

New **atlas** maps impact of oceans: Web-based data a worldwide work in progress by UN

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There are thousands of **atlases** covering every country in the world, but finally a United Nations science group is putting together an **atlas** showing the greatest part of Earth's surface: Oceans.

The UN Oceans **Atlas** will be free to anyone in the world at www.oceansatlas.org

Over-fishing, destruction of coastal habitat and pollution from industry, farms and households are endangering not only fish, the leading individual source of animal protein in the human diet, but other marine life and even the global climate.

Countries with low coastal areas are showing sharpened interest in ocean data as scientists warn that global warming will melt ice caps and raise water levels by up to a metre around the world, causing widespread flooding.

The **atlas** will show specific impacts of these and other problems in each region. As well, it will provide links to maps and tracking data for constantly shifting things such as sea temperatures, the biggest clue to a growing El Nino, and sea ice in shipping channels.

The **atlas**'s first chapters are now available online, but most of it isn't ready yet and will be added piece by piece in coming months. So far, it's the work of only 19 editors, a number that should expand to hundreds in the coming year.

"It's still a baby," says Serge Garcia, a fisheries expert with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome.

Much of the oceans information, endless data on fisheries, depths, salinity, currents and water temperature among others, is drawn from the vast set of maps made by the Russian and Soviet navies in the past 100 years.

"Most countries are interested of course in what happens in their own house, and a bit beyond their door," Mr. Garcia said. "So the U.S. has expressed an interest in what happens in the Russian Arctic. Same for Canada.

"Beyond that, they might not be so interested. But if you take a French point of view, they are interested in the North Sea ... and down to the tropics. And if you started from Indonesia ... you are interested in what happens in Malaysia, Thailand and so on."

This **atlas** "offers a service to the whole world," he said. "And everyone can read it from their own angle, of course."

So far, however, they can't read much. Many of the maps, hand-drawn on paper by Russian naval officers, are not yet scanned and added to the Web site.

A would-be viewer interested in ocean temperatures, for instance, can click furiously with the computer mouse and get only the Indian Ocean over and over. There's more textual information than maps in some areas.

Still, the baby **atlas** has already shown surprising facts. There's nothing new in the sense of startling discoveries, but it is opening up much information that has been closeted away, known only to a select few.

Mr. Garcia, who specializes in fisheries and pollution, ran into one surprise in data from the UN itself, where nuclear experts had prepared a map of radioactive fallout pollution from old weapons tests.

"Nothing you find there is new to the person who put the data in. But a lot of what is put there is new to others."

Another surprising discovery surfaced just last week in maps of human settlements along Lake Victoria, Africa's largest lake.

"We found that the rate of HIV-AIDS infection in fishing communities (there) was five times the rate in any other sector. We didn't know that.

"We immediately put that on (in the [atlas](#)) and it immediately raised a lot of interest around the world."

The HIV-AIDS problem appears to spread fastest among men in fishing fleets who are away from home for long periods, and who aren't getting information on how AIDS is spread.

The [atlas](#) is meant chiefly for policymakers interested in shipping, fisheries and pollution. But it also gives the public free access to its maps and to the text documents that analyse what the maps mean to current issues.

Nations called for an oceans [atlas](#) during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, saying they needed a new tool to address marine environmental challenges.

The launch of the [atlas](#) at a meeting of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission in Paris today comes less than three months before the World Summit on Sustainable Development opens in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Besides the UN, national science research groups such as the U.S. National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are heavily involved in funding and producing it.

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