Ocean Governance

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Introduction

Ocean governance refers to the ways in which the ocean is controlled, managed and protected. In most cases, ocean governance is usually undertaken by a single country, a small group of countries, or many countries acting together (for example, under the auspices of the United Nations). Despite the ocean covering over two-thirds of our planet, it is often overlooked when compared to the interest in, and support for, environmental protection on land.

The ocean is vitally important to the health of the planet. Oceans are the world's largest carbon sink, absorbing four times more carbon dioxide than the world's forests combined (see Peters, no date). Additionally, oceans offer key resources to many human communities, including food, habitat, and modes of transportation. With increasing climate change, piracy, and political turmoil, the ways in which our oceans are protected fails to provide a sustainable environment to fulfil the needs of these communities.

(Operations room staff patrolling the water via radar on board the destroyer HMS Edinburgh. (Flickr Source: UK Ministry of Defence cited in Peters, no date.)

Background

How are the oceans managed?

The oceans are managed in a multitude of ways on both national and international scales. Nationally, countries are responsible for the distance of up to 12 nautical miles, known as their territorial sea, in this zone national territorial laws apply.

Additionally, up to 200 miles can be claimed under EEZs (Extended Economic Zones) meaning much of the ocean is under national management. Internationally, the United Nations formed the Law of the Sea in 1982. This law was used to guide the management of the oceans beyond the 200 mile limit, and resulted in the creation of *Marine Protected Areas* and the *International Fish Stocks Agreement*, which attempted to protect the ocean and its resources whilst simultaneously upholding the notion of the sea as a 'commons' resource.

The oceans are often considered as a commons resource as vast expanses of them remain beyond the control of one nation state. In these areas, oceans remain beyond legal or property ownership, and are thus considered to be 'free' spaces where any activities can occur. The nature of commons resources often makes it difficult for a range of parties to act together for the common good – this makes it particularly difficult to protect marine environments and the species who live in them.

In some cases, the sheer size of the ocean surface means it is difficult to police and surveill illegal activities. Illegal fishing can occur in deep oceans, the jettisoning of ballast water (water used to balance empty cargo ships) can be openly emptied, polluting local habitats and species, whilst piracy can also occur. In regions such as the Gulf of Aiden (off the Horn of Africa), where modern-day pirates (armed with advanced weaponry) can raid cargo ships and disrupt international trade. The difficulty in policing oceanic waters is also highlighted by the rise of migrants using oceans as a means to escape their own countries and seek a better life elsewhere.

How to raise awareness of issues of human impact on the oceans and its species?

In the UK, The Shark Trust exemplifies many of the challenges we face when trying to govern the ocean. The Trust is a charitable organisation dedicated to promoting the study, management and conservation of sharks. Sharks are one of the most threatened

groups of animals on our planet, which in turn poses a threat to our ocean's biodiversity and ecosystem resilience (and concomitantly human survival). The Trust argue that shark conservation is a global problem and needs global solutions. They campaign for a change in how we manage and protect populations on a global scale. Their conservation goals include species protection, fisheries management and responsible trade.

A positive future for sharks relies on commonly agreed actions and goals. The major players need to be involved in change, including governments, industry, scientists, NGO's and charities, as well as the general public in many nations. The Shark Trust understand the complicated geographies of oceans management. Therefore they have achieved a global reach by developing a strategy of collaboration. So far, they have worked within 6 key partnerships involving over 70 organisations.

The Shark Trust have seen results from their work. They helped in the implementation of the first EU Blue Shark catch limit, as well as helping to create a new UK Government commitment to sharks. Their campaigning has seen results across fisheries management, citizen science, species protection and steps towards more responsible trade.

Have a look at material from the Shark Trust and see if it makes a convincing case to you to help protect the oceans see https://www.sharktrust.org/

Conclusions

In conclusion, the ocean is a vast space which is under both national and international governance. However, despite previous actions to ensure its management key issues continue to prevail. As geographers, a newfound responsibility to study and manage the ocean is vital to ensure a more sustainable future for our water world.

Further Questions

Find out more about some of the issues raised in this case through the following media reports:

BBC Ocean Pollution
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/cnegp3jvj32t/ocean-pollution

BBC Piracy in West Africa
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-48581197

BBC The hunt for fish pirates
https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190213-the-dramatic-hunt-for-the-fish-pirates-exploiting-our-seas

References

Peters, K., (n.d.). Governance of the oceans. Available at: https://www.rgs.org/schools/teaching-resources/governance-of-the-oceans/ [Accessed: 17/02/22].

WWF., (n.d.). Oceans. Available at: https://www.wwf.org.uk/where-we-work/oceans [Accessed: 17/02/22]

Further Information: RGS Ocean Governance and political Seas with Doctor Kim Peters
https://soundcloud.com/rgsibg/ocean-governance-and-political-seas-with-dr-kim-peters

(Greenpeace stopping an illegal fishing boat from offloading cargo (Flickr Source: Salvatore Barbera cited in Peters)