

Protecting the people of Oceania from marine threats requires science and human dialogue

Solving the threat of rising sea levels and deep-sea mining in Oceania will require methods that bring science and the human experience together, guests heard at a world-first online conference held last week.

More than 100 people from across the region and beyond, including Catholic Bishops from the Oceania region, attended the first *Our Ocean Home* conference promoting First Nations voices from Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia alongside experts in climate science and theology.

The event, hosted by Australian Catholic University with endorsement from the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, was held in preparation for the General Assembly of the Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania (FCBCO) in February next year.

FCBCO President, Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, who joined the conference from Rome, said as caretakers of the Church in Oceania, the bishops of the region would be asking the world to commit to caring for the ocean when they meet for their General Assembly.

"We are the Catholic Bishops of Oceania, and we want to be prophets for the ocean and Oceania peoples.

"The Federation of Catholic Bishops Conference of Oceania will hold our assembly next year in February and 'care for the ocean' is one of the key themes. We will speak to the world to commit to its caring for the ocean. This is the first and most important step towards caring for mother ocean, our common home."

Archbishop Chong said the impact of the climate crisis was revealing the vulnerability of island nations in Oceania, who face two major threats to their life – rising sea levels, and marine extractives.

"While (the people of Oceania) contribute the least to the carbon emissions, we are the first to either drown or find another place to live due to the rising sea level," Archbishop Loy Chong said.

Frontline ecological and human rights activist, Rosa Koian of Papua New Guinea, said while her country had seven deep-sea mining operations, the tangible benefits were yet to be seen.

"Have they brought any tangible benefits for us? We haven't seen much except damages," Ms Koian said.

One of the areas marked for marine extractions, Ms Koian said, is connected to the family of PNG Cardinal John Ribat.

Ms Koian said while citizens of the Pacific have called for a moratorium, she called for increased scientific research for PNG specifically, and for law reforms to ensure that the sea bed was protected under legislation.

Marine scientist and former Professor at The University of the South Pacific, Jeremy Hills, said science alone could not solve the global environmental crises facing the people of Oceania.

"We need to modulate our science towards caring for the ocean, putting a person right at the centre of the ocean," Dr Hills said, citing Pope Francis' *Integral Ecology* paradigm from *Laudato Si'*.

"Science needs to be used for supporting our interconnected worldview and our dialogues with the ocean, rather than being a solution on its own."

The event participants expressed their delight with the *Laudato Si'* inspired spiritual process of dialogue and discernment that guided the event, the valuable insights shared by storytellers, and signalled their thanks to the Australian Catholic University and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for their support for this event.

The SUVA Secretariat, co-chaired by Archbishop Peter Loy Chong and ACU academic Dr Sandie Cornish, heard the call to form an ecclesial network in and for the Oceania region, similar to ecclesial networks that have been forming in recent years in Latin America, Meso America, Africa and Asia.

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