

Greece belongs to the first group of countries to sign and adopt the Barcelona Convention and the Mediterranean Action Plan back in 1975. Recognizing the importance of this institution from the beginning, my country submitted its candidature, together with other countries, in 1979 for hosting the MAP Coordinating Unit. In 1982 the final decision was taken, the Host Agreement was signed and the Coordinating Unit moved from its temporary premises in Geneva to its permanent ones in Athens.

Today, after 30 years of life, the Barcelona Convention and MAP are more active than ever. Its Contracting Parties, 22 in total, are all the Mediterranean countries and the European Union. The list of activities, initiatives and programme undertaken during those 30 years is quite impressive. To mention a few:

- The MEDPOL programme launched in 1976 was the first regional effort to assess the status of pollution in the Mediterranean on a regional scale and in a coordinated manner, and for years it formed the 'heart' of activities within the Convention. Today MEDPOL has of course evolved and MEDPOL Phase IV is on its way.

- A number of thematic legally binding instruments (Protocols) have been elaborated and adopted, and six Regional Activity Centers have been established in various Mediterranean countries.

- In 1995, the Contracting Parties adopted the amended Barcelona Convention which has extended its geographical coverage into the coastal zone and the hydrological basin and which is more 'action oriented' than its predecessor.

- A number of new or amended Protocols have also been added since 1995. The six Protocols and the amended Convention constitute the legal framework of the Mediterranean Action Plan.

- In 1996 the Contracting Parties established the Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development (MCSDD), a 'think-tank' for MAP. Its members are representatives of the Contracting Parties and representatives of Civil Society, environmental NGO's, local authorities and socio-economic actors. The MCSDD is the only regional UN body (besides the CSD in New York) dealing with issues of sustainable development.

- Very recently, in June 2005, the MCSDD finalized the Mediterranean Strategy for Sustainable Development, a framework non-binding document which will serve as the basis for future activities. It also adopted the 'Athens Charter' as its preamble.

All these, together with hundreds of meetings, workshops, activities and programmes – such as the Coastal Area Management Plans (CAMP's), and the recent SAPMED and SAPBIO programmes – constitute the vast number of activities undertaken in those years in the framework of MAP.

Most Achieved

George Souflias
assesses the progress of the
Mediterranean countries in
protecting their common sea

Much has been achieved in the Mediterranean during these years thanks to MAP and the Barcelona Convention, but they are more – much more – than the mere sum of their instruments and activities.

It is the strong ties established through the common routes and civilizations around the Mediterranean for centuries, or even thousands of years, that make countries and people of various religions, social and economic status feel that they belong to a common 'Mediterranean family'. It is the spirit of camaraderie forged through the knowledge that we, Mediterraneans, are tied together through a common destiny. It is the fact that in MAP, all countries – developing or developed, large or small – sit around the table on an equal 'footing' and work together for a better Mediterranean environment for the present generation and generations to come. This is the 'beauty' of MAP and we should all work hard to preserve it and enhance it in the future.

Protecting the environment is now embedded in the broader context of sustainable development and constitutes one of its three pillars, together with economic and social growth. Prosperity in a global context – for today's generations as well as for future ones – cannot be achieved without a simultaneous and coordinated effort on all three. The old perceptions that protecting the environment is isolated from the general notion of development or, even worse, is an obstacle to development and prosperity, are totally obsolete and outdated. On the contrary, we know today that protecting the environment constitutes an important element and vehicle of development and prosperity. This is even more obvious in such an area as the Mediterranean in which one of our basic economic resources, tourism, depends heavily on the quality of the marine environment and its coastal zone.

Has MAP been successful? Is the assessment of those 30 years positive? In our view the answer is very positive. MAP has created a full set of legal instruments, programmes and recommendations which have been adopted by the Contracting

Parties and have greatly contributed to protecting the environment in the Mediterranean area. In some cases, there have been criticisms regarding a slow pace or degree of implementation. If this is so, this concerns the Contracting Parties rather than MAP which, after all, is only a facilitator to the Mediterranean countries. It is our duty as Contracting Parties to ensure the maximum degree of implementation of the decisions we, ourselves, adopt within the MAP system.

During all these years Greece has played an important role within the MAP system. The fact that it has the privilege and honour of being the Host Country increases its responsibility within MAP and assigns it a special role. Greece has actively participated in all MAP activities. It has also taken a number of initiatives, of which I only mention two:

- Greece took the initiative of organising an extraordinary meeting in Athens, in July 2002, of the Ministers of Environment of the Euromediterranean Initiative. During it a special relation between MAP and Euromed was officially adopted and this was reflected in the decisions of the meeting (The Athens Declaration).

- Greece, in the framework of the EU Water Initiative – a very important political initiative of the EU for water – has undertaken the responsibility of its Mediterranean Component and will coordinate all its activities for all countries in the region.

I wish to congratulate MAP and the Barcelona Convention on their 30th Anniversary and reiterate our commitment to working with all the Contracting Parties for the protection of our common sea, the Mediterranean.

My final words go to the Coordinator and all the staff of the Coordinating Unit of MAP, whom I wish to assure that they can count on our continuous, active and friendly support ■

George Souflias is Minister of the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works, Greece.

