

June 8, 2009



REUTERS

## Menaces to oceans: CO2, plastic bags, overfishing

Mon Jun 8, 2009 5:50pm EDT A boy collects plastic materials as boats dock near a polluted coastline in Manila April 9, 2008.

REUTERS/Cheryl Ravelo

By [Deborah Zabarenko](#), Environment Correspondent

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The world's seas are filled with too much garbage and too few fish with flimsy plastic bags and government subsidies bearing much of the blame, activists and trade officials said Monday on the first U.N. World Oceans Day.

The World Trade Organization's director-general, Pascal Lamy, used the occasion to note that some species are at risk of extinction from overfishing, and government subsidies bear some of the blame.

"Governments have contributed to this problem by providing nearly \$16 billion annually in subsidies to the fisheries sector," Lamy said. "This support keeps more boats on the water and fewer fish in the sea.

He said WTO members are now negotiating to reform subsidies programs to make fishing a sustainable industry.

U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk echoed those sentiments, saying the United States is pushing for stronger rules against "harmful fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing."

Eighty percent of the world's fisheries are under pressure, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): overexploited, fully exploited, significantly depleted or recovering from overexploitation.

Global fisheries subsidies are estimated at \$20 billion or more annually, an amount equivalent to 25 percent of the value of the world catch. Economic losses from overfishing in marine areas are \$50 billion a year, according to a 2008 World Bank/FAO report.

"International trade can play a key role in protecting the world's oceans," Courtney

Sakai of the group Oceana said in a statement reacting to Lamy's and Kirk's comments. "The WTO is in the unlikely position of producing one of the most significant actions to stop global overfishing."

### CO2 THREAT

In addition to overfishing, the carbon dioxide emissions that contribute to climate change also combine with sea water to form carbonic acid, a corrosive substance that eats away at the shells of mollusks and corals.

Last week, as international climate negotiators gathered in Bonn, Germany, 70 of the world's major science academies reported that ocean acidification was so dangerous that it could be irreversible for thousands of years.

The academies urged those bargaining for a world agreement to stem global warming into take account the risks to the oceans in working on a new U.N. treaty to be agreed in Copenhagen in December.

The U.N. Environment Program and the Ocean Conservancy marked the day with a report on marine litter, from discarded fishing gear to cigarette butts to plastic bags, which the environment program's director called signs of systemic waste.

"Marine litter is symptomatic of a wider malaise: namely the wasteful use and persistent poor management of natural resources," said Achim Steiner, U.N. under-secretary-general and UNEP Executive Director.

The ubiquitous flimsy plastic shopping bag is a particularly nettlesome problem, said the

environment program's spokesman, Nick Nuttall.

In a telephone interview from Nairobi, Nuttall said that "these rather pointless flimsy plastic bags, which serve little or no purpose except to choke the oceans and the environment" should be banned or taxed to kick-start recycling efforts.

Last December, the United Nations designated June 8 as World Oceans Day, more than 16 years after it was first proposed at an Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.