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UN, Global Scientific Partners Join In Effort to Reverse Oceans Deterioration, Promote Sustainable Development, Inform Policy Makers and Educate Public

Washington / Rome / Paris - The UN and leading international scientific agencies will launch on June 5 (World Environment Day) a pioneering Internet-based atlas providing users with continuously updated strategic data on the state of the world's oceans, maps, development trends and threats to human health from the deteriorating marine environment.

More than 2½ years in development after a decade of planning, the UN Oceans Atlas represents the most ambitious global scientific information collaboration ever online and an international consensus-building tool expected to assist negotiations of future marine-related agreements.

Amid mounting concern over continuing deterioration of marine and coastal ecosystems, several of the world's foremost ocean agencies created this new tool with the goal of helping reverse the decline and promote the sustainable development of oceans. Over-fishing, destruction of coastal habitat and pollution from industry, farms and households are endangering not only fish - the leading individual source of animal protein in the human diet - but also marine biodiversity and even the global climate. The Atlas will better spotlight these and the other most acute marine issues with, in many cases such as ice cover, links to real-time maps and tracking data.

"It is becoming increasingly clear that to solve or prevent the world's biggest problems the public and private sectors must come together to combine the best they each have to offer. The Oceans Atlas does this by combining the credibility and leadership of the United Nations with the vast knowledge of scientific organizations to monitor, diagnose and heal the great oceans of the world," said Timothy E. Wirth, President of the United Nations Foundation.

Project manager Dr. John Everett said the Atlas is intended for a complete cross section of users - from schoolchildren, educators and the general public to policy makers, scientists, the media, NGOs, and resource managers needing access to comprehensive databases.

The Atlas is designed to be an encyclopedic resource but also the world's foremost information clearinghouse and online forum for experts in ocean issues.

"This is the first time a community of world scientific and academic experts has collaborated on an information product of this breadth and depth," said Dr. Jacques Diouf, Director General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which led the initiative with principal funding of \$500,000 from the UN Foundation.

"The oceans play a crucial role in sustaining life on earth," he added, "and this important new tool will allow us to monitor and pay attention to problems in a way that hasn't been possible in the past. It will help coordinate and harmonize the work underway in various parts of the UN and in national agencies, academic institutions and other organizations and will serve a major role in moving the world towards the sustainable use of oceans for food security and human development."

The website will be supplemented by a CD-ROM and other media, co-published with Cinegram Media, to reach broader audiences and regions where Internet access is difficult. More than 900 topics are currently covered with 17 founding editors. Further issues and several hundred designated topic editors will be added over time.

NOAA Administrator Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher calls the Atlas "both a challenge and an opportunity to the ocean community" to integrate marine protection with the broader goals of sustainable development such as clean water, human health and reliable food supplies. By consolidating and achieving a consensus around marine-related information from leading agencies and experts worldwide, the UN Atlas will form an important informational foundation for future national and international policy development, setting research priorities and for intergovernmental negotiations on ocean issues.

"National governments have an important role to play," said Adm. Lautenbacher. "A collective commitment from all countries - such as participation in a global initiative like the UN Atlas of Oceans - will be needed to preserve the oceans' benefits into the future." In addition to a wealth of information, NOAA seconded Dr. John Everett as Project Manager and provided support staff and funding.

Project Director Dr. Serge Garcia, Director of the FAO Fisheries Resources Division, said the Atlas "enhances the world's ability to form partnerships, to share and pool information with all regions of the world, including the least developed ones, greatly benefiting all nations concerned about sustainable use of the oceans."

The need for the Atlas was identified during the 1992 Rio Earth Summit in response to a call to identify and address the greatest environmental challenges facing the planet. The launch of the Atlas at a meeting of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission in Paris June 5 comes less than 12 weeks before the World Summit on Sustainable Development opens in Johannesburg, South Africa.

"Ocean-related issues will almost certainly dominate the international agenda later this century if, as predicted, the Earth's continued warming accelerates sea level rise and adds up to 1 metre to the height to our oceans," said Dr. Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme.

