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Oceans and the law of the sea

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Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report has been prepared pursuant to paragraph 309 of General Assembly resolution 69/245 of 29 December 2014, with a view to facilitating discussions on the topic of focus at the sixteenth meeting of the United Nations Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea, on the theme entitled "Oceans and sustainable development: integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, namely, environmental, social and economic". It constitutes the first part of the report of the Secretary-General on developments and issues relating to ocean affairs and the law of the sea for consideration by the Assembly at its seventieth session. The report is also being submitted to the States parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, pursuant to article 319 of the Convention. In the light of the multifaceted nature of the topic being covered and the page limitations established by the General Assembly, the report does not purport to provide an exhaustive synthesis of available information.

* A/70/50.

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51. Access to energy is a fundamental factor of economic growth and human development, which are preconditions for poverty alleviation and the improvement of health, education, gender equality and environmental safety.[82] It is recognized, however, that the marine renewables sector is nascent and the potential of marine renewables is largely unproven pending further research and development.[83] Offshore wind generation, which is the most advanced of marine renewables,[83] typically has higher costs than fossil fuel-based power generation and other renewables such as land-based wind power generation.[84] However, costs vary depending upon site-specific factors, including availability of existing infrastructure, grid connection costs and local labour rates.[84] It is expected that offshore wind will be an increasing part of the energy mix as costs decrease.[84] The unbalanced state of utilization of marine renewables between developed and developing States has been noted and, in order to ensure access to marine renewables for all peoples, calls have been made for capacity-building and technology transfer (see A/67/120).

52. Marine renewable energy can, if proven, contribute to the supply of affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy in the future. It can also yield socioeconomic benefits, including poverty eradication, sustainable growth, reduced inequality, and increased employment opportunities. It also contributes to mitigation efforts in relation to climate change by offering low- and no-carbon footprint alternatives to fossil fuels.

5. Laying of submarine cables

53. Submarine cables are critical communications infrastructure, being used for more than 98 per cent of international Internet, data and telephone traffic, with only a few States being without fibre connectivity, and many of these having cable projects currently under way.[85] Submarine cables are recognized as vitally important to the global economy[86] and hence to economic growth. By underpinning international communications, their role in providing access to data and information for all peoples is evident.

54. The environmental dimension of submarine cables is, however, less apparent. Submarine cables themselves are considered to have a low-carbon footprint and a small relative impact on the environment, with the maintenance of submarine cables causing the highest impacts as a result of the operation of the cable ships themselves.[87] Submarine cables have the potential to be contribute actively to disaster warning and addressing climate change, with work under way to examine the potential for monitoring purposes.[88]

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[82] O. Edenhofer and others, *Renewable Energy Sources and Climate Change Mitigation: Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[83] See A/67/120 and A/67/79.

[84] International Renewable Energy Agency, *Renewable Power Generation Costs in 2014* (2015).

[85] D. Burnett, D. Freestone and T. Davenport, "Submarine cables in the Sargasso Sea: legal and environmental issues in areas beyond national jurisdiction", report of a workshop held in Washington, D.C., on 23 October 2014 (2015).

[86] See General Assembly resolution 69/245.

[87] C. Donovan, "Twenty thousand leagues under the sea: a life cycle assessment of fibre optic submarine cable systems" (Stockholm, 2009).

[88] See A/67/79/Add.1 and A/69/71/Add.1. See also www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/climatechange/task-force-sc/Pages/default.aspx.

55. Functioning as the backbone of the international telecommunications system, submarine cables are a fundamental component of the critical global infrastructure and play a direct role in sustainable industrialization; indirectly they contribute to all other areas recognized as important for sustainable development.

6. Tourism

56. Over the last 50 years, tourism has become one of the largest economic sectors in the world, accounting for an estimated 9 per cent of world GDP.[89] Cultural tourism is one of the largest and fastest-growing global tourism markets, encouraging tourist locations to actively develop their cultural assets.[89] The growth in tourism has been especially significant in developing and least developed countries, where it is one of the principal sources of foreign exchange and often the most viable and sustainable economic development option.[89] For example, tourism was a main factor in the recent advancement of Botswana, Cabo Verde and Maldives from their status as least developed countries.[89]

57. It is recognized that well designed and managed tourism can make a significant contribution to the three dimensions of sustainable development.[90] Sustainable tourism, can, in particular, contribute to eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (see A/68/278). It may also have beneficial effects on livelihoods and infrastructure development.

58. Sustainable tourism is based on visitors seeking to experience intact and clean environments and attractive natural areas.[91] This provides incentives for host countries to protect and preserve their environments. The past few decades have seen a substantial growth in coastal ecotourism,[91] which encourages increased protection of coastal ecological attractions, such as coral reefs and marine wildlife, including through marine parks and pollution control measures.

59. Despite its positive potential, tourism can also have a number of negative impacts. For example, it is a significant and growing contributor to carbon dioxide emissions, a growing cause of pollution of land and sea and a major user of non-renewable resources.[91] In addition, the economic benefits of the sector do not necessarily accrue to local populations, as illustrated by cruise tourism, one of the fastest growing segments of tourism. The foreign cruise ship companies enjoy most of the economic benefits, while many of the costs are borne by the port cities and their local populations.[92] On the social front, tourism can also lead to socioeconomic stratification, strained public services and infrastructure and resource conflicts, among others.[93]

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[89] World Tourism Organization, *Sustainable Tourism for Development Guidebook* (Madrid, 2013) (available from www.unwto.org/ebook/sustainable-tourism-for-development/).

[90] See General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex.

[91] John Davenport and Julia L. Davenport, "The impact of tourism and personal leisure transport on coastal environments: a review", *Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf Science*, vol. 67, Nos. 1-2 (2006).

[92] Juan Gabriel Brida and Sandra Zapata, "Cruise tourism: economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts", *International Journal of Leisure and Tourism Marketing*, vol. 1, No. 3 (2010).

[93] Bruce Epler, "Tourism, the economy, population growth, and conservation in Galapagos" (2007).