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**THE ENVIRONMENT: Rate of marine disease increasing around world**

# Call of alarm raised on health of oceans

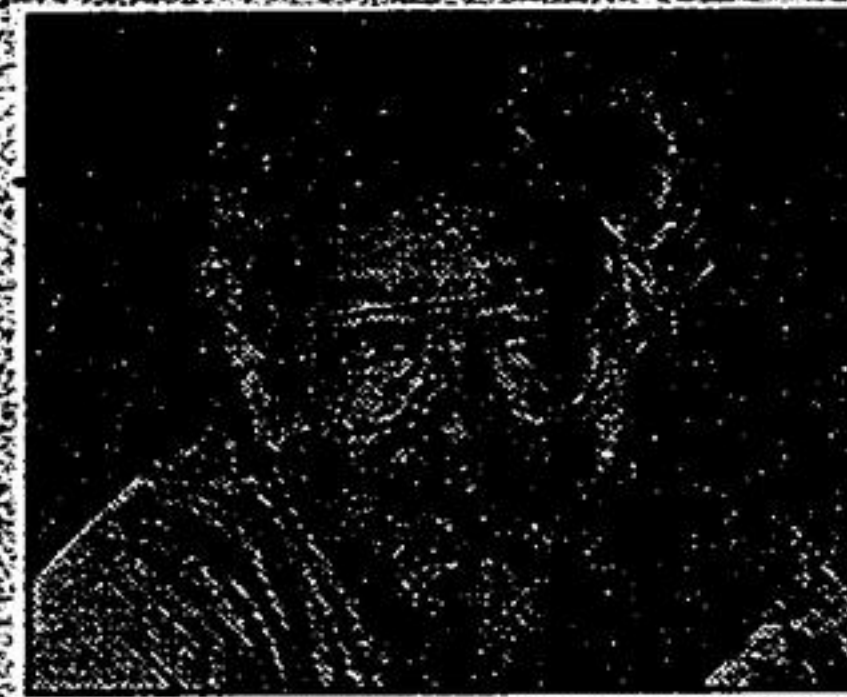
**T**he oceans are powerful engines of life. They regulate climate and weather, provide fresh water through the hydrologic cycle, absorb waste and provide an abundance of life's diverse forms. That's why the most recent scientific analysis of diseases in our oceans should both frighten humanity and encourage us to act.

We should be concerned because the researchers conclude that diseases of many marine ecosystems are on the rise, with epidemics devastating some economically important species such

as shellfish, as well as popular mammals such as seals and dolphins.

Perhaps most disconcerting is the suggestion emerging diseases could be wiping out unknown numbers of lesser-known species and we would likely never find out about it. That's how little is known about life in our oceans.

The analysis, published in the Sept. 3 edition of the journal *Science*, also shows how closely linked our oceans are to our atmosphere. The scientists note the trend toward a warmer climate could be one factor leading to increased mortality in the oceans.



David Suzuki

Climate change has been linked to more frequent and powerful El Nino events, which are thought to increase

the number and range of disease outbreaks. For example, El Nino is believed to be responsible for the most widespread coral bleaching (which reflects coral die-off) ever recorded.

Other human activities, including aquaculture, habitat degradation and water pollution, are also implicated in the spread of ocean diseases. In addition, these activities are believed to be increasing the number of blooms of toxic algae, which can kill fish and cause chronic illness in humans.

The *Science* article isn't the only alarm call about the health of our oceans. A study announced at the International Botanical Congress in August pointed out there are now 50 dead zones in the world's oceans. These oxygen-depleted areas form where nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus, which are found in agricultural fertilizers, accumulate. Combined with sunlight, the chemicals stimulate rapid growth of phytoplankton and other plant life on the surface, which cuts off life-sustaining oxygen from the depths.

The largest dead zone in the Western Hemisphere is in the Gulf of Mexico, a massive watery grave that grows to more than 18,000 square kilometres each summer — three times larger than Prince Edward Island.

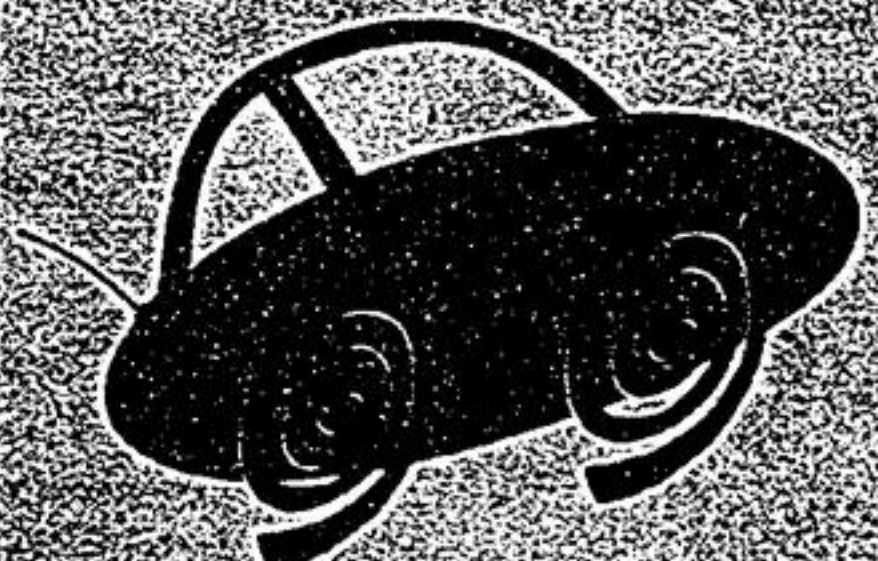
We need to take a hard look at fisheries practices, water pollution controls, habitat protection, climate change and any of a number of ways humans are affecting our oceans.

Jane Lubchenco, an eminent ecologist at Oregon State University, says environmental problems pose such a grave threat to the health of the planet and to humanity that the scientific efforts needed to find answers are on the scale of those expended during the space race or Cold War.

Surely, if we can focus massive research efforts on building weapons of mass destruction or putting a person on the moon, then we can do it to stem the environmental degradation of the only habitable place we know of in the universe.

The analysis in *Science* says the need for improved understanding of emerging ocean diseases is urgent. "I couldn't agree more."

However, improved understanding must first be accompanied by a change in attitude, a recognition that the oceans are the engine of the planet that supports our lives. And as such they should be handled with great care.

  
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