

# the last word:

## A voice for the oceans



**Professor Jörn Thiede** is Chairman of the European Academies' Science Advisory Council working group on marine sustainability. Following EASAC's contribution to a recent debate on the need for policy making to recognise uncertainties in scientific understanding of marine systems, he highlights the importance of harmonised research across all marine areas

Image: Jörn Thiede, present Professor at St Petersburg State University and former Director of the Alfred-Wegener-Institute for Polar and Marine Research in Germany, on the Antarctic ice shelf.

### Can you give an insight into the context of the marine sustainability debate?

European science academies cover a wide field and support powerful marine research institutions in the UK, France, Netherlands, Germany and many other countries. There is growing concern about the future of the oceans. Dealing with these concerns in a sustainable fashion is a huge task and significant responsibility lies with the politicians who make decisions that affect the oceans and marginal seas, and also with the scientists who advise these politicians. Examples of major problems include the impact of plastic litter in the oceans on the continued survival of marine biota. We have a pressing responsibility to safeguard the oceans with the help of Europe's research capabilities. It is important to have an opinion on this topic and make it public by bringing it to the media's attention.

### Could you summarise the core aims of the European Academies' Science Advisory Council (EASAC)'s study on the Earth's changing waters?

The major point of this report is that marine research around Europe generally falls under national jurisdiction, but flora, fauna and water masses, for example, are not controlled by these jurisdictions, which means they are not necessarily investigated and controlled according to the same standards. It is extremely important to ensure that the research is harmonised, with consistent standards and the same level of attention applied to all marine areas. The EASAC working group on marine sustainability comprises scientists from many countries in Europe, who are in agreement that we should use the same standards to studying sea areas close to Europe and, indeed, the entire world's oceans.

### Are marine sustainability and human society intrinsically interlinked?

I live in Kiel in Germany and have just returned from a trip to Saint Petersburg in Russia. These cities – including many others along the European coast – are dependent on the properties and qualities of the seas. This value comes from different areas for example: tourism, commerce and economies – there's a lot of interaction between the sea and human society. I very much hope that Europe and other countries are developing administrative procedures to protect the seas and make

use of their properties, while avoiding any damaging effects. Around one-third of the global population depends on the seas and coastal areas and so the related challenges we face must be acknowledged and met.

### How can policy makers and scientists ensure the Earth's seas and oceans are being treated in a sustainable manner and deal with the uncertainties of constantly evolving marine ecosystems?

Educating the next generation of marine scientists is crucial, and that's why EASAC is calling for a European Marine University. We would like to see a group of universities in Europe; from the Mediterranean and the Atlantic coast, all the way to Scandinavia, establishing research programmes which all adhere to the same standards. There are existing programmes developing marine protected areas in the Atlantic Ocean and adjacent seas, but if you do not study these following the same procedures and methods and by employing people with the same training and philosophy, you will never get comparable results.

### Can you describe your vision for the Earth's oceans in the year 2050?

Naturally, many of the problems facing the oceans and coastlines will not disappear, but we can deal with them. For example, getting rid of the abundance of plastic along the coast and in the open ocean. We can promote the idea that the ocean is not a garbage dump and that we should protect one of the most important parts of our environment – the oceans, which cover 70 per cent of our globe. If we irreparably damage this precious resource, there will be serious repercussions for future generations. We have a deep responsibility to protect our seas and oceans and need to unite and do everything within our power to protect this important part of our global environment.

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