



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FIFTH MEETING OF THE INFORMAL CONSULTATIVE PROCESS: TUESDAY, 8 JUNE 2004

On Tuesday, delegates to the fifth meeting of the UN Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea (Consultative Process) held the first session of the International Workshop for a process for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment (GMA International Workshop), and convened in Discussion Panel and Plenary sessions. In the morning, the GMA International Workshop started considering a draft document on the scope, general framework and outline for the GMA, as well as issues pertaining to quality assurance, institutional arrangements, capacity building and funding. In the afternoon, the Discussion Panel considered high seas bottom fisheries and scientific research in the deep sea, and Plenary started exchanging views on areas of concern and actions needed.

GMA INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP

REPORT OF THE GROUP OF EXPERTS: David Pugh, Chairman of the GMA Group of Experts, presented the Group of Experts' report (A/AC.271/WP.1), noting recommendations on the scope, framework and funding of the GMA. He outlined a possible two year start-up phase before entering into a regular process, and emphasized the need for a centralized and identifiable secretariat within the UN system. He said a successful GMA requires skills and structures such as observation and information systems, and estimated its cost at US\$ 20 million per five year cycle.

DISCUSSION: Most delegates supported the aim and goal of the GMA, but noted that further work is needed on its modalities. Several delegates stressed the need for a pragmatic approach in doing so.

Scope: Many delegates supported an ecosystem approach, with AUSTRALIA calling for the inclusion of marine components within and beyond national jurisdiction and considering a bio-regional approach. The US suggested that large marine ecosystems constitute one of the bases for analysis.

The RUSSIAN FEDERATION, NORWAY, ICELAND and the REPUBLIC OF KOREA favored focusing on pollution and physical degradation, while AUSTRALIA, CANADA and IUCN opposed excluding marine living resources and fisheries.

NORWAY and CANADA supported a science-based GMA, with CANADA highlighting risk identification and assessment for priority setting. Ireland, on behalf of the EUROPEAN UNION (EU), said the GMA should provide reliable and objective information on the type, extent and causes of the degradation of the marine environment and its resources.

Start-up phase: AUSTRALIA supported the concept of assessment of assessments and, with CANADA, said topical areas should be identified on the basis of the assessment of assessments rather than be pre-determined. CANADA questioned the role of scenario analysis during the start-up phase.

The EU noted the need to harmonize national and regional assessments. The UK and NEW ZEALAND supported a centralized rather than regional approach for the assessment.

The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO (IOC/UNESCO) offered to carry out preliminary work for the first assessment of assessments through compilation of information.

Frequency: The RUSSIAN FEDERATION and the EU supported a five year cycle. The CONVENTION ON BIODIVERSITY (CBD) emphasized that a five year cycle would not contribute to achieving the target stemming from the World Summit on Sustainable Development to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010.

Framework: Noting the need to avoid duplication of work, most delegates expressed support for building on existing global and regional structures and assessments, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection.

CANADA and the EU supported a regular process under the UN, with the EU suggesting that the UN General Assembly create a task force, involving the UN Division for Oceans Affairs and the Law of the Sea, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the IOC/UNESCO to coordinate the GMA.

Funding: The EU recommended using existing programmes to fund capacity building. CANADA said the GMA should be funded from existing budgets and should not overlook partnerships with the private sector.

Other issues: AUSTRALIA said information sharing is fundamental, and recommended developing common data standards. The EU identified UNEP as a possible institution for technology transfer and capacity building.



UNEP highlighted the preparation of a feasibility assessment of marine resources, including multipurpose assessment modules for the coastal marine environment. Outlining existing mechanisms for fish stock assessment and information sharing, FAO said these could be adapted to benefit the GMA. The International Maritime Organization noted the importance to further develop the GMA's institutional arrangements.

Proceedings: Several delegates suggested that the GMA International Workshop focus its discussions on the start-up phase and the nature of the assessment of assessments. ICELAND said the scope of the GMA should be addressed before considering other issues.

Delegates discussed and agreed to establish a Friends of the Co-Chairs group to address next steps for the start-up phase of the GMA.

DISCUSSION PANEL ON NEW SUSTAINABLE USES

HIGH SEAS BOTTOM FISHERIES: Keynote presentation: Lisa Speer, Natural Resources Defence Council, presented a video on deep sea bottom trawling and their effects on vulnerable deep sea ecosystems and biodiversity. She explained that with 70% of existing fish stocks being overexploited, fishing activities are moving away from coastal areas into the high seas and the deep sea. Noting that some States have adopted moratoria on bottom trawling, she said that no legal framework exists with regard to the high seas, and underlined a duty under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to develop a framework for regulation. Speer called for developing a rational, equitable and legally binding regime, and proposed a moratorium on high seas bottom trawling.

