

Interview with Sigrid Lüber, founder and president of OceanCare, World Oceans Day, 8. Juni 2019

“We do not fight. We convince.”

Thirty years ago Sigrid Lüber experienced a momentous encounter during a dive off the Maldives: it was as if the dolphins assigned her with a mission – and the young Swiss woman founded the marine conservation organisation OceanCare, which in its early years was called “Working Group for the Protection of Marine Mammals”. In the year of the anniversary, the 64-year-old president remembers the beginning – and sees great challenges in the near future.



Swiss marine conservationist of world standing:
OceanCare president Sigrid Lüber ©OceanCare

A small group of conservationists, who averted the construction of a dolphinarium in Switzerland in the spring of 1989, has grown into a world-renowned organisation that is committed to nothing less than saving the oceans and is approached for advice even by the UN. Did you expect this development when you founded OceanCare thirty years ago?

Quite honestly: Yes! Right from the beginning, when the Working Group for the Protection of Marine Mammals began its work, it was clear to me that we would have to go for the high levels if we wanted to be heard; the marine habitat can only be protected sustainably if we do not restrict ourselves to protest, but act in global networks. I had set myself a goal and in my youthful eagerness I was unwilling to compromise in achieving it.

Today OceanCare is perceived as a marine conservation organisation doing political advocacy work and influencing international conferences. Did you sacrifice the radical approach for the sake of a culture of diplomatic compromise?

When it comes to the fundamental stance, I have never compromised. Often different paths lead to the same goal – and if you want to have a say in international fora and gain achievements, you sometimes have to be flexible enough to be able to enter the smallest consensus and build on it.

OceanCare is fighting on numerous and very different fronts ...

... no, we do not fight! Those who fight have an opponent and risk losing the fight. We have partners and want to convince. This is the only way to win.

Where is it particularly important to convince at the moment?

Marine plastic pollution of the oceans has reached the awareness of the general public. More and more people realise that they can decide for themselves whether they want to remain a part of the problem – or contribute to the solution ...

... by avoiding the consumption of fish and seafood, reducing plastic and leaving the car parked. But when it comes to noise the consumer is powerless.

Not quite: as voters we can elect those politicians who ensure that the energy transition is taken seriously, and as consumers we have an effect on the demand for fish and petroleum products. We decide whether we want to go on a sailing trip or a motorboat trip, whether we surf the waves on a surfboard or on a jet ski. Oil not only feeds heaters and engines, it is also the most important raw material for plastic production. We control demand – and where there is no demand, there is no exploration, no drilling and no exploitation.

Is the need for action greatest with the noise issue?

Absolutely. It is invisible, but increasingly threatens life in the water. The noise of ship engines is by far not the only focus. Noise emitted by the oil and gas industry's exploration ships is even more unbearable for marine wildlife. Five years ago, the international community committed itself to the energy transition in the Paris Climate Accord and to replacing fossil energy sources with renewables. And what happens? The petroleum industry is launching an unprecedented run on deep-sea oil resources.

Why does searching for the 'black gold' involve so much noise?

The seabed and the geological layers below it are exposed to airguns for weeks, often months; each research vessel is equipped with up to 48 airguns, each of them firing a shot every ten to fifteen seconds. Recently, a scientific study has shown that a single shot can kill ninety percent of the plankton within a radius of nearly two kilometres. But plankton is the basis of the food web, it is the basis of life in the sea. My greatest concern is for the smallest animals in the sea. They are more than just the food basis of the largest living creatures on the planet, they also ultimately guarantee our survival.

The special consultative status granted to OceanCare by the UN ECOSOC was clearly an accolade. Are there other milestones in the long history of your organisation that mean a great deal to you?

There are many success stories – perhaps not as spectacular, but very important for us. And many signs of recognition.

Can you give an example?

Since 2016 we have been an official partner of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean ([GFCM](#)), which is a regional fisheries management organisation of the [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\)](#). In this capacity, we are involved in an agreement that regulates fishing. Last December we held a joint workshop with the UN Environment Programme to find solutions to the plastic problem in the Mediterranean. Another workshop jointly held with the GFCM in February focussed on the impact of underwater noise on fish stocks and invertebrates and the socio-economic consequences.

Climate change is currently the big issue: hardly anyone dares to dispute the phenomenon. Does it also threaten the oceans?

Yes, that's evident. At the poles the ice melts, coral reefs bleach and die, water temperatures in the Mediterranean reach levels that we used to have in the Maldives. Marine creatures are very sensitive to such changes – and in some regions native species are disappearing, while tropical fish species are being introduced into the Mediterranean, putting even more pressure on native species.

In the year of the OceanCare anniversary, the UN has chosen “Gender & the Ocean” as the motto for the 8th of June, the traditional World Oceans Day. What is this supposed to mean?

My understanding is that the international community wants to draw attention to the gender roles, equal rights and the specific role of those women who live from and with the sea, as well as those who work to protect marine wildlife worldwide.

OceanCare, too, was founded and for thirty years has been led through also stormy times by a woman. And this in a country that refused women the right to vote in Appenzell Innerrhoden until spring 1989, the time of OceanCare’s foundation!

That’s indeed a nice historical coincidence!

To this day, your organisation is almost entirely in the hands of women. Are women better marine conservationists?

I would not say so, but it is true that nine out of ten people who work in our office in Wädenswil are women. This may also be due to the fact that women are more willing to work under the conditions that we can offer. But that’s not what it’s all about; rather it’s about competence, passion and modesty. It is these qualities that unite our team.

This year you will reach the official retirement age for women. Will your female creativity stay with the sea and the people?

I have set 70 as my target; I would like to continue for that long. But of course I have arranged my succession – and it remains in female hands: With Fabienne McLellan, a woman who has proven herself in the diplomatic arena has taken over my succession in the International Relations department, and with our managing director Vera Bürgi, a captain is at the helm who will keep our ship on course even in heavy seas.

And you yourself?

I take care of strategic tasks in the background, continue to be involved in the project work, guide on the general orientation of the organisation and accompany the team as a mentor. I also want to make sure that the culture of responsible good governance, which I have always been promoting in international bodies, remains in the focus within OceanCare as well.

About Sigrid Lüber

Within a few minutes, Sigrid Lüber’s path of life was redrawn by a touching encounter with a school of dolphins when diving in the Indian Ocean. In the same year, in 1989, together with a handful of like-minded people, she founded OceanCare, for which she has served as the president since 1993.

Sigrid’s passion and goal is the global preservation of oceans and the species within them. This focus has driven Sigrid to work hard to ensure OceanCare’s voice is heard within various high-level intergovernmental fora and resulted in numerous successes influencing international ocean policy. Since 1992, Sigrid has participated in conferences of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) advocating for an end to commercial whaling and promoting the growth of the IWC’s conservation and welfare agenda. Since 2004, she has also been playing an active role in all United Nations (UN) related bodies dealing with ocean governance and policy. Sigrid builds and maintains excellent relationships with decision-makers both nationally and internationally. Owing to her cooperation with the UN and in recognition of the organisation’s expertise and credibility, OceanCare was awarded Special Consultative Status by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2011. Most recently, in 2015, OceanCare received invitation from the United Nations Environmental



Programme (UNEP) to be accredited as Major Group to UNEA, the world's highest-level decision-making body on environmental issues.

Sigrid's profound knowledge about the seas and the legal basis of international ocean conservation is self-taught and a credit to her many years of experience. With her visionary sense for upcoming issues and her well balanced combination of pragmatism, knowledge, commitment, courage and perseverance, she was instrumental in making OceanCare an organisation widely respected by international bodies and scientific professionals worldwide.