

Declaration on the World's Oceans

By Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
Stockholm, Sweden
June 7, 2003

One thing we all share as a common heritage of humankind: We are united by water which comprises 70% of our body and 70% of the Earth's surface. All life depends upon its nourishing power. Flowing water makes our planet unique among all the planets in the universe. Water is a source of wonder and beauty, a cause of celebration and connection.

Water cradles us from our birth, sustains us in life, and heals us in sickness. It delights us in play, enlivens our spirit, purifies our body, and refreshes our mind.

We share the miracle of water with the entire community of life. Indeed, each one of us is a microcosm of the oceans that sustain life. Every person here, every person in the world, is in essence a miniature ocean....

The oceans provide one-sixth of the animal protein consumed by humans, more than chickens, beef, mutton or pork. Oceans generate half of the oxygen we breathe and cleanse the atmosphere of carbon dioxide that people, automobiles and power plants produce. Removing this carbon dioxide is vital because the human-caused increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide threatens our planet's biological diversity and our own human civilization.

*“So what we do to the oceans... we also do to
God's other creations, including ourselves.”*

The oceans are the earth's major shapers of climate.... More than half of humanity lives within 100 kilometers of the coast, and where we live reflects our affinity for the gifts that the oceans provide. The health of the oceans is essential to human well-being... and to the stability of our world's climate. And the oceans are home to countless species of life, from great whales that are loved by all to tiny creatures that only God knows.

But the health of the oceans and seas is severely threatened. We overfish. We pollute. We have nearly exhausted our seas.

The Baltic Sea... suffers from and is being stifled by humans. Once we were few and the sea seemed vast; but now we are exceedingly numerous, and yet the Baltic has not grown. We surround it, and this surrounded sea feels the pulse of human life. Our species has harmed the life of this beautiful and once-bountiful sea.

The Baltic is a microcosm of the world's oceans. It is one of many seas bordering the interconnected basins of the world's oceans. The Baltic's waters may have originated in rain over Germany or Poland and brought to it by a hundred rivers. Nevertheless, when these waters leave the Baltic, they will touch the shores of Indonesia, the ice-bound coasts of Antarctica... before the end of time. There is truly only one ocean, with all its parts interconnected, just as there is only one Spirit, which unites us all.

So what we do to the oceans, God's vast blue Creation, we also do to God's other creations, including ourselves. Once we humans did not know that we could harm God's Creation. The oceans especially seemed so vast as to be invulnerable.

“We invite you to join... in pledging to protect the oceans as an act of devotion.... If we love God, we must love His creation.

But now we know differently. We know how fragile is our precious Earth and its oceans. We know how essential they are to sustaining our bodies, our minds, our hearts and spirits. And we know that the oceans, even in their vastness, are feeling the crushing burden of humans' callous ignorance.

We fish their depths to exhaustion, we fill them with pollution, we reshape their shores with little concern for their ability to endure. From the Baltic Sea to the remotest Southern Ocean, we have reduced the oceans' miraculous biodiversity.

The oceans are in peril. They cannot protect themselves. But God has endowed humankind with the knowledge to rectify our mistakes, and we are, each one of us, given the choice of what we will do.

To harm them, even if we are ignorant of the harm, is to diminish His Creation. We can stop over-fishing and destructive fishing methods so that the miracle of the fishes will endure for future generations. We can stop pollution so that the seas can recover from poisoning and from life-choking nutrients produced by our cities and farms and industries. We can establish sanctuaries in the sea where we agree to do no harm of any kind.

If we can find the faith to love each other and to love God, then we can find the faith to help His vast water planet live and flourish. On this eve of World Oceans Day, we invite you to join in pledging to protect the oceans as an act of devotion.... If we love God, we must love His creation.