Discussion: PAPUA NEW GUINEA stressed that his country lacks the necessary scientific information and technology to protect deep sea biodiversity.

AUSTRALIA enquired about the identification of specific seamounts that could benefit from a moratorium, and drew attention to difficulties regarding enforcement. Speer noted the need for further research to identify areas that require protection, and noted that moratoria on activities carried out in the high seas, such as drift net fishing, had already been enforced.

Noting that the majority of fishing activities are concentrated in the Exclusive Economic Zone, SPAIN and JAPAN questioned the moratorium's focus on high seas. COSTA RICA supported an immediate moratorium for all high sea areas. Noting that a moratorium would seriously impact fishermen's livelihoods, JAPAN called for further scientific evidence, and emphasized the relevance of the work carried out by the FAO and regional fisheries organizations. Speer remarked that the call for further scientific evidence contradicts the precautionary approach, and that FAO's role is important only as part of a larger initiative including biodiversity protection. She noted that some areas do not fall under any regional fisheries organizations' jurisdiction and that many of the existing organizations do not prioritize conservation.

Responding to NEW ZEALAND, Speer clarified that the proposed moratorium would be in place until deep sea fisheries are managed sustainably.

Greenpeace, on behalf of a coalition of NGOs, urged the international community to take urgent action for fear of losing the political momentum accumulated in recent years.

The MARINE BIOLOGY INSTITUTE stressed that fishing, and bottom trawling in particular, is the greatest threat to the ecology of the high seas and that other threats such as pollution, alien species and climate change are only consequential.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN THE DEEP SEA: Keynote presentation: Kazuhiro Kitazawa, Marine Earth Science Technology, presented methods for scientific observation in the deep sea. He noted that using submersibles is a costly option that does not allow permanent observation. Describing programmes in Japan, he supported developing cable networks using multi sensor stations and decommissioned submarine cables to permit constant observation.

PLENARY

AREAS OF CONCERN AND ACTIONS NEEDED: NORWAY supported a ban on bottom trawling in the high seas, under certain conditions, and emphasized the role of regional fisheries organizations in addressing the issue.

The EU recommended that strategies for the protection of the marine environment draw on work in other fora, including the CBD, and suggested that the Secretary-General establish a task force to coordinate measures for improved protection of marine ecosystems.

Noting that the Area falls under the regime of the common heritage of mankind, characterized by benefit sharing and equity, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO and Brazil, on behalf of several LATIN AND SOUTH AMERICAN COUNTRIES (the Rio Group), emphasized that countries lacking necessary technology and resources can not reap the benefits of the Area's genetic resources.

NEW ZEALAND said a legal framework for managing resources in areas beyond national jurisdiction should be flexible and accommodate future scientific discoveries. Stressing the need for new management tools, she called on States to use existing mechanisms for the protection of deep sea biodiversity.

IN THE CORRIDORS

The question whether fisheries assessment should be included within the scope of the global marine assessment (GMA) polarized positions and gathered great interest. Most delegates anticipated the issue would dominate discussions in the Friends of the Co-Chairs group. Corridors were also abuzz with comments on the financial estimates for the GMA's operation, with many delegations being taken aback by the high figure included in the report of the Group of Experts, particularly since it does not include capacity-building costs. One delegate expressed concern that, in spite of general agreement on the scope and objective of the process, these and other issues such as the definition of ecosystems may delay the prompt finalization, at this meeting, of a negotiating document for the Ministerial meeting to be held later this year.

Meanwhile, NGOs were pleasantly surprised with first reactions to their call for a moratorium on high seas bottom trawling. They thought that the lack of strong opposition, particularly from some usually vocal countries, bode well for its possible inclusion in the meeting's recommendations to the General Assembly.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

DISCUSSION PANEL: The Discussion Panel on new sustainable uses of the oceans will meet from 10:00 am-1:00 pm in Conference Room 1. Keynote presentations will be given by Edith Allison, US Department of Energy, on gas hydrates, and by John Stegeman, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, on practical uses of marine genetic resources.

PLENARY: Plenary will meet from 3:00-6:00 pm in Conference Room 1 to continue exchanging views on areas of concern and actions needed.