May 2010 UNGA, during the resumed review conference on the UN Fish Stocks Agreement, referred to the need to assess the impacts of ONP on target stocks and associated species. Following up on this meeting, during the negotiations for the 2010 resolution of UNGA on sustainable fisheries, states expressly encouraged the preparation of studies on the socioeconomic impacts of ONP on fishing catch rates. It is expected that these studies will help the international community to better identify the consequences of ONP impacts on fishing catch rates, thus facilitating the adoption of regulations where appropriate. One viable option would be that of having regional fisheries management organisations agreeing on conservation and management measures to protect stocks under their limited-in-scope mandates against ONP. At the global level, progress could be achieved thanks to the latest UN law of the sea related forum, the so-called Regular Process, which will meet in February 2011 with the precise goal: link science to policy-making. The mitigation of ONP would significantly benefit in a shift of the international focus from science to regulation. The usefulness of the Regular Process will ultimately depend on the political will of states in addressing outstanding issues on



the international agenda, as well as new issues.

OceanCare has been working on the conservation of marine ecosystems for over 20 years and focuses on building awareness through public education and outreach programmes. OceanCare is a founding member of the International Ocean Noise Coalition. OceanCare is committed not only to warn, but also to work with, the international community on tasks such as preventing and reducing the impacts of ONP for the benefit of communities worldwide.



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