

Conference Report...

6th World Ocean Council Sustainable Development Summit
Hong Kong, 14 – 16 November 2018

Ocean Sustainable Development – Connecting Asia and the World

The Blue Economy continues to make headlines and is likely to do so well into the future. It is only a few years since the idea was first promoted in its present form, with Seychelles (under the then leadership of former president James Michel) soon recognized as a pioneering nation. The very simplicity of the concept – to make greater use of the world's ocean and to do so sustainably – has proved to be its strength and before long one nation after another has been adopting the same theme. When the United Nations in 2015 launched its programme of Sustainable Development Goals, with one of these devoted specifically to the health of the sea, the Blue Economy had arrived as a key player on the world stage.

On reflection, one can see how the first few years were given over to spreading the message. First, it was scientists and policy-makers who saw the potential of making better use of our shared ocean, and this has since been reinforced by a popular realization that we cannot leave things as they are. Issues like plastic waste and the damage this is doing to the marine ecosystem are now widely appreciated and a variety of remedial actions are at last being taken. In Seychelles and many other countries, the banning of plastic bags is at least spreading awareness of the problem.

But where do we go from here? Having got the basic message across, what can now be done to find inventive ways, literally, to turn back the tide of destruction? There is no doubt that good ideas are coming forward, but how do we find out more about these? Even in a world of electronic communication, face-to-face contact is still effective, and well-chosen conferences, where experts come together, provide an opportunity to achieve this. One such event, organized by the World Ocean Council, took place in Hong Kong in November 2018.

Hong Kong itself was a stimulating location for the event, synonymous with innovation and exuding a sense of dynamism and determination to make things happen. The endless mountains of containers along the waterfront of the unique harbor tell their own story. They illustrate how tradition has given way to new methods of transporting cargoes, as well as demonstrating Hong Kong's strategic location as an outlet for the exports of southern China. It is a story of rapid change writ large across Asia, which is now home to nine out of

ten of the world's busiest container ports, seven of which are in China (including Hong Kong).

The World Ocean Council operates internationally to bring together business leaders who are prepared to play an active part in ocean renaissance. Each year an international conference is held in one part of the world or another, designed to further develop an influential network and to take forward the basic aims of the organisation. The most recent event was held under the banner of a Sustainable Ocean Summit, with a particular focus on Asia, where most of the world's ocean traffic is generated and where most ships are now built. As such, it was significant that ship-owners and other major corporations declaring a commitment to sustainability took part.

Of particular interest to Seychelles was that James Michel was invited to deliver a keynote address. A full version of his paper has been posted on the James Michel Foundation website (<http://www.jamesmichelfoundation.org/speeches/121/the-business-of-the-sea:-making-the-blue-economy-work>) but he also presented an abridged version to participants. In addition to setting up and leading his own Foundation to further the cause of the Blue Economy, Michel has recently been appointed as an Ocean Ambassador of the prestigious Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy. Widely respected as a leading figure in the field, his message on this occasion was that the time for talking is over and action should now be the order of the day.

In the spirit of his presentation, with its emphasis on practical proposals, he suggested a number of new initiatives, including the following:

- ♦ Create a **'one-stop' global shop window** for good ideas and practical projects that will further the cause of the Blue Economy. An organization like WOC could help by providing the know-how to develop this facility for buyers.
- ♦ Encourage small island states to develop **centres of excellence** for one specific activity. To offer some examples, Seychelles could be the home of progressive Blue Economy management schemes; Samoa, say, could offer to the world working examples of ocean waste management; Cape Verde could be the centre for tidal energy – and so on. The idea is that the enormous challenge of making better use of the ocean can be broken down into manageable, 'bite-sized' chunks, each of which is within the capability of individual states.
- ♦ Following the example of some initiatives in Africa, ideas can be generated to **bring more women into the maritime workforce** and to encourage new ideas for sustainable development. This should not be mere rhetoric. Changing the balance would not simply add to the number of ideas but it would undoubtedly encourage new perceptions too.

- ♦ Invite the United Nations to design and fund a programme of **annual awards for the greatest contributions to the sustainable use of our shared ocean**. The whole emphasis would be on innovation and practical achievements.
- ♦ In addition to the work being done by the UN, and as well as the designation of **Marine Protected Areas** in our own EEZs, embark on a global campaign to have certain parts of the high seas declared as fully protected areas to be respected by all countries and ocean users. This is do-able, with support from leadership companies from the ocean business community, government and non-governmental organisations as well as academics.
- ♦ Ensure that delegates come away from all such gatherings with something practical in their conference bags. Borrowing an idea from the President and CEO of the WOC, Paul Holthus, is this not the time to create a small but focused **business leadership group**, concentrating on developing the Blue Economy in small island states? This cannot be just another committee but, rather, a high-profile group with specific targets to make a real difference. It is a demanding challenge but can we any longer call for anything less?

As well as these various suggestions, the conference showcased some imaginative proposals from around the world. One speaker made the point that shipping itself is a major polluter and will remain so until new sources of power like LNG replaces diesel; after a life at sea the ex-mariner has set up his own company to spread the use of the cleaner source of fuel. Another speaker explained that, having made his money from conventional activities, he was currently devoting his time and resources to a large-scale scheme to plant fresh 'forests' of seaweed on the ocean bed, likening the process to one of afforestation on land. Then there was the story of the Japanese-inspired Peace Boat, now in the process of introducing a state-of-the-art eco-vessel to show how cruise liners can be revolutionized; even the movement of dancers on the disco floor can be used to generate renewable power.

There was a sense in Hong Kong that new technologies are starting to offer hope for the prospects of a Blue Economy. The presence of bankers and other financiers at the conference was a welcome sign and a free flow of funds will be an essential part of the process. People are still asking for a definition of the Blue Economy but now the main questions are about ways to make things happen. This progression of the debate can only be for the good.