



A Super Year for Ocean Governance: A Dream Deferred?

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Executive summary

2020 was meant to be a ‘Super Year for the Ocean’, with a series of negotiations and political processes due to take place on ocean governance, climate change, biodiversity and sustainable development. However, the disruption caused by COVID-19 has delayed many global meetings and cast uncertainty over these processes. At the same time, collective action on global governance challenges remains paramount. COVID-19 has highlighted the interconnectedness of the globe and the need for urgent, coordinated, multilateral action.

As the global community reflects on past practices in light of COVID-19, it is important to consider a ‘new normal’ that better incorporates sustainability in the use and conservation of natural resources. It is crucial to look at how transformative behaviour and policy change can pre-empt future environmental catastrophes, achieve sustainable development and eradicate poverty. This will require a profound systemic shift in our current relationship with the ocean.

The importance of the ‘blue planet’

The ocean is a key component of the Earth system and is essential for all aspects of human well-being. It produces life-supporting ecosystem services such as oxygen and habitats for abundant marine biodiversity, and supports human livelihoods through the provision of food, mineral and energy resources. Perhaps less acknowledged are the services it provides to climate regulation and carbon storage. The ocean absorbs and stores human-made atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) and is an integral component of global biogeochemical cycles. The ocean’s biology is one of our best allies in the fight against climate change.

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Oceans also provide substantial economic and social benefits, highlighted in recent years through the growing interest in the global Blue Economy. Besides valuable commercial fisheries and aquaculture, the volume of maritime trade has more than doubled between 1990 and 2017,¹ and the exploitation of offshore oil and gas reserves in ever-deeper waters has advanced. In addition, several new sectors have emerged, including seabed mining, marine genetic research, and offshore wind and other renewable energy technologies.

¹ UN Conference on Trade and Development, *50 Years of Review of Maritime Transport, 1968–2018: Reflecting on the Past, Exploring the Future* (New York: UNCTAD, 2018), https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/dtl2018d1_en.pdf.

Yet overexploitation and fossil fuel emissions have pushed the ocean, and the ecosystems that accompany it, to the brink of collapse. Despite global efforts to improve its management and conservation, the ocean is now seriously degraded, with changes and losses in the structure, function and benefits of its marine systems.² As the world population is estimated to reach 9 billion people by 2050, human impacts on the ocean will increase. Climate models, such as those developed by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) and the [Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services \(IPBES\)](#), project continued and significant changes in the coming century. High emissions scenarios show devastating and widespread ocean warming; sea-level rise; increasing acidification; decreasing stability of mineral forms of calcite; oxygen loss; decreasing net primary productivity; reduced fish production; and the loss of coastal ecosystems and their key ecosystem services. These changes are exacerbated by non-climatic pressures, such as construction, pollution, agricultural expansion and mining.

Also, climate change impacts on oceans and coastal communities will happen much earlier and on a larger scale than initial models indicated. Two special reports by the IPCC in 2019, namely [Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate](#)³ and [Global Warming of 1.5°C](#),⁴ demonstrate the urgency of action needed and conclude that the ocean has warmed unabatedly, continuing the clear multi-decadal ocean warming trends documented in the [IPCC Fifth Assessment Report](#)⁵ in 2014.

Governance of the oceans and converging multilateral agendas

The expectation was that 2020 would be the ‘super year for the ocean’, with several important political events and high-level negotiations taking place, as well as the conclusion of two long-running intergovernmental negotiation processes, namely the governance of biodiversity in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction and distorted fisheries subsidies under the World Trade Organization (WTO).

However, with the travel bans implemented because of COVID-19 and the prohibition of in-person gatherings, these meetings have mainly been postponed. Yet the continuation of these negotiations and the implementation of existing commitments remain as urgent as ever, given that the health of our natural environment is directly linked to the well-being and health of our global citizens and that we continue to face increasingly volatile and extreme events and rapidly changing landscapes and biota.

2 UN, *First Global Integrated Marine Assessment -World Ocean Assessment I* (New York: UN, 2016).

3 H Pörtner et al., eds., *IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* (Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2019).

4 V Masson-Delmotte et al., eds., *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of global Warming of 1.5°C Above Pre-Industrial Levels And Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty* (Geneva: IPCC, 2018).

5 RK Pachauri et al., eds., *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Geneva: IPCC, 2014).

Climate change and oceans

In 2015 world leaders committed to a historic global agreement to tackle climate change. They agreed, under the Paris Agreement, to ensure that the increase in the global average temperature stays well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, and to pursue efforts to limit the rise even further. They also agreed to step up efforts to adapt to the impacts of climate change and to make finance flows consistent with a pathway towards climate-resilient development. However, despite good intentions, the manifestation of these commitments into quantifiable, legally binding greenhouse gas reductions at the national level is slow. In fact, UN Environment's 2019 Emissions Gap Report states that emissions continue to increase and that, even if all national commitments under the Paris Agreement (through the Nationally Determined Contributions and other regulatory mechanisms) are implemented, the world is still on course for a 3.2°C rise.⁶ Without mitigation commitments, the ocean's health will continue to deteriorate.

