

FEATURE: UN-backed projects in the Caribbean highlight connection between life on land and life below water

26 May 2017 – The vital role of the world’s oceans in human well-being and development is being highlighted next month as the United Nations hosts a global conference aimed at protecting these resources.

Conserving the marine environment is among the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), which seek to achieve a more just and equitable world for all people and the planet by a deadline of 2030.

The ocean is vital to us because we are a small island developing State

SDG 14, Life Below Water, and the [Ocean Conference](#), to be held from 5 to 9 June, has particular resonance for countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, a twin island nation in the Caribbean, according to Rissa Edoe with the UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)) in the capital, Port of Spain.

“The ocean is vital to us because we are a small island developing State. Most of our resources are along our coast and most of our industry is also along our coast, so it is very important for us to understand the connection between life on land and life under water.”

Ms. Edoe is the National Coordinator for the Global Environment Facility’s ([GEF](#)) Small Grants Programme, which has funded more than 100 projects since 1995.

Among the recipients is Nature Seekers, a non-profit organization that has become a model for marine conservation in the Caribbean over the past 27 years.

The group is based in Matura, a fishing village on Trinidad’s north-east coast, where nesting leatherback turtles were being slaughtered for their meat. Today, the 2,000 residents proudly protect the female sea turtles that come to the local beach every March through August to lay their eggs.

Leatherback turtles are the largest turtle species on Earth and can grow up to seven feet long and weigh up to 2,000 pounds. Esther Vidale, Project Director at Nature Seekers, described them as a “keystone species” in the marine environment.

“The leatherback turtles’ primary food source is jellyfish and they really keep the jellyfish population in check by eating their weight or more in jellyfish per day. And jellyfish feed on small fishes or fish eggs. So by keeping the jellyfish population in check through the leatherback turtles, we

have a thriving fishing industry so that fisherfolks who use this as their livelihood, persons who just want to enjoy seafood cuisine, and all the industries and persons that are impacted by the use of fish, can now benefit: both in the ocean, and us as man as well.”

VIDEO: Nature Seekers, a community-based conservation group in Trinidad and Tobago, has played a key role in protecting leatherback turtles since 1990.

When Nature Seekers began in 1990, up to 30 per cent of leatherback turtles that made it to Matura Beach were being maimed or killed by poachers.

Suzan Lakhan Baptiste, the group’s Managing Director and driving force, recalled that the beach once resembled a “graveyard.”

“I live in the community and when I went out onto the beach I saw all these huge turtles with just all the eggs in the stomach, with just a few pounds of shoulder meat missing. I remember seeing turtles with chops all over and no part thereof missing. And I said ‘I have to be a part of doing something and curbing this,’” she stated.

Since then, Nature Seekers has educated the village of Matura about the importance of conservation and showed how the turtles are a resource that can enhance livelihoods.

Residents have been trained as guides to patrol the beach to monitor the nesting leatherbacks which are tagged, measured and weighed, thus contributing to global research on the species.

Matura has become an eco-tourism destination as the group also works on issues such as forest management and sustainable livelihoods, emphasizing what Ms. Edoe called “the ridge-to-reef connection.” Visitors can also purchase beaded bracelets, necklaces and other trinkets made from glass bottles collected during beach clean-ups, marketed under the brand Turtle Warrior.

Today, the greatest threat to the leatherback turtles lies in the water as they can get entangled in fishing nets as bycatch, a term used to describe species caught inadvertently during commercial fishing.

Through [UNDP](#), Nature Seekers is exploring alternative fishing methods such as using Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) which allow trapped turtles to escape from nets.



Leatherback turtles are the largest turtle species on Earth, growing up to seven feet long and weighing as much as 2,000 pounds. Their name comes from the soft shells on their backs. Photo: UN News/Lulu Gao



Esther Vidale, Project Manager at Nature Seekers, monitors a leatherback

turtle that has just given birth. Leatherbacks are critical to marine ecosystems as they help keep jellyfish populations under control, thus contributing to the availability of fish stocks. Photo: UN News/Lulu Gao



Residents and volunteers remove countless bottles during the annual clean-up held on Matura Beach prior to the start of turtle-nesting season. Nature Seekers says making the beach safe for both people and turtles has spurred a means to turn “trash into cash” by recycling the bottles to produce jewellery and other products. Photo: UN News/ Lulu Gao



The glass bottles collected during the beach clean-up are recycled into beads which local women string into bracelets, necklaces, anklets, keychains and other items sold under the brand Turtle Warrior. In this way, women who may not be able to participate in Nature Seekers’ turtle patrols can also contribute to conservation efforts. Photo: UN News/ Lulu Gao

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Meanwhile, people on the sister island of Tobago are also working to preserve the stunning environment that surrounds them. For example, community-based organizations located in the north-east are being empowered in co-managing natural resources.

