

Conference Reports...

The Economist World Ocean Summit, Abu Dhabi, 5-7 March 2019

Building Bridges

Abu Dhabi might seem an unlikely location for a conference on ocean sustainability, a city relying on desalinated water, which imports most of its food, and is one of the world's major oil exporters. Yet its present commitment to the subject of this conference is genuine, backed by the immense wealth of the United Arab Emirates and strong governance to make things happen. The city state is also well connected to all parts of the world, which is one reason why this year's event attracted no fewer than 750 delegates from 67 countries.

Quite apart from the value of individual contributions, one attraction of such events is to feel the collective pulse of participants. What are the issues that currently concern them most? Is there optimism in the ability of governments and individuals to recover the health of the ocean?

Certainly, the focus of attention has shifted markedly in just a few years. It is not so long ago since such gatherings were still engaged in defining the problem. Some sessions were dedicated to exploring the meaning of the Blue Economy and arguing why it needed to be taken seriously. Fortunately, this is now a given and participants have moved on to look at practical measures, some of which are already being taken, together with targets to achieve further progress. But is there optimism or pessimism about what is being done? In Abu Dhabi a straw vote showed that the jury is still out, with some believing that ambitious targets will be met and others not so sure. On the basis of the various papers, that seems a fair enough conclusion at this stage, though one must hope that the balance of opinion becomes more confident about the prospects of success in the years ahead.

Ideas abound, some building on what is already here but others setting out in totally new directions. One presenter asked why we need fish to look like fish. If the ultimate aim is to provide the world with protein then it's the fish meat that counts, not the fins, tail and so on. To follow this logic, taking cells about the size of a grain of rice, scientists are working on ways to make the cells grow to produce a type of fish paste. A plate of fish and chips will never be the same again.

This was just one eye-catching idea; others are less dramatic but no less important. Shipping companies are committed to finding ways to reduce fuel pollution by 50% by 2050, and the industry is hoping for breakthroughs in battery efficiency. Plastic waste, which hardly featured a few years ago, is now at the top of everyone's agenda and attracting the very latest technologies as well as meaningful policies to help solve the problem.

James Michel, former president of the Republic of Seychelles and now chair of his own foundation, was unable to take his place as a plenary speaker due to his attendance at the state funeral of his predecessor. Instead, his presence was marked by an effective video presentation. In this he succinctly made three points, suggesting that much can be learned from our longer experience of making the land more sustainable. Blue, he argued, is following in the footsteps of green.

First, he said, we must plan the use of the ocean. We should build on the experience of land-use planning to create a similar process for the sea. It is almost inconceivable that most of the world's seas are still something of a 'free for all'. As well as the high seas, many of the areas under national jurisdiction remain little more than lines on a map. We must now zone sections for different uses and support the UN's work to bring the high seas under control. In his own small island state of Seychelles he explained that a plan is being prepared to match our ocean responsibilities. It is time for all countries to do this and to create a maritime planning system with a new generation of ocean planners.

Second, he stressed that we need to work closely with businesses and communities. This is another lesson from land-use planning. Governments are good at guiding and encouraging, but it is businesses which will see the opportunities to innovate and invest. And it is communities which can give energy and local know-how to make plans work. The best plans are not imposed from above but they grow from within. Plans are nourished by people. Success can only be achieved through ownership.

Finally, he concluded, we need some quick wins. Simply talking will not save the ocean. People now accept land-use planning because it can offer popular examples like national parks and sustainable neighbourhoods. The ocean prize that is within our reach, he suggested, is marine protected areas. These can yield a dramatic difference and Seychelles is committed to making its own contribution. Marine protected areas are not difficult to establish so long as there is political will. If the world as a whole can reach the target of 30% protection by 2030 we will have marked a famous victory. We still have a long way to go but Michel expressed the belief that we can do it.

Elsewhere at the conference, Seychelles was mentioned favourably by several speakers, with a lot of interest especially in the Blue Bonds initiative. It was pointed out that, elsewhere,

Green Bonds started slowly but then really took off and it is expected that the same will happen with bonds for the ocean.

Another potential Seychelles connection was through the presence of Ray Dalio, a highly successful hedge fund investor. Having amassed a fortune through his American company, Bridgewater Associates, Mr Dalio and his wife are now spending more of their time on philanthropic ventures, including ocean exploration. 'Nations spend much more on space exploration than on discovering more about the ocean', he said, 'but the deep sea is far more exciting'. Next year he will bring his latest, state-of-the-art research vessel to Seychelles to add to our knowledge of the sea around our islands.

Full marks to *The Economist* for organizing this, the latest in a series of annual ocean summits. It succeeded in taking participants closer to the heart of key issues than other large-scale gatherings. The agenda is constantly evolving and *The Economist* has skilfully tracked the present frontline of sustainable development.

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