



Blue as the New Green – educating the consumer about what’s at stake at sea

What people don’t know – and should care - about the oceans

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Moderator : **Bruno Giussani**, European Director, TED, Switzerland

Speakers : **Sandra Bessudo**, Executive Director, Malpelo Foundation, Colombia
Tony Haymet, Director, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, USA
Peter Heffernan, Chief Executive Officer, Irish Marine Institute, and European Union Ambassador for the Seas
David de Rothschild, Co-Director, the Plastiki Expedition, UK

Just a few years ago, global warming was an esoteric subject confined to scientists and apocalyptic sects. Today, it is a constant, even trendy subject of discussion at the dinner table, in the boardroom *and* in the laboratory. What would it take to give “blue” issues the same currency?

Improving scientific observation of ocean phenomena and making the data available to the public would help, the Irish Maritime Institute’s Peter Heffernan said. He noted that the European Union had taken a step in that direction with the creation of the European Marine Observation and Data Network. What people needed to understand was that if the oceans were not managed wisely, “soon we will have created a mess we won’t be able to clean up,” he warned.

One potentially devastating development that needed to take center stage was ocean acidification, Scripps’ Tony Haymet urged. “We were shocked last summer to see data on acid levels of the waters just off the California coast,” he said. “It was corrosive enough to dissolve shells.”

Acidification, which Haymet called “a sleeper effect” of greenhouse gas emissions, was worrisome because its impact and prevalence were not well understood. “How quickly will the ocean become acidic? We need to get on top of this problem very quickly,” he said.

Haymet admitted that even scientists often had the humbling experience of finding that some piece of accepted wisdom was in fact completely wrong. Everyone knows to throw the little fish back, right? In fact, marine biologists now know it’s the big ones we should save, Heymet said. “These are experienced fish that know how to survive,” and these aquatic street smarts are crucial to the whole population, he explained.

As the director of Colombia’s Malpelo Foundation and its national marine park, Sandra Bessudo manages a living laboratory for study and communication about sea creatures and their environment. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Malpelo is home to



a unique concentration of endemic species, ideal for research but also as an ecotourism venue to raise public awareness of the importance of marine biodiversity.

Malpelo is at the forefront of international cooperation initiatives, she explained, leading to the creation of a four-nation agreement on conservation in the Eastern Tropical Pacific with Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Ecuador as the signatories.

Bessudo also made the important point that while the public in developed countries may be aware of the environmental consequences of human activity, that was much less the case in developing countries. "We need a very strong education effort, even on things like the impact of throwing waste into rivers and oceans," she said.

To very poor populations, larger, longer-term ecological considerations may seem a luxury. Even in rich countries, it was hard to get people to change behaviour, Ireland's Heffernan noted. "Human nature is selfish. If it hurts your health or your wallet you're much more likely to act," he said.

David de Rothschild concurred. He is about to embark on an extraordinary maritime adventure to raise awareness of the degradation of our oceans, and in particular the devastating effects of pollution by plastics. His Plastiki expedition will consist of sailing a raft made of discarded plastic bottles across the Pacific, passing through the world's largest floating garbage dump. Plastic refuse, for reasons not entirely understood, have concentrated in a few places in the warmest areas of the seas.

Rothschild chose the plastic water bottle as a stark symbol of human carelessness and a potentially potent tool to wake people up. "It takes 3 to 5 litres of water to make a 1-litre plastic bottle. That's just dumb," he said.

Many people have experienced the depressing sight of beautiful beaches littered with such bottles, but few realize that beyond the aesthetic issue is a far more vital one. At sea, plastic refuse decomposes into miniscule toxic particles, which are eaten by fish. This threatened not only their health, but ours, Rothschild pointed out. He called for a "Kyoto Protocol for the oceans" to coordinate an international response to the marine impacts of climate change and reckless consumerism.

"We need to draw a clear path from science to the consumer," he argued. "We were able to create 'the green thing' – let's create 'the blue thing,'" he said.
