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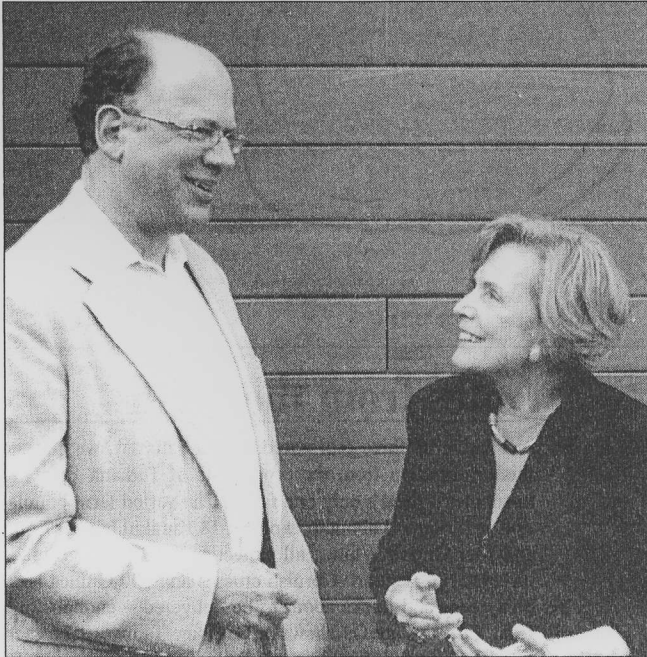


Photo by Lori Quillen

Dr. Sylvia Earle talks with Dr. William Schlessinger, president of Cary Institute, after her lecture at Cary Arboretum's Earth Day program.

## WE HAVE TEN YEARS LEFT

# “The Earth is Blue,” A Cautionary Talk by Dr. Sylvia Earle

By Stephen Kaye

“We have about ten years left,” warns Sylvia Earle, one of the world's experts on the state of our oceans.

Oceans take up about 90 percent of the earth's surface and are home to about 90 percent of the earth's living creatures, so we had better sit up and take notice that the oceans are in a perilous state. From outer space, the earth is mostly ocean, the color blue.

Dr. Earle, oceanographer, explorer, professor and writer, spoke at the Cary Institute last Thursday before a packed auditorium. Her slides and her quiet voice belied her message. Man has overstepped the limits of sustainability. Ninety percent of the oceans' large creatures have disappeared. Whales, sharks, groupers, cod, swordfish, and tuna have all suffered huge population declines because of man's penchant for seafood. Even the smaller fish have been decimated, like herring, mackerel and scallops. We are mining the oceans for krill, the bottom of the food chain on which hundreds of species survive. We use krill for such non-essentials as cat food and fertilizer. Our consumptive behavior threatens life on the planet, yet we continue to do it because the oceans are free and fish harvesting is profitable.

Dr. Earle points out that we have protected about 12 percent of the land mass from predatory practices, but less than one percent of the ocean. Recently, the United States protected 340,000 square miles in a National Marine Sanctuary around the Hawaiian Islands, a sign of hope that we are recognizing the oceans as “our life support system.”

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Dr. Earle emphasized that we now know what we are doing – we know the consequences of our acts. Modern science has been able to measure the state of the oceans, the reports have been made, and people know what they did not know before. We know what trawling the ocean's floor does to the species that inhabit this zone – it effectively destroys them. In the search for one good edible species, huge nets capture and kill everything, including coral that may be 5,000 years old.

Dragnets destroy the seaweed beds, the spawning grounds, the feed sources and the species that live there. The machinery of mass harvesting equipment, the huge nets that gather in all species when only one or two are wanted, causes measurable damage to life in the oceans. Giant vacuum cleaners suck in everything, leaving carcasses of the unwanted.

“Change our eating habits, our preferences” counseled Dr. Earle. Wild fish are disappearing; order fish that you know are sustainably raised, like tilapia, trout and catfish. Groupers that turn up in Chinese restaurants are at least 20 years old and could be 200. Halibut, tuna and swordfish are long-lived. They live complex lives, travel great distances, have systems of communication, and a place on earth that we should respect. Predation by machine is doing great damage. Biodiversity in the oceans is just as important as biodiversity on land.

“We are living in the most important time in human history; we can change the future of the earth. But we must change our habits. Our capacity to alter how the world works has put us at risk.”

The Arctic ice cap is 50 percent of what it was 50 years ago.

Three hundred thousand marine animals are killed each year by fishing gear, mostly by plastic nets left in the oceans.

She ended on a positive note: “A greater awareness of earth and our ecosystems may allow us to do better. With knowledge comes responsibility.”