Time to reverse the damage to our oceans

THE 1991 devastating Iraq war oil slick “harmed or killed about 82,000 birds of 102 species, 6,165 sea turtles, and up to 25,900 marine mammals, including bottlenose dolphins, spinner dolphins, melon-headed whales and sperm whales”.

In 2010, months after the Deepwater Horizon incident led to spilling of 205.8 million gallons of oil and 225,000 tons of methane into the Gulf of Mexico, “dead turtles, marine mammals, birds and fish kept washing ashore; dolphins were reported to be miscarrying, and pelicans attempting to nest on beaches polluted with tar balls and subsurface oil”.

Since then, although major incidents of oil slicks have not been largely reported, marine life throughout the world has continued to be subjected to immense pressures due to our perennial yearning for “progress” and comfort and our utter carelessness in dealing with affairs of the oceans, and of the land too.

An incredible amount of plastic waste is making its way into the oceans the world over; this trash is being eaten by marine life and even ending up in seafood. Plastics are estimated to comprise 60-80% of all marine litter and it is estimated that the ocean will contain one ton of plastic for every three tons of fish by 2025 – 80% of it worldwide coming from land-based sources. Widespread overfishing has cast a shadow over global fish population sustainability. Industrial, agricultural waste, chemical particles, etc. are washing into the world’s oceans. And global warming has added to the growing burden of marine pollution. All this is leading to irreversible damage, including widespread disturbances in ocean circulation leading to changes in weather patterns, and increasing loss of marine species.

There are solutions that are being worked upon by various countries of the world. These comprise stricter fishing regulations to check over-fishing; restrictions on killing of wildlife such as dolphins, turtles, whales and seabirds; strict regulation of chemical dumping, petroleum spills, and toxics leaching from plastics; and establishing more marine protected areas to protect the fish populations and address the issue of degradation of the marine environment.

The problem of marine pollution and degradation the world over is serious enough for the United Nations to designate the theme of this year’s World Wildlife Day (3 March 2019) as “Life below Water: For People and Planet” – focusing on the severe stress in recent years on marine creatures.

Ironically, much of the stress on the world’s oceans originates from the land. There is a lot we too can do to prevent the burden on our oceans, including reducing the use of plastics, abstaining from littering the beaches, cleaning the beaches of rubbish and plastic, reducing the amount of chemicals that we release into our drains, reducing our carbon footprint, and regulating energy consumption.

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