

The deep seabed, the beginning of a new era?

By

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Francis Vallat - Credit DR

When I hear everything that is said about an issue as complex as the Deep Seabed, when I am myself so tempted to surrender to the appeal of the easy way out ("It is very simple, if we want to protect the Ocean, our future, which is already so aggressed and poisoned, let's just stop using it"),

When weariness and indignation overwhelm me when faced with the doubt - insidiously spread and "on principle" - on the Cluster's determination never to threaten marine ecosystems, whilst it is its absolute priority,

When sometimes everything combines to keep men of good will away from this hot issue,

Then I am torn between giving in to the temptation of Venice and, on the contrary, the desire to demonstrate why the fierce defenders of the planet should support an approach that illustrates to the highest degree the opportunities and crucial virtues of Sustainable Development.

To achieve this, the first requirement is to recall the general context in which both the Earth and humanity find themselves. With its many indisputable facts:

- . The situation of our planet is disastrous. It is doomed in the short term if the Ocean is further weakened than it is today.

- . As the main predator of the living world, humans have demonstrated their capacity for destruction, which is still at work, as shown, for example, by space being transformed into a waste bin or the growth - uncontained and insufficiently compensated for - of plastic production.

. Man, capable of the worst and of the best, nevertheless has the right to life.

. The economic and social pressure of demographic change over the next two decades - with a peak expected in 2050 with nearly three billion more human beings than today - is unavoidable, unless we accept the programmed death of hundreds of millions of men, women, and children.

. The future of our inhabited planet will only be saved with Man and not against Man. It is thus an illusion to hope to protect future generations without the support of the present ones.

. The change of pace in recycling activities for all forms of waste is a necessity but will unfortunately not be sufficient on a global scale in the next twenty years. Accelerating is vital, but too much time has been lost to be "on time".

. The need for raw materials (including the rare metals that are necessary for the energy transition - wind turbines, batteries, etc. - as well as by the irreversible digitalisation) are huge and exponential. And yet there are actors (States or private entities) throughout the world who are determined to go ahead without the slightest hesitation, unconcerned about the future of humanity and of the planet. Entities that will not respect any rules if they are not constrained by a framework obliging them to act responsibly.

As a result, the only possible way for the future is to impose Sustainable Development, wherever and whenever it is possible. It is indeed a challenge that raises questions that are sometimes unpleasant and complex, but these are the questions that must be put on the table instead of ignoring them with a good conscience dressed up as virtue, but in reality, irresponsible.

Working in coalition

From this first conclusion, and because of the urgent need to save the sea, the second imperative follows:

The time has come - it is, in fact, a matter of crucial urgency - for all stakeholders to work in coalition. A coalition that does not just bring together all the NGOs concerned about the future of the Ocean, as is the case today, but all the decision-makers concerned by this vital issue, whatever their origin. This includes politicians, professionals and, of course, representatives of the economy and, more particularly, of industry. The objective being to study, and even to find together, without delay, the most ambitious but also the most realistic solutions for the future.

And I would add, for the sceptics that I can already hear ironizing, that it is not necessarily an unreachable dream... provided we decide to go for it. In this respect, I could recall some encouraging 'precedents' of major achievements, too quickly forgotten although recent, on which no one would have bet at the time. For example, the recovery of the

ozone layer (the depletion of which was already threatening human life as well as many other forms of life, and seemed to condemn the Earth ineluctably), or to a lesser degree, the eradication of unregulated degassing and deballasting in European waters. In both cases, the phenomenon appeared unsolvable, but thanks to the action of determined people, of a few government leaders taking the risk of unpopularity, and to the almost brutal mobilisation of all the 'stakeholders', man finally found, structured and imposed solutions. In a few years in each case!

Today, in the face of climate change, we are once again well behind schedule, backs against the wall, and furthermore helpless because of the complexity of the challenges that must be overcome simultaneously. But if we accept to be less dogmatic towards each other, if we take advantage of the next three years (we should listen and hear the IPCC, which has set the timetable for us!) to overcome everyone's suspicions, we may have a chance. We must, at all costs, avoid a situation where NGOs continue to talk only to each other, leaving the industry to follow its own path - also among themselves - in parallel. With the risk that in the end nothing will be done or, worse than that, done the wrong way...