The region is rich in diverse eco-systems, with coastal communities bracketed between the Main Ridge Forest Reserve – the oldest on record, according to the UN cultural agency ([UNESCO](#)) – and the Caribbean Sea.

Neila Bobb Prescott, of the Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)), is Chief Technical Advisor for a national project funded by the GEF covering six sites throughout the country.

“(In Tobago) The site that we are trying to improve management to is the North East Marine Tobago area, which is the home of the biggest brain coral in this part of the world,” she said.

“We have just concluded studies showing that we have two species of endangered sharks there and the studies show that we have juvenile species, so there may be other reasons to pay attention to these areas.”

For the past three years, the Environmental Research Institute Charlotteville (ERIC) has been supporting area residents in making informed decisions about their future through taking an active role in contributing to natural resource conservation.

ERIC is another recipient of the GEF Small Grants Programme.

Aljoscha Wothke, the group’s Director and CEO, said their activities include providing eco-diving training to a handful of local fishermen who then check

and monitor reefs and sharks.

“And at the same time, we train them to be community communicators because we believe that in small communities, people trust the people they grew up with much more than if they get messages from somewhere outside or messages that are dropped on them,” he added.



Fisherman Welldon Mapp (left) has been working with the Environmental Research Institute Charlotteville (ERIC) in its three years of operation. The group supports communities in north-eastern Tobago to co-manage natural resources, including reefs. Mr. Mapp, 25, also engages with people in his hometown, Charlotteville, to get them to think about issues that have an impact on the natural environment such as climate change and overfishing. Photo: UN News/Lulu Gao

Welldon Mapp is an example of this bottom-up approach.

The 25-year-old fisherman, “born and grown” in the fishing village of Charlotteville, is also an ERIC communicator, engaging his peers and neighbours in discussions on topics such as how climate change impacts on their livelihoods.

He believes the messages are getting through.

“You have dive boat operators changing from running the engines on all day to switching them off while they have customers. You have the football coach asking students that came in late to practice to bring a plant to plant around the football field to enhance their community. So people are changing slowly,” he stated.

[‘All refugees want to go home someday’ – UNHCR spokesperson and author Melissa Fleming](#)

26 May 2017 – “I envy the mountains and the trees and the rocks because they will be able to breathe Daraa’s air and I won’t.” Those were the thoughts going through Doaa Al Zamel, when she and her family reached the Jordanian border. It was November 2012, one year and eight months since the violence in Syria first began.

Doaa is a refugee from Syria who now lives in Sweden. She survived one of the worst refugee shipwrecks on the Mediterranean Sea. In August 2014, aboard an overloaded ship carrying more than 500 refugees, Doaa became an unlikely

hero.

As Head of Communications and Chief Spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Melissa Fleming listens to stories of people fleeing for their lives every day. Although she has met many refugees and gotten to know several stories of resilience, when she came across Doaa's story, she couldn't sleep at night.

"Doaa's story is particularly remarkable; the resilience and the strength of the human spirit is so evident through her story that it is one that people are really not just moved by but also inspired by," Ms. Fleming told *UN News* following a recent event at the UN Bookshop in New York.



Doaa al Zamel was a refugee in Egypt before she embarked on a deadly boat journey and saw her fiancé and hundreds of passengers die at sea. Photo: Elena Dorfman

War and persecution have driven more people from their homes than at any time since records began, with over 65 million men, women and children now displaced worldwide. According to the latest Global Trends report issued by the UN refugee agency, known as UNHCR, one in every 113 people on earth is either an asylum-seeker, internally displaced or a refugee.

In order to get away from the idea of refugees as statistics, Ms. Fleming believes in a communication strategy of telling individual human stories. That is why she would "love to tell all 65 million stories of all the forced displaced people in the world."

But it was the powerful story of Doaa that inspired her to write "A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea," which gives a human face to the sheer number of human beings trying to escape to seek better lives.

"Refugees are becoming statistics and throughout the world they are being used to fuel xenophobia because of the large numbers and because of their desperation," Ms. Fleming said.

With the book, she hopes to build "a bridge of empathy" to people, "so they'll start caring and understanding why refugees like Doaa take this kind of risk to come to their countries, why refugees like Doaa deserve our compassion and our help."

VIDEO: 'Doaa's story is particularly remarkable,' says UN refugee agency spokesperson and author Melissa Fleming, as she talks to UN News about her book 'A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea.'

Doaa comes from Daraa, in Syria. After war engulfed her city, tanks rolled in and bombs started falling, she and her family became terrified for their lives and left to Jordan and then to Egypt. Through her story, Ms. Fleming

also describes the situation in the neighboring countries which are hosting the majority of refugees, some five million.

