

THE NEED FOR AND POTENTIALS OF INTER-REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

Arthur Lyon Dahl

La Pallud, St. Jean de la Porte, 73250 St. Pierre d'Albigny, France

ABSTRACT

Each Regional Seas Action Plan has been developed in response to the specific needs of its region for environmental protection. However all the Action Plans share many features and respond to common problems that would benefit from inter-regional co-operation.

Regions with similar coastal ecosystems such as coral reefs and mangroves should exchange information on those ecosystems and their management. Techniques for surveys, monitoring and analysis should be harmonized and intercalibrated so that the results can be compared. Participants from several regions can be grouped for specialized training to make courses more cost-effective. Experiences of one region in regional co-ordination, data analysis, legislation and other fields can often be useful to other regions.

Inter-regional co-operation should be developed at the levels of regional co-ordinators, governments, research institutions and individual specialists.

The needs for regional co-operation

The oceans form a global interconnected system. No one nation can think of managing its part of the ocean in isolation from all the rest. Yet organizing a world co-operative programme of ocean management presents enormous practical difficulties. Nations that share a common coastline, or that surround or are scattered across a common sea can more easily see the importance of regional co-operation to solve the environmental problems of their shared ocean resources. This was the origin of the Regional Seas Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme.

In each region the governments have identified their own priority problems: oil pollution, nature conservation, terrestrial inputs, resource management, waste dumping, etc. The regions differ in their geography, cultures, governmental procedures, scientific infrastructure, economic and political systems, and existing regional organizations. These differences are expressed in their action plans and programme structures.

However, there are also many shared features and common problems, as are evident in the papers presented in this symposium. The three regional seas programmes and all the Pacific countries represented here share the same ocean, and have much to learn from each other both in their approaches to problems and their solution, and in the specific information concerning their common resource. Discussions on inter-regional co-operation first began in the Pacific as part of the UNEP session at the last Pacific Science Congress in 1983 (Dahl, 1985), when some of the action plans were still in the very early stages of implementation. As the programmes have developed over the last 4 years, there has been a small beginning to inter-regional activities in the Pacific, including some joint training courses for the East Asian Seas and the South Pacific, and even some participants from other regions. This is an appropriate time to see how this co-operation can be expanded.

Potential areas of inter-regional co-operation

There are a number of ways that different regional programmes for the environmental protection of marine and coastal areas can benefit from inter-regional co-operation. Where regions have common ecosystems, features, species or resources, they can share information on the status of such resources as well as experience in dealing with management problems. For instance, coral reefs and mangroves are common in the East Asian Seas and the South Pacific, as well as the northern parts of the South-East Pacific. Certain ocean currents and water masses traverse the whole Pacific from one region to another. Some widespread marine species occur throughout the regions, or like turtles and skipjack tuna may migrate from one region to another. Species that are sensitive and difficult to manage like the dugong also may be distributed widely. The special problems of island environmental management are shared by island areas across all the regions.

The most appropriate techniques for surveys, monitoring and analysis should also be shared and harmonized so that the results can be compared between regions. Field techniques for data collection are steadily being improved with the use of remote sensing and better monitoring methods; such new techniques should be shared widely. Analytical techniques for marine pollutants require standardization and intercalibration so that data can be pooled on a world basis. The UNEP Reference Methods for Marine Pollution Monitoring illustrate the common approaches that should be applied throughout the different regions. Many groups of marine organisms are still not well understood scientifically; inter-regional co-operation in working out the taxonomy of important groups can help in the intercomparison and exchange of results. The masses of data produced by national and regional programmes need to be stored and processed so that they can be drawn upon and used; the use of common data processing formats and storage systems can make for efficient data exchange in the best interests of all concerned.

The training of researchers and technicians is a slow and expensive process. Grouping training needs into inter-regional courses can be more cost effective. The creation of Pacific centers of excellence in certain fields may be the only way to make high quality scientific facilities available to regions that lack scientific infrastructure. Producing training materials and audio-visual supports dealing with Pacific problems and solutions can make training across the three regions concerned more effective.

In a number of fields where the regions share common problems, co-ordinated action may be needed to respond to them. Certain pollutants or potential pollutants may have an ocean-wide dimension, such as persistent toxic chemicals like PCBs and organochlorine pesticides, plastics, oil, and radioactive products dumped or released into the ocean. All the regions are facing common difficulties with coastal zone planning, environmental impact assessment, resource management, nature conservation and other problems where the interchange of experience would be useful. Urban pollution is common to all Pacific urban areas, and there is a widespread need for research on appropriate technologies for pollution control and waste treatment that would be applicable across the regions. The regions may also find it useful to pool their research efforts in certain fields where country and regional resources alone are inadequate.

Where certain environmental dangers threaten the whole Pacific, it may be in the interest of the many small countries in all the regional action plans to make common cause in their pressures, protests or initiatives at the international level.

Inter-regional co-operation can also be beneficial in sharing approaches to legislation, administration and implementation, in the review, publication and exchange of scientific results, and in the early exchange of information on research in progress.

Fostering inter-regional co-operation

It is important to remember that inter-regional co-operation can take place at many levels, depending on the type of problem or topic. The first efforts usually begin at the level of international agencies or of the regional co-ordinators for each action plan. However co-operation at the level of individual governments, research laboratories, associations of researchers or research institutions, or even individual specialists should also be encouraged when appropriate.

The first step in fostering inter-regional co-operation is to define the areas of common interest, or in which knowing more about other regions would make a region's activities more effective. It is then necessary to define the kinds of co-operation that would be most effective: meetings, newsletters, combined training, the twinning of research institutions, exchanges of personnel, technical co-operation using experts from other regions, exchanges of educational materials, etc. It can also help to analyse those problems or barriers that make inter-regional co-operation difficult and to identify the best ways to overcome them.

As co-operation between the different regional programmes is strengthened, they will become the foundation for the global approach to the protection and management of the oceans envisaged by the governments of the world at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment.

REFERENCE

- Dahl, A.L. (Rapporteur). 1985. Inter-regional co-operation: summary of discussions, p. 287-289. In A.L. Dahl and J. Carew-Reid (eds.), Environment and resources in the Pacific. UNEP Regional Seas Reports and Studies No. 69. UNEP, Geneva.