Low-lying regions of the world are frequently fertile, densely populated and invested with expensive infrastructure. The human and material costs of a 1 metre sea-level rise would be huge, affecting over 70 million people in coastal China, 10% of the population of Egypt and 60% of the people in Bangladesh. Among wealthier nations, over 60% of The Netherlands' population could be affected and 15% of the people and 50% of the industry of Japan would be threatened. In the US, 17,000 square kilometres of wetlands, and the same amount of dry land, could be lost - an area the size of Connecticut and New Jersey combined. In low-lying countries like the Maldives or the Marshall Islands, the entire population is at risk.

The Atlas contains an initial 14 global maps and links to hundreds of others, including 264 maps showing the distribution of fishery resources. A further 100 maps showing global ice cover, navigation routes, earthquake and volcanic activity, temperature gradients, bottom contours, salinity and other ocean characteristics are being contributed by the Russian Head Department of Navigation and Oceanography.

The National Geographic Society will likewise make a major contribution to the Atlas, including access to its map machine and marine-related information from its extensive portfolio of books and magazines. The Census of Marine Life, a global Washington-based organization working to assess

and explain the diversity, distribution, and abundance of marine organisms, will also make its resources fully available through the Atlas.

Said Dr. Garcia: "The UN agencies and their partners have provided structure and a great deal of content based on their own expertise. We look forward to adding much more knowledge from ocean users, scientists, managers and institutions around the world, and to identifying the most qualified international editors for individual topics."

Dr. Patricio Bernal, Assistant Director-General for the IOC of UNESCO and former Chairman of the UN Subcommittee for Ocean and Coastal Areas said: "Natural ocean processes have an impact on every aspect of life on land. Our mission in IOC is to promote international cooperation to learn more about the nature and resources of the ocean and coastal areas. Built as a management tool to aid decision-makers, the Atlas is a successful example of cooperation among UN Agencies and international centers of excellence. Thanks to the Atlas project, the substantial amount of information contained in the data-bases developed by the UN will be now available to everybody."

Additional members of the project partnership include: the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), International Maritime Organization (IMO), World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, and The UN Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea.

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Background

The UN Atlas of the Oceans organizes information according to general subject areas:

- **Uses** - disposal of waste from land, energy, fisheries and aquaculture, human coastal settlements, marine biotechnology, non-consumptive uses, ocean dumping and ship wastes, offshore oil, gas and mining, recreation and tourism, and transportation and telecommunications.
- **Issues** - climate variability and climate change, economics, emergencies, food security, governance, human health, pollution and degradation, safety and sustainable development.
- **Background** - including biology and ecology, how oceans were formed and how they are changing, monitoring and observing systems, and maps, statistics and online databases
- **Geographical** - categorizes information according to geographic region.

Among the issues addressed:

- **Fishing**: all 17 of the world's major fishing areas have either reached or exceeded their natural limits and nine are in serious decline, according to the FAO.
- **Piracy**: the number of reported piracy attacks worldwide for 1999 rose nearly 40 percent compared with the previous year and almost tripled compared with 1991 according to the International Maritime Bureau of the International Chamber of Commerce.
- **Algal blooms**: The number of poisonous algal species identified by scientists has nearly tripled since 1984, increasing fish kills, beach closures, and economic losses. Large parts of the Gulf of Mexico are now considered biological dead zones due to algal blooms.
- **Coral reefs**: 58 percent of the world's coral reefs are at high or medium risk of degradation, with more than 80 percent of South-east Asia's extensive reef systems under threat, according to the World Resources Institute.
- **Invasive species**: Marine bio-invasions have been identified as a major global environmental and economic problem with several thousand species estimated to be in the ballast tanks of the world's shipping at any one time. The Atlantic box jelly, believed to have been released in a ship's ballast water, helped wipe out life in the Black Sea. In San Francisco Bay, a new foreign species takes hold every 14 weeks, scientists warn.

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Project Manager Dr. John Everett and Dr. Serge Garcia, Director of the FAO Fisheries Resources Division, are available for advance interviews from Paris June 3-5. Please use the contacts above to schedule a time.
The UN Oceans Atlas is online at www.oceansatlas.org