The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration

Gabriel Grimsditch of UN Environment introduces this special edition, which celebrates the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030).

The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) headquarters in Nairobi. Image © Gabriel Grimsditch.

2020 is the year where we have an unprecedented opportunity to redefine our relationship with our natural environment. Environmental concerns are expected to top many global agendas as crucial international meetings are being organized on climate change (the 26th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Glasgow) and biodiversity protection (the 2020 Biodiversity Conference in Kunming). Several other important conferences that are especially relevant to marine ecosystems are also taking place in 2020, including the UN Oceans Conference in Lisbon, the Our Ocean Conference in Palau, the 14th International Coral Reef Symposium in Bremen, the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Marseille, and the 14th International Seagrass Biology Workshop in Chesapeake Bay.

But this is not just a year of conferences. Global awareness is increasing on the myriad of challenges that our marine environment faces, and communities around the world are increasingly willing to take action against ecological degradation. There has never been a more urgent need to restore damaged ecosystems, and nature-based solutions are being recognized as critical for addressing global sustainable development goals and national priorities, from climate change mitigation to food security.

In recognition of this urgency, the United Nations General Assembly in March 2019 proclaimed 2021–2030 as the **UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration**[1]. On land, this involves the restoration of at least 350 million hectares of degraded landscapes by 2030, realizing up to US$9 trillion in net benefits and alleviating poverty in many rural communities. A target for coasts and oceans has yet to be set, and this presents an opportunity for target-setting for education, awareness-raising and investments in the restoration of marine ecosystems from government, civil society and private sectors.

The potential for ecological restoration in the coastal space is huge and can provide benefits to societies

Globally, we have lost approximately half of live coral cover, a third of seagrass meadows, a third of mangrove forests, 40 per cent of saltmarshes and up to 85 per cent of oyster reefs since the early 20th century. The potential for ecological restoration in the coastal space is huge and can provide benefits to societies. The IUCN estimates that up to 812,000 hectares of degraded mangrove area globally show potential for restoration, with over 500,000 hectares considered highly restorable. This would not only lead to increased carbon sequestration, as mangroves are among the most carbon-rich ecosystems globally, but also to increased fisheries productivity and shoreline stabilization. Coral reefs are another valuable ecosystem where advances are being made in restoration techniques. A United Nations Environmental Programme UNEP analysis showed that healthy coral reefs would deliver economic benefits of $34.6 billion and $36.7 billion between 2017 and 2030 in the Mesoamerican Reef and Coral Triangle regions respectively. Urgent action on climate change, coupled with investments in protecting resilient coral reefs from localized stressors can deliver a healthier future for coral reefs and the economies that depend on them.

Challenges still exist around the cost-efficiency and scalability of restoration; however the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration provides a great opportunity to catalyse investments and prioritize the restoration of coastal and marine ecosystems for governments, private sector and civil society around the world.

Gabriel Grimsditch (gabriel.grimsditch@un.org), Programme Management Officer for Marine and Coastal Ecosystems Branch, Ecosystems Division, UN Environment

1 https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/