“Egypt was one of these countries; when Doaa first arrived with her family, Egypt was a very welcoming place, but then the government changed and it became less so. Like in all the countries that host so many refugees, the refugees struggle because those countries themselves are having their own difficulties. UNHCR is always underfunded and can only provide pretty much the basics. So all the dreams of studying and making a good living, they are not just completely destroyed by the war, but also by the fact of being a refugee in a situation like that,” Ms. Fleming explained.

Without a work permit in Egypt, Doaa struggled through day shifts for low wages. The war in Syria that drove her family away was in its fourth year. And the people who once welcomed them in Egypt had become weary of them.

It is also in Egypt that Doaa meets and falls in love with Bassem, a fellow Syrian refugee who convinces her to leave and make the perilous journey across the sea to Europe. “They’d heard from their friends who had already made the journey to Europe that there they could not just be safe, but also she could study and he could find a job,” said Ms. Fleming.

“And so he convinced her – even though she was terrified of the water, because she had a near drowning experience when she was a young girl – to take this journey. They sold everything and paid the smugglers \$2,500 each, which was a fortune for them, and ended up boarding not a luxury liner as the smugglers promised but a really decrepit, rusty, rundown boat packed with 500 refugees, among them 100 children.”

After two days at sea she started to get worried, and on the third day she told Bassem: “We will never reach the shore. We will all sink.” The boat sank near Greece; only 11 people survived, enduring four horrible days floating in the sea. One of them was Doaa.



Volunteers help newly-arrived refugees on 28 September 2015, as they disembark from a large rubber boat, on the shores near the town of Mithymna, on the Greek island of Lesbos, in the North Aegean region. Photo: UNICEF/Ashley Gilbertson VII



Refugees arrive on the island of Lesbos, Greece. (2015) Photo: UNHCR/Giles Duley



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Refugees arrive on the island of Lesbos, Greece. (2015) Photo: UNHCR/Giles

Duley



A young boy surrounded by adults after being rescued in June 2014 from a boat on the Mediterranean Sea. Photo: UNHCR/A. D'Amato

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When Ms. Fleming first read about Doaa and baby Masa – who survived four days and nights on a child's floating ring in the middle of the sea with no food and no water and everyone dying around her – she flew to Crete, Greece, to meet her. At the time Doaa was deeply traumatized.

“She lived a nightmare beyond what anyone could possibly imagine. She witnessed the drowning of 500 people, just one after the other before her eyes, including Bassem, who after two days of treading water next to her, slipped from her hands and gave up his struggle.” The fact that 19-year-old Doaa and 18-month-old Masa survived is actually “almost miraculous.”

Through UNHCR's [resettlement programme](#), which helps resettle refugees in a third country, Doaa was reunited with her family. “We were able to connect them with the Swedish Government and facilitate the move,” said Ms. Fleming. “The Swedish Government settled them in a small snowy village where they are now learning Swedish, she is healing from her trauma and now again thinking of her brighter future.”

As she says in the book, Doaa still feels the same longing she felt in 2012. “One day, I hope to return to Syria so I can breathe again. Even if just for one day. That would be enough. ”

AUDIO: Melissa Fleming talks to UN News about her book ‘A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea.’

Ms. Fleming said she never met a single refugee who does not want to go back. “All refugees want to go home someday. Some of them may never go home and live there again... they were forced to flee. It's one of the worst things that can happen to you, everything that you treasure and it's not just things, it's community, it's friends, it's atmosphere, it's the type of food, it's memories, it's all been forcibly left behind.

“All refugees long for the chance to be able to go home. I hope one day Doaa will be able to go home and not just go home, but go home to a peaceful Syria, the Syria that has been reconstructed and a Syria that is reconciled with the evils that have happened in the past six years.”

The book is set to reach an even wider audience given that Hollywood directors Steven Spielberg and J. J. Abrams plan to turn it into a film. “That means that the telling of this single human story, a remarkable human

story... it's something that resonates," Ms. Fleming noted.

[Fresh violence empties city in Central African Republic; senior UN official urges more aid](#)

26 May 2017 – A senior United Nations official is calling for additional humanitarian aid in the Central African Republic, where nearly the entire population of the city Bria was forcibly displaced last week.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)) said that more than 41,000 people were forced out of their homes in “unprecedented violence between rival armed groups” between 15 and 18 May.

In those days, people searching for protection flooded seven sites for internally displaced camps, among them one near a base for the UN peacekeeping force in the country ([MINUSCA](#)).

“With the [emergence of an ethnic dimension](#) to the conflict, hundreds of houses were burned, property looted and ransacked,” said OCHA.

