

Acting in CONCERT

Stjepan Keckes looks back thirty years to describe how the Mediterranean countries set about addressing the problems of their common sea, creating as precedent for the world to follow

We have witnessed – and caused greater change in the Mediterranean environment in the lifetimes of most people now alive than occurred during several past centuries. The change was, at the beginning, quite gradual, almost imperceptible and seemingly benign, but in late 1960s it became obvious that the pace of it was accelerating, with some undesirable consequences.

Previously pristine beaches were soiled by discarded and floating trash. Oil slicks and tar balls appeared ever more frequently. Growing amounts of untreated industrial wastes and sewage released into the sea offended the senses and threatened human health and marine life. Diminishing fishermen's catches were ascribed to pollution. Coastal industrial, urban and tourist development was spreading and altering the traditional Mediterranean coastal landscape. Several people talked about the poisoned Mediterranean Sea – and some even predicted its death in a few decades.

It did not take long before scientists, politicians and the general public realised that these problems would have to be countered without much delay so as to forestall further decay of the Mediterranean environment and to remedy the damage already done. It also became clear that concerted action by all Mediterranean countries would be needed to tackle most of the identified problems.

France, Italy and Malta, with considerable support from the Food and Agriculture Organisation, played a major role in laying the ground for a Mediterranean-wide environmental action. Starting from the early 1970s, numerous informal and formal consultations and meetings were held to prepare it.

Scientists, technicians and managers tried to find out how bad the situation actually was, what were

the causes of the main problems, and what might be their most tractable solutions. The task was not easy, mainly due to paucity of reliable information, data, and expertise in most Mediterranean countries.

The task of the politicians was no less daunting. First, they had to dispel the initial fear of less developed countries that an agreement on a common policy to protect the Mediterranean environment was intended to put a break on their development plans.

Agreeing on the prospective participants in the common endeavour to protect the Mediterranean was another major stumbling block. One of the main problems was to decide whether to include the Black Sea in the planned action. The other was to convince all the Mediterranean coastal states to participate, regardless of their ideological and political differences.

The 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment and the advent of UNEP – established at its heels – gave additional momentum to the preparations for action. UNEP joined the efforts of the Mediterranean countries in its first major programme, extending its full political, technical and financial support to the preparations, and soon became the focal institutional mechanism leading and coordinating the action.

Through the consultations that followed the Stockholm Conference, agreement was reached to limit the geographic scope of the planned action to the Mediterranean proper, with all the region's coastal states agreeing to take part. Agreement was also reached about the substantive scope of the action, which was to be structured along the lines recommended by the Stockholm Conference for the Global Action Plan it adopted.

By early 1975, the time was ripe to formalise the results of these consultations and UNEP was asked

to organise a high level inter-governmental conference to do so. It took place in Barcelona. The government representatives attending it adopted an open-ended regional Action Plan consisting of three main "chapters" – environmental assessment, environmental management, and supporting measures – and invited UNEP to coordinate its implementation.

A year later, in the same city, these countries adopted a legally binding regional agreement – commonly known as the Barcelona Convention – which provided the legal framework for the Action Plan. It entered into force within two years – a remarkable achievement by any standards, signifying the resolve of the Mediterranean countries to protect their sea.

The success of the Mediterranean initiative soon became widely known and was followed, as a useful model for regional cooperation, by a series of similar initiatives in semi-enclosed seas or seas in regions with distinct problems which require regional cooperation for their solution ■

Stjepan Keckes was the first co-ordinator of the Mediterranean Action Plan and served as the director of UNEP's Oceans and Coastal Areas Programme until his retirement in 1990.

