

Saving the Sea

Mostafa K. Tolba outlines the lessons learned from the successful negotiation of the Mediterranean Action Plan and calls for a huge multidisciplinary assessment of its effects

A miniature ocean bordered by 120 cities with a population totaling at least 100 million – the virtually enclosed waters of the Mediterranean Sea have been the crossroads of European, Asian, and African civilizations for at least 4,000 years.

But by the early 1970s the Mediterranean was so heavily polluted that many feared it might die. Once a symbol of the seas' benefits to man, it had become a symbol of man's destructive impact on the seas. Efforts to save it began with an assessment of its condition, carried out by a team of technicians from all the relevant UN organisations. Their prognosis was bleak.

The question then was: in the midst of wars, political antagonisms, and national feuds, to what extent would countries around the Mediterranean be willing to enter into an environmental agreement that would benefit them all? This was a time when all the Arab states were at war with Israel; when Turkey and Greece were disputing ownership of Cyprus; when Algeria and Morocco were at odds over the Sahara; and when the Cold War was still shaping international relations.

In spite of these difficulties, and in the face of the belief that the Mediterranean was beyond rescue, UNEP decided to go forward. Spain offered to host meetings to negotiate regional cooperation to save it and – to the astonishment of many – almost all of the basin states both attended the negotiating sessions, and succeeded, in 1975, in adopting a joint action plan that would slow and ultimately reverse the threat.

Negotiating the Barcelona Convention and the Mediterranean Action Plan yielded useful lessons. One was that governments listen when science speaks with authority. Scientific reports identifying the cause of the Mediterranean's ills spurred the countries surrounding it to action. Subsequent action plans and agreements have been preceded by scientific assessment of the regional sea in question.

Others were that Governments showed themselves to be willing to put aside political differences and address a common threat, but that such negotiations succeed only when they share certain features: there must be strong leadership by at least one of the parties; the sponsoring UN organisation must take an active, objective role in the meetings; and the negotiating delegations must be made up of government representatives whose strong personalities lead them to make imaginative, effective decisions.

Similarly, dealing with shared environmental problems has

inevitably led to an erosion of the old doctrine of absolute sovereignty, as governments have become willing both to give and to accept instructions on how to modify pollution-causing activities. But the resulting treaties are not, in themselves, enough. Implementation is the key. Any successful treaty must provide for sufficient financial and technical resources to countries that need help in enforcing the terms of the treaty inside their own borders.

Lastly, the importance of public awareness and sensitivity cannot be overemphasized. The public outcry that followed media coverage of Jacques Cousteau's warnings about the Mediterranean, and coverage of further scientific findings, prompted the region's governments to act in concert to avert the environmental calamity. The same pattern saved the waters in the region covered by the Kuwait, the Caribbean, the West and Central African and other Conventions.

At the fifteenth anniversary meeting of the Barcelona Convention in 1991, I called attention to the basic issue of all environmental treaties:

"A very basic question we have to answer is how far has the Mediterranean benefited from the Barcelona Convention, its various protocols, and its action plan. We are all saying the Mediterranean would have been worse without them. We need the proof for this. We need to know exactly where we were and how far did we go. This is essential to identify the next concrete steps. My question is, how far are the contracting parties ready to support such an exercise financially and with human resources? Such an effort will be a huge multidisciplinary effort involving marine scientists, ecologists, economists, technologists, social scientists, and several others."

I raise the same issue today ■

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