

2011 Annual Report: President's Letter

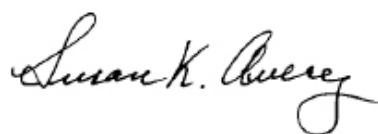
As happens every year, many remarkable social, cultural and political events took place in 2011. For WHOI, however, it is events related to the physical environment of the ocean that capture our attention: 2011 will be remembered for the magnitude 9.0 earthquake and subsequent tsunami that devastated the northeastern coast of Japan. The Tohoku earthquake occurred entirely beneath the ocean, one in a series of extreme events that demonstrate the power of our planet to overwhelm human capacity to predict, prevent, and mitigate natural disasters.

WHOI researchers played a valuable lead role in the aftermath of this quake, as we have in other recent disasters. When the tsunami caused the Fukushima nuclear power plant to experience partial meltdowns, hydrogen explosions, and fires, WHOI senior scientist Ken Buesseler quickly assembled an international team to assess the levels and dispersion of radioactive substances in waters offshore. It was a daunting task in every respect. The government of Japan, from which permission was required to conduct the research, was consumed with responding to the rapidly escalating crisis. It had neither time nor resources to offer.

Ken worked around the clock to recruit colleagues, find a research vessel as close to the area as possible, and—the greatest obstacle—obtain funding. After what he calls the “five busiest weeks of my life,” he set sail from Hawaii—still without all the necessary permits from Japan. He led a science party of 17 people from eight institutions that collected water, air and biological samples from a starting point 400 miles offshore to a point within sight of Fukushima. In the end, of most immediate concern to all, they were able to determine that the release of radioactive material was below the threshold of harm to humans and marine life. Many questions remain, and the analysis of data continues.

As we enter a presidential election year in the U.S., I continue to be concerned about the unpredictability of federal budgets and public policy disputes that threaten to debilitate the agencies that support this kind of research, even when it has such obvious social benefit. The Fukushima research highlights this. Ken was able to get a RAPID grant from the National Science Foundation to help in the earliest stage, but it was the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation that ultimately stepped forward with the multi-million dollar award necessary to mount the cruise and collect the samples. The Fukushima disaster, especially the release of radionuclides, is still affecting the ocean and ocean ecosystems, and there must be continued attention to and support for ocean research and monitoring.

As federal funding agencies that we have relied on for decades are constrained by enforced austerity, we must look beyond traditional sources to find alternate and supplemental means to sustain our research. Clearly, despite increasing questions about the value of science to society, our efforts contribute significantly to global capacity to better predict, prevent and mitigate natural disasters. As we saw again this year, those disasters affect all of us on Earth. Such events—so often tied to the ocean—are showing signs of increasing in number and severity. It's worth noting another milestone in 2011: the world's population passed the seven billion mark. In light of that and the worldwide increase in human population along coasts, the enduring value of ocean research and of WHOI is apparent.




WHOI President and Director Susan Avery

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