

Stories from the Ocean

Archbishop Peter Loy Chong

I grew up close to the ocean, living with my grandmother and the ocean is the soft music you hear on the background of the night. You can hear the gentle splashing of the ocean on the reefs. As children, the ocean is many things - entertainment, recreation, fun, and joy. It's swimming, peddling around with our bilibili or bamboo raft and it's just fun to be in the ocean.

The ocean is also like a food bank. The seashore is a place where we collect seashells and small crabs after school so that we can have something for dinner. The seashore is also a place to go in a thina which means to go with a flashlight or a kind of light in the night to do the sending to catch seafood that goes out in the night. It's much easier because some of them are asleep.

The ocean is also a place to fish. The reef, an isolated small reef which we call amotu popular place for fishing. It's like a deep fridge that is where we come together to get food. The ocean is also economic sustenance. My uncle was a fisherman. He had a boat with a 40-horsepower engine. He will go out with his team in the night to fish. In the morning, the sound of the boat coming brings excitement as children as we eagerly await the catch of the night and also have some of the left-over for nice fish soup in the morning, of course the other fish are sold.

The last thing I'd like to share about the ocean is about spirituality for us in Oceania. Most of the Oceania peoples have totems, gods that live in the Ocean. The ocean is their abode, this is where they live.

Today I have come to know more about our Mother Ocean through science. I have come to know that 70% of the Earth's surface is covered by the ocean - the biggest surface of the Earth. And also, it provides 70% of the oxygen. More oxygen than the rainforest which provides 20-percent something of the oxygen. So, in terms of the air we breathe, the ocean is a very important part.

I've also come to learn through science that the marine system is the largest ecosystem in the Earth, where a lot of creatures live in. I have also come to know through science that the marine ecosystem is the biggest and greatest biodiversity on earth. I have also come to know about Mother Ocean that it regulates the world's climate. It regulates the warm and the cold sea in order to keep the climate steady and last, the ocean is source of food to us.

But today, we know that Mother Ocean, as Pope Francis says, is groaning because of a few things.

One, because of the global warming and the increase of temperature the ocean is getting warmer and the corals have died, and because of that many creatures that live around the corals have also died. So global warming is one of the biggest threats to Mother Ocean.



Overfishing is also another big threat. When I was a kid, it was the simple boats, small boats that caught fish by fishing line, now you have big nets that fishing boats drag under the seabed and grab everything that they can, destroying the ecosystem. Overfishing means that the population of the fish will decrease. Science tells us that the droplets from the fish, produce the phytoplankton which produces the oxygen. If you see the fish population dropping then it has a big impact on the phytoplankton that produce oxygen. Human beings are a big threat to the ocean.

The other one which is a big concern in Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Fiji and other places that have been identified as potential beds for seabed mining is another big threat to us that brings unknown dangers. In Papua New Guinea, this is a big issue.

Together with these are extractive industries, especially in my own home province in my mother's village, it's extracting gravel. Sr. Mariana has talked about sand, and this has a big threat, too, on the ocean, where the silt from the river goes to the ocean and damages the ecosystem there.

Another big threat to the ocean is the sea level rising which you have probably heard a lot. It's a big threat to the small islands in the ocean, that are atolls, that are not volcanic islands like Kiribati, Marshall Islands. All these in 30 years' time, they say that two thirds of Kiribati will be under the sea. So you have here the threats that are coming to our ocean.

The scientists are very clear on this. If we are to care for our planet, which means reducing carbon and getting out more oxygen, investing on things that can give out oxygen. The ocean is an important player, probably the most important part of the planet that we need to care for. If we want to care for the planet, this is one area that we must put a lot of investment and care because the ocean produces 70% of the oxygen, and it also takes a lot of the carbon dioxide, more than the rainforest and thus, the urgency for us to care for the ocean.