

AN ADVOCATE FOR OCEAN PROTECTION

Prince Albert II of Monaco discusses his passion for the oceans and his ongoing support of the IAEA's ocean protection activities. The Principality is home to the IAEA Environment Laboratories, which were founded in 1961 with the support of Monaco.

Where does your passion for marine protection come from?

There's obviously some family heritage here. My great-grandfather, Prince Albert I, had an incredible vision for sciences in general but for oceanography in particular. His wonderful work in this field left us with his legacy in the form of the Monaco Oceanographic Museum. But of course this interest also comes from my father, Prince Rainer III, and the many marine protection initiatives he led, primarily in the Mediterranean Sea.

Did growing up next to the sea encourage you to protect it?

Obviously, the more you know the ocean or our sea here, the Mediterranean Sea, the more you want to protect it. Living near the sea and being exposed to it at a very young age can only entice you to learn more about it and find innovative ways of protecting it. Also the exceptional geographic situation of my country encouraged me to take a keen interest in the field of marine protection.

A year after your accession, in 2006 you founded your own foundation. What led you to this?

I was exposed to different environmental issues at a young age, but I think one of the turning points was the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 where I accompanied my father. Through attending this event, I became more aware of different environmental issues, not only concerning oceans but climate change, greenhouse gases and deforestation. Then I tried at my level and with our different organizations based here in Monaco to try to work more closely on these issues. But way before 2006, I wanted to create some kind of foundation, something more personal. I suppose after this Rio summit I finally got the sense of urgency to do this, which had been building up over the years.



What is the main focus of the foundation?

The three main pillars are biodiversity, water and climate change. The three main regional areas that we've been trying to concentrate on are the Mediterranean Basin, the least developed countries, this group includes a lot of African countries, and the polar regions. I'm very happy to see the way the foundation has developed over the last seven years. We've now been a part of over 230 projects in 40 different countries and have partnerships with many organizations, such as the UN Foundation, The Climate Group and the WWF.

You don't just use your name and your title to draw attention to these issues, you actually get first-hand experience of them. How important is this for you?

I think it's extremely important. Not only to get a better knowledge of the different issues on the ground, but also to be able to meet the local populations we're trying to help through these different programmes, whether they are on land or sea. I don't do it for myself. I do it because I'm interested and because I'm passionate about what I'm trying to achieve. But it's also for the foundation, to get better visibility and to show that we're following these different programmes with all the attention they deserve.

Prince Albert II of Monaco (left) is a committed environmentalist, and supporter of the IAEA's Environment Laboratories and its work; taking part in Arctic marine expeditions, and even conducting mollusc dissections with IAEA scientists.

(Photo: Jean Jaubert)

How does your government support the work of the IAEA?

There is a long-standing collaboration between Monaco and the IAEA dating back to the early 1960s. We were collaborating through our scientific centre, the Centre Scientifique de Monaco, and it was decided that this cooperation could become even closer by establishing an IAEA marine laboratory. It's now the IAEA Environment Laboratories that is here in Monaco. The research done there is absolutely tremendous and we're very proud and honoured to have this close partnership and it's only going to develop even further in the future.

Why do you think it's beneficial for the IAEA to have its Environment Laboratories here in Monaco?

We have a long history in marine sciences, so this makes us as credible as other locations that also do scientific research in this field. Because of this history and our teams of scientists at the Centre Scientifique de Monaco, we were able to establish this working cooperation with the IAEA. Also, Monaco is a small country directly concerned by marine environmental problems, due to its position. Its size is an asset in testing out new environmental practices and implementing them. Furthermore, my country is apolitical. So, when we organize debates or conferences, we look to promote just a single interest, that of environmental protection. This is fundamental and lends credibility to our environmental approach on the international stage.

You also support the IAEA's work in the field of research into ocean acidification. You led the Monaco Declaration on Ocean Acidification in 2008. What was the purpose of this?

We wanted to draw international attention to ocean acidification. Increased CO₂ emissions due to human activities represent a major threat to the marine environment. 50% of CO₂ produced by humans over the last 200 years has been absorbed by the oceans. The higher the level of CO₂ absorbed, the higher the level of ocean acidity. This acidification will upset the ocean balance and have a negative impact on biodiversity hotspots, the coral reef ecosystems for instance.

What was achieved by the Declaration, have we moved on with our understanding of the issue?

I think the Declaration and the meeting that lead to the Declaration were of paramount importance — not only to raise awareness of the issue, which very few people outside of the scientific community knew about, but also for us to get the stamp of approval from scientists from 26 different countries as to what the dangers are, to better identify the issues and to direct the research towards a better understanding of the dynamics of ocean acidification. I'm very happy to see that the Declaration is considered to be a very important stepping stone towards a better awareness not only by the scientific community but by the general public as well.

Despite your efforts the seas are still being abused. Do you think this situation can really improve?

I think we are at a crossroads now and we have very little time to try to reverse these different trends that are affecting our seas and oceans — from ocean acidification to overfishing, excessive pollution and the non-treatment of different wastewaters. Pressures on marine ecosystems are constantly growing, and the sustainable management of marine resources is now a major global issue. As global populations increase and most people live in urban areas that are on the coast, there is more and more pressure on the oceans. The consequences of climate change and ocean acidification further exacerbate the fragile balance of ocean ecosystems and biodiversity. My personal commitment and my Government's policy are to work towards improving the situation.

Interview by Louise Potterton, IAEA Division of Public Information