The resurgence of the last outbreaks of tension in the past two weeks has caused the displacement of about 100,000 people, 200 wounded and 300 dead, according to the Ministry of Social Health in the country.

Echoing the Government's concerns, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in the country, Najat Rochdi, expressed concern at “this new outbreak of violence where civilian people are paying the highest cost.”

A lack of sufficient shelters is the main concern, as CAR is now in a rainy season, following by the need for food and clean water.

OCHA said that shelters and food rations have been convoyed from Bangui and Bambari to Bria, but insecurity and the poor conditions of roads have delayed their arrival. The humanitarian community is also working to meet the needs in terms of supply of drinking water and sanitation.

Diseases are also increasing, spread by “promiscuity and poor hygiene,” OCHA said.

The senior UN official has called for additional resources. Halfway through the year, funding for the 399.5 million dollars Humanitarian Response Plan is only at 64.8 million.

CAR is emerging from civil conflict which began in 2013, with clashes between the mainly Muslim Séléka rebel coalition and anti-Balaka militia, which are

mostly Christian.

[Civilians in Syria must be spared from anti-ISIL airstrikes – UN rights chief](#)

26 May 2017 – The United Nations human rights chief today urged all warring parties in Syria to take every feasible measure to spare the civilian population from the effects of the armed conflict, noting that civilians are increasingly caught in fighting between the Government forces and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) terrorist group.

In particular, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein urged the air forces of the Government and other States fighting ISIL in Syria to take much greater care to distinguish between legitimate military targets and civilians.

The rising toll of civilian deaths and injuries already caused by airstrikes in Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Raqqa suggests that insufficient precautions may have been taken in the attacks, Mr. Zeid [said](#) in a news release from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)).

Just because ISIL holds an area does not mean less care can be taken. Civilians should always be protected, whether they are in areas controlled by ISIL or by any other party, he added.

Places such as the border city of Albo Kamal where retreating ISIL fighters and their families are mixed in with some 100,000 people, including displaced Syrians and Iraqis are of particular concern, Mr. Zeid said.

The same civilians who are suffering indiscriminate shelling and summary executions by ISIL, are also falling victim to the escalating airstrikes, particularly in the northeastern governorates of Al-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, according to numerous credible reports of such incidents, he said, citing an airstrike of 14 May that reportedly killed 23 farm workers, including 17 women, in a rural village of eastern Al-Raqqa Governorate.

Airstrikes on two residential areas of the ISIL-controlled city of Albo Kamal in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate on 15 May reportedly killed at least 59 civilians, including 16 children and 12 women and injured another 70.

The day after that, ISIL fighters are said to have cut the throats of eight men at the sites of the airstrikes, after accusing them of providing coordinates for the strikes. On 18 May, an ISIL attack on the Government-controlled village of Aqareb in rural eastern Hama Governorate allegedly resulted in the deaths of 36 civilians including women and children.

[With focus on natural disasters, UN risk reduction forum opens in Mexico](#)

25 May 2017 – Opening a major United Nations conference on risk reduction in Cancun, Mexico, Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed cautioned that the world would not reach its development goals without tackling climate change and disaster risk.

“[Human and economic losses](#) from disasters cannot continue at current levels if we are going to progress with the Sustainable Development Goals,” the Deputy Secretary-General said at the opening on Wednesday evening.

Held every two years since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to discuss disaster reduction, the [2017 Global Platform](#) – the fifth such event to date – is bringing together some 6,000 Heads of State, policy makers, disaster risk managers, civil society and other participants.

This is the first international summit on disaster since the [Sendai Framework](#), which was adopted in 2015 in the northern Japanese city after which it was named, and consists of seven targets and four priorities for action that aim for the substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities and countries.

Last year, 445 million people were affected by disasters linked to natural hazards worldwide including floods, storms, earthquakes and drought, 8,000 people lost their lives and direct economic losses from major disaster events were estimated at \$138.8 billion.

The World Bank estimates that the real cost to the global economy from disasters is \$520 billion per year and that they push 24 million people into poverty annually.

“The challenge is how we are going to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) if annual economic losses from disasters can wipe out the entire GDP of a low income country overnight and force millions from their homes,” Ms. Mohammed said.

She noted that Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and the Pacific, have all agreed and adopted plans to implement the Sendai Framework “with a clear focus on shifting the paradigm from managing disasters to managing disaster risk.”

She emphasized that this is vital in order to progress on key targets of the Sendai Framework including reducing mortality, reducing the numbers of people affected by disasters, reducing economic losses and reducing damage to critical infrastructure – all points that are also integral to the [2030](#)

[Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development.

Earlier in the day, UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Disaster Risk Reduction, Robert Glasser, welcomed participants and said he hoped the gathering would provide "great momentum" to efforts to make this a safer and more resilient world.