

How it All *Began*

Serge Antoine describes the origins of the Barcelona convention and traces the 30 years of cooperation in the Mediterranean that have ensued

Thirty years already! It seems like only yesterday. The 1972 Stockholm Conference – the first World Summit on the environment – had just taken place. Hardly had it ended, than its secretary-general, Maurice Strong, then launching the United Nations Environment Programme, asked me what initiatives should be taken. I replied without hesitation: the Mediterranean, linking environment, development and planning. Until then the vast region of 20 coastal countries had been split by international institutions between Europe, Africa and Asia – though a few pioneering voices, such as those of Jacques Yves Cousteau or Elisabeth Mann Borgese were calling attention to it as a precious resource whose seas and common heritage were fragile and at risk

In 1974, Strong's deputy, Peter Thacher, met with me to put the idea into action. A plenipotentiary Conference was called in Barcelona in 1975, followed by another in 1976 attended by the states themselves. The countries on the Mediterranean coastline got on so well there that Portugal (on the Atlantic) and the Soviet Union (on the Black Sea) knocked on the community's door. They and the United States were observers at the meeting, but that is where their participation ended: the Mediterranean countries decided to keep it in the family.

Fortunately, the Commission of the European Communities was both present and active accepting, for the first time in its history, to sign an international convention. I represented France with Olivier Manet, then ambassador. Before the meeting, we had to convince our ministers that our country had a role to play in the Mediterranean – by virtue of its southern coastline and Corsica, by virtue of its historical position and by virtue of its national wealth which then represented 45 per cent of the GDP of all the Mediterranean countries put together.

The Barcelona Convention received the blessing both of the UN (UNEP launched its Regional Seas Programme there) and of governments. Today, there are 21 participating states, each eager, and rightly so, to reinforce its national identity. Out of this consensus, they extract maritime cooperation and environmental schemes focusing on a coastline 47 000 km long, its hinterland, and the territory as a whole – particularly important for countries with multiple coasts, like Morocco, Spain, France, Turkey and Egypt.

The Mediterranean Action Plan's (MAP) first years saw Algeria and Albania joining the countries that had already



Kevin Aitken/Still Pictures

signed the Barcelona Convention. In 1978, the Blue Plan to explore the future of the Mediterranean – which I had initiated – was confirmed, thanks to the action of Ismaïl Sabri Abdalla. In 1982, during a meeting of the Parties in Montpellier, Athens was chosen for MAP's headquarters: Split, Tunis, and Malta, were chosen to host MAP Centers. In 1985 in Genoa, Mostafa Tolba, then Executive Director of UNEP, led the adoption, after a decade of work, of the 10 great directions of MAP for 1985-1995.

In 1989, the Blue Plan published a reference book – *“Le Tableau de la Méditerranée à l'horizon 2010”*, by Michel Batisse, its president since 1983, and Michel Grenon – where it detailed required plans of action for the region, with 450 million people, to enable it to avoid disaster and develop its assets in an increasingly competitive world. In the aftermath of the Rio Summit, Tunisia proposed further expanding MAP, which already linked environment and “sustainable development”. This was done in 1994, especially through the creation of the Mediterranean Commission on Sustainable Development and the official entry of the Civil Society of local government, associations and private companies.

In 1943, Charles de Gaulle said: “A day will come when peace will bring together peoples from the Bosphorus to Hercules's Column. They have thousands of reasons as old as history that command them to group together in order to complement one another”■

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