

Meeting with the Seas

Rebuilding marine biodiversity

Carlos Duarte

King Abdullah University of Science and Technology – Director of the Red Sea Research Centre

Following a short break, the speeches resumed with Carlos Duarte, director of the Red Sea Research Centre of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia, who focused his presentation on marine biodiversity. Considered one of the most prestigious researchers in multiple branches of biological oceanography and marine ecology, he delivered a speech on Rebuilding marine biodiversity.

The expert emphasized the importance of changing the narrative on the current state of the ocean as, much to his frustration, only catastrophist headlines are given attention while positive ones that explain the progress in recovery of our seas are ignored.

For Duarte, who said he would coincide on many points with Javier Garat's speech, the marine situation is improving significantly as although many species -more terrestrial than marine- have been lost, regulating of fishing and hunting has allowed this extinction to be slowed and, in many cases, population numbers of animals which were at risk of disappearing completely are increasing. He then gave various examples such as that of the humpback whale, numbers of which have reached 70,000, or the elephant sea which has gone from 20 to 200,000. He also gave other examples including grey seals or some species of sharks and tortoises.

Carlos Duarte highlighted the fact that, although it's true that in the 20th century half the 'blue assets' had been lost, initiatives have been launched that establish the global framework to recover oceans. To the surprise of the audience, the expert reported that strategies for habitat recovery had been learned from some of the worst events in history such as the Second World War. To back up his argument, he explained that during that war the English Channel was closed due to the risk of mines and described how those areas had recovered marine population. To this respect he also spoke of how the air raids by the American forces during the Vietnam war destroyed the Mekong delta and how, thanks to an ecological restoration project -the greatest in history- 2,700 square kilometres have been recovered in fifteen years.

A map then appeared on the screen which displayed the evolution of protected areas, which currently cover 7.6% of the surface of the planet. A percentage which has grown over the last 20 years. In parallel, an improvement in the state of conservation of the

marine species has been registered and extinction figures have been reduced. In fact, 47% of marine mammals are currently in the process of recovery.

One of the key factors in recovery of the oceans is aquaculture, a practice which has only been underway for 30 years, but has provided “a relief of the pressure on wild stocks,” Duarte explained, adding, “if stocks are managed in a sustainable manner, even to the limits of possibility, 80% will have been recovered in 2030. And by 2040, even with climate change, it will be possible to continue generating fishing yields to maintain the population of 10,000 million we expect to reach by 2050.” In fact, the expert signalled aquaculture as “the only option for healthy nutrition.”

Another piece of good news the speaker wished to share was the fact that, thanks to the existence of today’s lead-free petrol, the levels of this metal in the sea have been significantly reduced.

The next topic addressed was that of the underwater meadows, the recovery of which in Europe is now a fact. Coastal areas of the United States, China, Australia and Japan are currently also implementing protection and recovery policies thanks to which the first results are beginning to appear. It should be noted that 40% of the fisheries depend on the habitats of these underwater meadows. To this respect, the director of the Red Tuna Research Centre also spoke of the mangroves and of how the rates of fall had been slowing down to their current level of 0%. Their loss has managed to be halted.

Finally, Duarte pointed out: “right now, conservation and sustainability are not acceptable, we have to recover what has been lost. And although at the moment between 10 and 20 thousand million are being invested per year, it isn’t enough. We have to consider the fact that the return on the investment in recovery of our seas is ten dollars per dollar invested.”

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