

## Devastation of oceans a bigger problem than carbon threat

Tuesday, December 15, 2015

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At the COP21 (Conference of the Parties) that concluded last week in Paris, leaders from around the world called for "urgent action" on climate change. And while taking action may be important, is climate change really the most urgent environmental threat facing our planet?

According to the most recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Mother Earth warmed by just six one-hundredths of a percentage point between 1998 and 2013, only one-third of the amount predicted by IPCC's computer models. That's the lowest warming rate in half a century, even as atmospheric CO2 concentrations increased by the highest rate ever. This information makes it hard to accept Prince Charles's dramatic assertion that there's just 20 months remaining to take action. Moreover, underlying all this frenetic rhetoric lies the assumption that climate change is wholly man-made, ignoring the fact that the planet has been warming ever since the last ice age 12,000 years ago.

But there is a formidable environmental peril where urgent action is critical. And there's no doubt that it's man-made. The world's oceans are being devastated. From garbage dumping to shipping pollution to agricultural runoff to overfishing, the world's most important natural resource is under imminent danger of passing the point of no return.

Our oceans have become the world's biggest garbage dump.

Every year, more than 10 million tonnes of plastic are discarded into the oceans. The impact on marine life and seabirds is appalling. An adult grey whale that washed ashore near Seattle was found to have three stomach chambers filled with plastic bags, surgical gloves, duct tape and even a golf ball. Sea turtles die after consuming translucent plastics they mistake for jellyfish. Sea mammals suffocate after being entangled in plastic fishnets.

Even Arctic fulmars and thick-

billed murrelets, inhabitants of one of the world's most remote places, have been found with stomachs stuffed with bits of plastic.

Recently, scientists have made an even more alarming discovery. A 2014 survey estimated there were more than five trillion pieces of plastic less than half a centimetre in diameter floating in the oceans. Despite that astounding number, it was still far less than the amount of plastic that had been dumped into the ocean. Further investigation found the rest had broken into microscopic bits, turning the oceans into a kind of "plastic soup." Already, plastic has been found in filter feeders such as mussels and oysters that were harvested commercially.

Researchers are scrambling to determine the impact on plankton-dependent feeders that form part of the foundation of the ocean's food chain.

Our endangered oceans suffer many other man-made assaults.

Bulk tankers often dump their chemical-contaminated ballast.

Agricultural fertilizer runoff chokes fish-spawning streams before flowing to the ocean, where it creates hundreds of oxygen-starved "dead zones" that asphyxiate sea life.

Billions of people depend on the oceans for protein. Yet that resource is being harvested at unsustainable rates. The problem is particularly acute on the so-called high seas. Two-thirds of the fish stocks beyond nationally regulated 200-mile limits are overexploited, a problem made even worse by the surreptitious dumping of millions of tonnes of dead fish back into the ocean as unwanted bycatch. And it's not just the amount of fish caught, but the methods. Fish nets often kill whales, dolphins and other marine mammals while bottom trawlers destroy seabed habitat.

There's a long list of what can and should be done.

While the Paris COP21 focused on changing the degree of rising temperatures between now and the year 2100, our oceans could be lifeless long before that. It's time for a global COP conference aimed at "urgent action" to save our oceans.

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