

Oceans Day: A Personal Reminiscence of Its Initiation

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“How’s your Portuguese?” I was asked on the way out of the office.

“Non-existent,” I replied looking back over my shoulder.

“Well, better brush up on some rudimentary conversation, I think we’ll be taking you with us.”

The voice belonged to Dr. Judith Swan, an internationally respected figure in marine law circles and at the time the Executive Director of the Oceans Institute of Canada (OIC).

We had just met in the OIC office sequestered away on the fifth floor Dalhousie University’s heating plant building on Henry Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia. It wasn’t a familiar spot for me. I really didn’t have much to do with oceans management, policy studies or anything related to academic inquiry in that regard.

I was a senior executive at the region’s largest public relations and strategic marketing agency and I had been directed to meet with the OIC folks by my president after he had received a request for possible communications services.

“You teach at university, and enjoy that scene,” he said as he dropped the phone message slip on my desk, “Drop by and see what they need and what we can do for them.”

So here I was.

It was March, 1992 and we had been discussing the upcoming United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Rio Conference or Earth Summit, depending on your level of gravitas or, in my case, scientific sophistication; a major global event scheduled to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 3 to 14 June 1992.

The Earth Summit was going to examine and discuss a number of emerging and important global issues including biodiversity, deforestation, desertification, and, yes, climate change. It would produce benchmark conventions and declarations including Agenda 21, the United Nation’s environmental and sustainable development plan for the twenty-first century.

But the Government of Canada wanted the OIC to get a heightened profile for the oceans at UNCED, because they knew we were facing a crisis of sustainability. I was there to suggest ways to get that visibility and build international ‘buy-in’ at the event for the Canadian agenda. Somehow I was convincing on

the tactical approach, and displayed at least an informed understanding of the issues; so our firm was retained to develop that strategy.

And I was invited to join the team on their way out the door.

Now, when I say that I hadn't any knowledge of oceans issues and strategic imperatives, it was not entirely true.

Over the past few years I had come to know the redoubtable Elisabeth Mann Borgese, defender of the oceans, internationally recognized expert on maritime law and policy, and founder of the International Oceans Institute (IOI), while she was a professor at Dalhousie University. She and I were regular guests at weekly soirees hosted by our mutual friend Dr. John Godfrey when he was president of the University of King's College, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and we would often chat about her work and the issues she was addressing.

I was also happy to work with the Mayor of Halifax to infer special civic citizen status upon Elisabeth while she was with us.

She was a brilliant and engaging person and I really liked her. And I would listen intently as she discussed and delineated legal and environmental marine issues, and her global role with *Pacem in Maribus* ('Peace in the Oceans').

Because of Elisabeth Mann Borgese, through meeting her and most all through listening to her, I was able to acquire a sufficient understanding of the issues and challenges facing the OIC mandate to take part in their Rio mission.

After leaving that first meeting with Judith Swan and some of her team members, I waited by the elevator to head back to the office. On the bulletin board was a poster that promoted the upcoming Earth Day, April 22nd.

A light went on.

I turned and went back into the OIC office.

"Is there an Oceans Day?" I asked Dr. Swan.

"No, why?" she replied.

"I think it's something we should discuss," I said.

And we did, many times, as we prepared to go to Rio, until it became a centerpiece of our strategic agenda.

We accepted the idea to declare an Oceans Day and present it for global consideration. It was well received by the federal government. The federal Minister of Fisheries and Oceans loved it, and told me so on a number of occasions when we were doing media work at the Earth Summit. We were encouraged to put it out there as a focus of Canadian concern and commitment.

But when? What would be the day?

Over a couple of social libations and discussing a possible date for the Oceans Day activities, Judith Swan and I discussed the activities planned for

the two weeks in Rio and I said that I was available to assist the delegation for the entire time, I just had to take time to call my wife on June the 8th because it was our wedding anniversary.

“Can you repeat that date again?” she asked.

“June 8th,” I repeated, “Why?”

“Because that’s my birthday as well,” she said.

Judith Swan had a respected background as a legal scholar in the field of marine affairs, and an impressive knowledge and grasp of international oceans issues. I assumed that’s why she was awarded the position she currently held.

But I also came to learn that she had a mystical side that appreciated apparent karmic confluence.

“Well that’s got to be it then,” she declared as if it was meant to be.