Knowledge of the deep sea is at the heart of all issues - Credit : DR

Credible approaches and guidelines

This brings us to the third imperative: to analyse in an objective manner the provisional conclusions of a French working group, the "Deep Sea" Synergy Group of the French Maritime Cluster, which for a dozen years has been quietly bringing together companies, associations, research institutes and, on a regular or occasional basis, a number of administrations and NGOs. And actually, some approaches and orientations resulting from the work of these experts are particularly relevant ...and credible!

. Identification of ten necessary steps - in terms of technical aspects and environmental precautions - between the first exploration phase and the potential initial exploitation phase.

. A solemn commitment by all, including the industry, that nothing will be undertaken (and especially no mining activity) if there is no guarantee that marine ecosystems will be preserved.

. A similar commitment that nothing will be undertaken without involving the populations that may be concerned in the decisions and/or being involved in the various stages.

. A definitive awareness that, at least within our EEZs, the deep seabed issue is a structuring challenge for joint approaches between Metropolitan France and the Overseas Territories, which in itself presupposes a balanced and win-win dialogue (each one needing the others and all being French).

Note that the right conclusions were drawn from the deadlock experienced in Wallis and Futuna a few years ago, due to a lack of preparation, insufficient explanation and, I would even say, arrogance towards the local populations and their traditions.

. Commitment by all, both in terms of exploration and potential exploitation, to respect procedures that ensure full transparency of operations.

. And finally, a proposal for a methodology that would appear to be objectively indisputable. Basically:

- Implementation of the pilot demonstrator mentioned in the 2021 French national strategy with the agreement of all (an initiative initially called for by the environmentalists, and whose complex structure was defined by all the parties concerned, and in whose governance all players agreed that the NGOs should be involved).

- A " step-by-step " approach, where each stage involves a decision on whether or not to proceed, and this through a governance process involving all the parties concerned on each site, including external observers, regulators, and here again NGOs...

In that spirit, a difficult but frank and determined dialogue was sought and established with major NGOs, which is why I accepted last year to write the book " *Notre avenir s'écrit dans l'Océan* " with Isabelle Autissier, honorary president of the WWF.



Polymetallic nodules observed in the North Pacific during the Nodinaut campaign in 2004 - Credit : DR

Other reasons for hope

Finally, let me suggest a few final hopeful observations:

. The younger generations, including in the industrialised world, are and will be less and less willing to compromise on the environment. However, they are now the ones who are, or will soon be in commands.

Common sense now seems to be prevailing and argues in favour of the likelihood of an encouraging transition. It is indeed becoming increasingly clear that it will be in the interest of industrial companies

not to take the risk of investing in the seabed if they are not prepared to clearly demonstrate that they comply with the most stringent rules and procedures and that they can meet all the requirements. Should the " worksite " come to a halt (due, for example, to non-compliance with their obligations), the risk of losing the millions invested in each site for operations with very high added value would be far too great. In fact, this is one of the reasons to fight so that all operators in the world have to comply with the same obligations, without simply being satisfied with the argument of certain players (right but insufficient) that a mining site will never be more than a tiny dot in the immensity of the ocean.

. In another domain, it is also for this reason that we must be cautious about the thoughtless attacks heard here and there against the International Seabed Authority (ISA), whether from the most extreme NGOs or, on the contrary, from those who would like to be able to disregard its rules. Of course, vigilance and caution are and will remain necessary until the publication and analysis of the new international mining code produced by the ISA, but let us not disqualify in advance the only institution in the world that has the legitimacy and expertise to publish universal regulations. In other words, the only barriers likely to impose a responsible approach from operators or states that would love to "move forward" without constraints...without daring to show it.

Working together for a new era

I am convinced that the resolution of the "Deep Seabed" issue could well be the first achievement and the most beautiful symbol of a new era. An exemplary era in which exploration or prospection will not automatically mean exploitation, in which all stakeholders will be conscious that dialogue is not an option but an obligation, and in which any exploitation will not be possible without the demonstrated assurance of being able to effectively limit the impacts on marine biodiversity. Finally, an era in which transparency, proper rules and compliance with clearly specified controls based on the knowledge acquired from exploration will be compulsory on every occasion and on each site (see §6 of the French Maritime Cluster's position below).

