

REGIONAL AFFAIRS

Northeast Pacific

New Convention and Action Plan Agreed

The Convention on Cooperation in the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Marine and Coastal Environment of the Northeast Pacific was signed by six countries at the Conference of Plenipotentiaries in Antigua, Guatemala on 18 February 2002. Canada and the United States were observers.

The Agreement was brokered by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), as part of its regional seas programme. Big cuts in pollution and improved conservation of fish stocks are now likely in the Northeast Pacific, following the signing of the agreement by Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. Mexico and Colombia, the two other States involved in the region, have indicated that they will sign the Convention before the end of this year.

Klaus Töpfer, UNEP's Executive Director, said that the negotiations on this Convention had been five years in gestation. "I am delighted that this work has finally borne fruit. Such cooperation would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. During the 1980s, Central America was gripped by a profound political and economic crisis. The end of the cold war signalled the beginning of the end of armed conflict in the region and a chance for cooperation on environmental and development issues. The new agreement marks an important step towards achieving even greater stability in the region."

A request for UNEP assistance in reaching such an agreement was made by its Governing Council at their nineteenth session in February 1999. This request was reiterated in February 2001 at the twentieth session of the Governing Council.

An action plan, detailing how the countries concerned will improve the environment of the Northeast Pacific for the benefit of people and wildlife, has already been approved. The Convention will come into force when the countries concerned ratify it.

Key parts of the action plan will include an assessment and crackdown on the high levels of sewage and other pollutants being discharged from cities into the Pacific Ocean. Such discharges are compromising the health of bathing waters and can lead to outbreaks of water-borne diseases such as cholera, which not only endanger people but also harvests of sea food such as shellfish. High sewage discharges and run off of fertilizers from agricultural land are also adding to the risk of algal blooms in the region's coastal waters.

This part of the action plan could mirror a similar one drawn up for the Wider Caribbean regional seas agreement. Here, countries are upgrading existing water treatment works or installing new ones. The project is initially targeting large cities, eventually extending the improvements to smaller settlements. Funding is coming from national governments' own budgets and loans from donors such as regional development banks.

Jorge Illueca, Director of UNEP's Division of Environmental Conventions, said: "The Central American coastline of the Northeast Pacific has undergone rapid changes in recent years. Over 90 per cent of the population of Central America lives on this drier, Pacific Ocean, side and so it is here where the environmental pressures are the greatest. Forests along the coast have been largely cleared, resulting in widespread losses of plant and animal species, degradation of the land itself and pollution of rivers, streams, lakes and coastal waters."

He noted that pressures are also increasing on mangroves, which are vital nurseries for fish. The breaking down of all these natural systems, he said, is leading to a deterioration of environmental security in the region, leading to growing numbers of environmental refugees encroaching on highland and other forested lands in the interior including protected areas: "The new agreements offer real hope that these stresses and strains can be countered and genuine improvements can be delivered."

Another priority will be an assessment of the risks from oil pollution and a strategy to deal with such events, including an evaluation of the region's availability of clean-up equipment and personnel. The region is an

important shipping route for vessels sailing from Panama up to Alaska in the United States, as well as much of the oil transported from Alaska to the east coast of America via the Panama Canal or through the Bahía de Charco Azul to the Laguna de Chiriqui oil pipeline.

The Central American countries will be working closely with UNEP and its Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities (GPA). UNEP is also coordinating the Global International Waters Assessment (GIWA). (MJ)



Courtesy: IUCN/Netherlands CINP