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Don’t Ignore the Root of Trouble in Our Oceans

Miyoko Sakashita.
Oceans Director,
Center for Biological Diversity

The clock is ticking for our sea life.

Every day, some 22 million tons of carbon pollution from factories, power plants, cars and other human sources are absorbed by the world’s oceans. We’re seeing the terrible effects as sea water acidifies, coral reefs collapse, oyster beds disappear and the tiny creatures that are food sources for larger ecosystems are getting smaller and weaker.

I was pleased that President Obama just released a long-awaited plan to improve ocean health and management. The National Ocean Policy Implementation Plan will push ahead some much-needed work, including improving ocean science, planning marine reserves and reducing the risks from industrial activities in the Arctic.

The troubling part, though, is what’s not in the plan. Specifically, any steps to reduce carbon pollution that’s plaguing oceans and rapidly transforming marine life.

Without making cuts, the long-term future of many marine species is in question.

The growth rates for some corals have already fallen off as they’re surrounded by acidic water that makes it much more difficult for them to grow and reproduce. Scientists warn us that coral reefs will vanish by the middle of this century unless we reduce carbon dioxide pollution.

As reefs disappear, so will the hundreds of species that depend on them, including clown fish.

Meanwhile, small ocean species like pteropods -- snails sometimes call sea “butterflies” -- are struggling in more acidic water. These tiny creatures are an important link in the marine food web because they’re eaten by salmon, mackerel, herring, baleen whales and and sea birds. When that food source is diminished, those species then have a hard time surviving.

On our coasts, oysters in the Pacific Northwest are already feeling the ill effects of acidification. The region’s top oyster hatcheries have suffered 80 percent declines during periods when acidic waters reach the shores. That spells trouble for otters and other species that rely on shellfish in their diet.

The list goes on and on. But the broader point is this: Our oceans are already undergoing an unprecedented transformation by carbon pollution and it will only get worse if it goes unchecked.

Like global warming, the acidification of our oceans is a problem that's vast in scale and demands a rapid, ambitious response.

Yes, I applaud President Obama for launching this new national plan and taking seriously the health of our oceans. And yes, I'm happy to see the plan calling for assessments of the vulnerability of regions to climate change and ocean acidification and that it's seeking development of adaptation strategies.

However, we shouldn't ignore the driving force behind our changing oceans. There's still time to make the dramatic cuts we need in carbon pollution to provide a hopeful future for corals, fish, whales, otters and, ultimately, all of us.

But we shouldn't dally -- every day of delay is a day closer deeper trouble in our oceans.