In doing so, we will also be following the example of the Montego Bay Founding Fathers who paved the way for the concept of "the sea as the common property of mankind" and who, in its name, created the first instrument for the retrocession to developing countries of part of the wealth generated in the open sea. Wasn't this already the promising premise of a new era?

SIX UPDATES ON THE POSITION OF THE FRENCH MARITIME CLUSTER (CMF)

I / Our ignorance of the Ocean is absolutely staggering, especially if we intend to have increased means to protect it! In our opinion, we have clearly reached the stage:

. where refusing knowledge through exploration would constitute a form of obscurantism and failure to assist a person in danger (the Ocean itself should one day be considered as a legal entity with rights and in the name of which it would then be possible to take legal action). Not to mention the unconsciousness of ignoring on principle the huge potential of scientific discoveries or technological advances that are vital for mankind and, above all, potentially decisive for the understanding and protection of nature.

. where not considering the possibility of exploitation would also be irresponsible given the quasi-humanitarian pressures that are increasing at all levels. It therefore seems to make sense to try to find out if, and how, we can 'go there', or on the contrary, why (and where) we should not. In our opinion, this is the only possible way to talk about sustainable development without ideology or compromise, and to remember that the two concepts of 'development' and 'sustainability' are mutually linked.

II / Regarding the situation in our country, we should point out that - whatever the disappointments in the implementation, or rather in its non-implementation - the national strategy drawn up by agreement of

all the stakeholders and decided at the CIMER of January 2021 does indeed exist. It remains the strategy of the French government and has moreover just been confirmed with no aspect of its content being contested (development over ten years with programming of the successive phases of implementation. And evaluation, for each phase, of the objectives, missions, and necessary funding, including the campaigns to be planned, the demonstrator etc.).

III / In this respect, the France 2030 initiative can be considered as the first concrete step of this strategy, whereas the disappointments of 2021 made us fear the worst. In fact, its objective n°10 effectively addresses the fields that are the first logical foundation of any strategy, and also of any creation of a new sector (exploration campaigns; emergence of disruptive tools, French if possible; adequate public financial commitment via public orders and/or subsidies).

IV / Whether it is a matter of exploration or exploitation, it is at least as important and fair not to deny that there will be impacts on ecosystems, as it is not to declare, a priori, that this or that type of action must be banned.

Indeed, the important thing is on the one hand, to know if we can contain the spatial and temporal repercussions of the impacts, and adapt solutions offering satisfactory guarantees; on the other hand, to

be ready to stop or suspend any work until the elimination of risk has been clearly demonstrated.

V / Discussions with foreign counterparts of the French maritime cluster, particularly European ones (cf. German DSMA) are essential. Because even if the French players are very well placed, well enough so that their leaderships can still be accepted, there is a need for cooperation, exchanges of information, bilateral and sometimes multilateral, joint approaches at the Brussels level etc...

VI / Reminder of the summary of the CMF's official position:

EXPLORATION: No moratorium

"The preservation of the ocean and its biodiversity, as well as its role in climate regulation, can no longer wait. It is in the very name of the active protection of the ocean that research and exploration must be developed, both in the water column and on the seabed. This commitment, along with that of the inventory of underwater heritages, will have to be implemented in a public and transparent manner, with means and procedures strictly respecting protocols approved and controlled by entities recognised by all stakeholders, and capable of guaranteeing the knowledge needed for the protection of marine biodiversity and the ecosystems concerned. The urgent need for increased knowledge for the protection of the Ocean is now widely accepted in the scientific community. We can no longer take the risk of acting too late, either for mankind or for our planet."

PROSPECTION AND POTENTIAL EXPLOITATION: conditional moratorium

Faced with the growing need for resources, a new era must begin. An era of exemplarity, where all skills are brought together to give Responsible Development a real chance, beyond the priority given to recycling. An era in which exploration will not necessarily mean exploitation, in which all stakeholders will be involved, and in which any potential exploitation will have to be undertaken with the absolute guarantee of limiting to the strict acceptable minimum the impact on marine ecosystems and biodiversity. An era in which transparency, clear rules and compliance with conditions or controls defined precisely through research or knowledge will be required in each case and for each site.”