

A Social Movement in Ocean Literacy

World Ocean Day

This is the story of World Ocean Day's (WOD) modest beginnings almost three decades ago. The first "Oceans Day" was designed by Canada's International Centre for Ocean Development and launched through the Ocean Institute of Canada, on June 8, 1992, at the NGO Global Forum of the Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), in Rio de Janeiro. It was the genesis of a global social movement in public education and ocean literacy.

The event called for a greater awareness of our relationship with the world ocean; in particular, the need to better understand the cumulative human impacts on climate change and global warming. The theme of the very first Oceans Day in Rio was "The Health of the Blue Planet and the Health of Coastal Populations."

Thirty-two years ago, dialogue and exchange on the impacts of climate change and global warming were largely confined to scientific circles. The World Commission on Environment and Development, the Brundtland Commission of 1987, and its final report *Our Common Future* raised the veil of silence and ushered in a new era of critical thinking about the environment. *Our Common Future* recognized the important role of teachers, scientists, and ocean educators to advance the message of sustainable economic development. Today, the Canadian Network for Ocean Education (CaNOE) and the Canadian Ocean Literacy Coalition continue the tradition to advance citizen science and public engagement across Canada.

Reflecting back, Oceans Day at Rio served as a reaffirmation of *Our Common Future* and provided a call to action to mobilize educators and scientists to support sustainable development and ocean management. The event would eventually help advance a nascent movement of citizen science and ocean literacy. Oceans Day 1992 was attended by respected scientists and policy makers from Europe, Africa, Asia, the South Pacific, North America, and many United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development delegates. An all-party delegation of Canadian parliamentarians, including a future Prime Minister of Canada, also participated.

The principles of the first Oceans Day 1992 charter from Rio still ring true:

- Preservation of our Blue Planet will hinge on our collective will and capacity.
- We need to address more concretely how the immediate needs of communities dependent on the oceans can be met.
- A new working vision for the oceans should be formulated. It is clear that the present management regimes are not working. Approaches based on the twin principles of sustainability of the resources and integrity of the ocean environment are needed.
- Sustainable development must be founded on creative and ethical principles of resource use and conservation that will benefit future generations.

Oceans Day 1992 supported the UNCED Rio Declaration and acknowledged the



participation of “concerned citizens” in achieving sustainable development, including the rights of women and Indigenous Peoples to participate in public education. WOD was recognized as an international public good by the Secretary General, United Nations in 2008/09. (The UN General Assembly decided that, as of 2009, June 8 would be designated as “World Oceans Day.”) Today, thousands of people participate in World Ocean Day events every year on June 8. One of the most notable WOD events to take place in Canada each year is the Halifax Oceans Week. This volunteer campaign has been running continuously since 1992. Internationally, the Ocean Project in the USA provides a global map from which viewers can track more than 2,000 annual World Ocean Day events around the globe.

As a social movement, World Ocean Day belongs in the public domain. It is not a

proprietary name or concept and it belongs to every classroom, every community centre, library, school, university, and maritime museum in the world. WOD was, and is, a unique global social movement in the field of ocean literacy.

About the author

Carol Amaratunga was formerly Director of the Interregional and Cooperative Activities Division, International Centre for Ocean Development (ICOD), which conceived the ICOD Ocean Forum of 1991 and the first global Oceans Day 1992 in Rio. Dr. Amaratunga is a writer/social policy researcher with Cartis Research Inc. and lives in Oak Bay, British Columbia.