The date was subsequently proposed and accepted, and the launch of the Oceans Day proposal was written into the agenda.

It would take a lot of work and planning by a superb team of scholars and policy experts assembled as part of the OIC team. And it was done over an incredibly short period of time. Focus and realistic expectations were essential. Personal, pedantic, and organizational agenda were to be set aside.

The progress and planning towards what became Oceans Day perhaps received its best summary in a recent comment article posted in the Victoria, British Columbia, *Times Colonist* on 7 June 2017, the day before Oceans Day, by Dr. Carol Amaratunga, one of the leading Canadian delegates to the 1992 UNCED conference and a key member of our team.

Dr. Amaratunga is a freelance writer and social-policy researcher who served as the Director of the Inter-regional and Cooperative Activities Division, International Centre for Ocean Development (ICOD), in Halifax, Nova Scotia, between 1986 and 1992 and with OIC between 1992 and 1994.

Her submission was entitled “Comment: Keeping True to the Spirit of World Oceans Day,” and she stated, in part:

A quarter of a century ago, on June 8, 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, a dedicated team from Canada’s International Centre for Ocean Development and the Ocean Institute of Canada launched the first World Oceans Day ... Oceans Day 1992 called upon world governments to remediate the early signs of global warming and climate change. Our objective was to move the oceans from the fringe to the centre of intergovernmental sustainable-development discussions and policy. ...

In planning Oceans Day 1992 our subject was simply: The Blue Planet and the Earth Summit. Our goal was to engage the public and support scientists, community leaders, and decision makers to affirm the world ocean as a global engine that drives and supports life on this planet.¹

On Monday, 8 June 1992, a day-long Oceans Day at the Global Forum seminar entitled 'The Blue Planet: Oceans and the Earth Summit' was held. The seminar was planned and hosted by the OIC team and chaired by Dr. Swan. The agenda featured a long list of internationally renowned speakers, and was fully attended by oceans policy-makers, researchers, educators, politicians, and media from around the globe.

The focus of the agenda was to address a ten-point 'Call for Commitment' drafted by the organizers. Those ten points were listed under a series of lofty and inclusive sub-headings that included management of the high seas, global institutional arrangements, global integrated actions, high seas fishing, land-based sources of pollution, and coastal zone management.

But it was particularly the tenth, and final, point in that Call to Commitment that I will always remember. That final sub heading was entitled 'Annual Oceans Day' and read as follows:

10. The international community should declare an annual Oceans Day, dedicated to directing global attention to the oceans, and monitoring post UNCED oceans agenda progress.

I can still remember reading and re-reading Article 10 of that statement, as I walked to the shore on that brilliant morning. All that week in Rio, and in the months before in Canada, I had been impressed, even humbled, by the knowledge, experience, and tenacious commitment I witnessed in the people I met and with whom I worked on developing the Oceans Day agenda, and the seminar going on in the lovely facility behind me.

But Article 10, well, I was able to play a part in that one.

"The international community should declare an annual Oceans Day." It had only been a few months since that day in March—but there it was.

And I had a part to play in its appearance at an international forum of such global import. I considered at the moment that I never had a chance to be part of any remotely seminal moment in history, and likely never would again. I smiled to myself.

1 C.M. Amaratunga, "Comment: Keeping True to the Spirit of World Oceans Day," *Times Colonist*, 7 June 2017, <http://www.timescolonist.com/opinion/op-ed/comment-keeping-true-to-the-spirit-of-world-oceans-day-1.20453333>.

And it would take a while before the 'international community' would act on that recommendation, but finally, in 2008, World Oceans Day was formally acknowledged and adopted by the United Nations.

World Oceans Day has grown and gone on to become a major event in celebrating our oceans heritage and dedicating efforts to preserve that priceless potential.

Since that day in 1992 I was honoured to be asked to teach communications management as part of the Masters of Marine Management at Dalhousie University, an assignment I loved and would perform for almost two decades. I still have the wonderful assignment of teaching the subject as part of the international summer programme conducted by the International Ocean Institute-Canada at Dalhousie University.

Over that period of time I have looked forward to the opportunity to share with my students my peripheral perspective on the story of the genesis of Oceans Day. They always seem to find it interesting and, in my accounting, somewhat amusing. Occasionally I get anniversary greetings from former students around the world. And, as on that wonderful day in Rio, I smile to myself.