For almost a decade oceans have been explored as a thematic concept on the outskirts of the formal annual UN climate change negotiations. 'Ocean Action Days' have been organised to galvanise support and action for the oceans, both within and outside the formal processes of the UN. The Ocean Pathway, spearheaded by the Fijian presidency in 2018, was considered a turning point in bringing oceans more firmly into the climate negotiations, strengthening the oceans dialogue space and highlighting the ocean-climate nexus. Over the years this momentum has continued, reaching a crescendo at the climate change Conference of Parties (COP) meeting in Chile/Madrid in 2019, coined the 'Blue Conference of Parties'. Many 'blue' advocates have asked that the next meeting deliver an official oceans outcome.⁷ However, COP26, which was due to take place in the UK at the end of 2020, has been postponed.

Some countries are leading the way. Costa Rica, for example, is leading the High Ambition Coalition for Climate and Nature, creating awareness on the climate-ocean nexus. Canada and Norway are spearheading action on marine plastics globally, and leading the charge on a sustainable Blue Economy. High-level personalities and youth activists have also contributed to this momentum, including Lewis Pugh ('the Human Polar Bear'), oceanographer Dr Sylvia Earle and youth activist Greta Thunberg. In addition, protest-oriented programmes such as Fridays for Future and the Extinction Rebellion are demanding intergenerational climate justice and insisting that political leaders are held accountable for insufficient progress on climate change.

6 UN Environment, *Emissions Gap Report 2019* (Nairobi: UN Environment, 2019), <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/30797/EGR2019.pdf>.

7 In the COP25 closing decision the UNFCCC adopted a provision on oceans, calling for a considered examination of the ocean and climate issues in the run-up to COP26 in the UK.

Biodiversity and oceans

The recent IPBES 2019 Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services highlights that nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history. In an attempt to slow (or reverse) biodiversity loss, a post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework was due to be adopted during COP15 to the Convention on Biological Diversity, scheduled for October in China. In particular, the framework aims to renew the expired, and largely unmet, Aichi Targets and their accompanying Strategic Plan for Biodiversity (2010-2020). This includes Target 11 on expanding the area of ocean under protection by 2020 to at least 10%.⁸ There is hope that a new target for coastal and ocean protection will be more ambitious and extend the coverage of marine protected areas (MPAs) to protect vulnerable and essential life-supporting ecosystems. There is substantial science that illustrates how area-based management tools, such as MPAs, can contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation by building ecosystem resilience and acting as nature-based solutions for absorbing and storing CO₂.

The UN has identified the 2020s as the decade of ecosystem restoration. Increasingly, restoration of terrestrial, inland water and marine ecosystems is needed to re-establish ecosystem functioning and the provision of invaluable life-support services. Restoration comes with an array of socio-economic opportunities, including green jobs. Approaches such as coral reef gardening, mangrove planting and other types of green ecological engineering require unskilled manual labour. However, restoration comes at a relatively high cost and its effectiveness is limited to reduced acidification and low emission scenarios. The UN has also named 2020 as the decade for ocean science in an attempt to improve scientific knowledge related to oceans and the causes of its degradation, to design and guide effective mitigation and adaptation strategies, to improve technical capacity in the developing world, and to manage the ocean under new challenges.

Agenda 2030 and oceans

As part of a broader process to support Agenda 2030, the high-level UN Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG 14) (life below water) was due to be held in Lisbon in mid-2020. Building on the first UN Oceans conference in 2017, this meeting intended to assess the implementation of SDG 14 and deliver an intergovernmental agreement to support its implementation. Much remains to be done to address the intersection of SDG 14 and the other SDG priority areas and targets. Addressing the underlying causes of ocean depletion, on land and in the sea, requires collective action and an integrated, intersectoral systems management approach.

⁸ Convention for Biological Diversity, "Target 11: Technical Rationale Extended (Provided in Document COP/11/INF/12/Rev.1)", May 25, 2012, <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/rationale/target-11/>.

The governance of biodiversity of the high seas

For almost 15 years countries have been negotiating a new agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the high seas – which cover nearly half of the Earth’s surface and fall beyond the jurisdiction of any one country. While many countries had hoped to finalise an international, legally binding mechanism under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in March 2020, this round of deliberations has been postponed. Although additional rounds of negotiations may be needed, 2020 will nonetheless be an important step towards finalising a dedicated instrument to guide biodiversity use and conservation on the high seas. One of the suggested objectives in the current draft text is to include new dynamic management tools, including ‘mobile’ MPAs, whose boundaries shift across space and time. This is a responsive governance tool to match the spatial and temporal scale of climate change impacts on ocean systems.⁹

Subsidy negotiations under the World Trade Organization

There were also expectations that 2020 would mark the conclusion of an almost 20-year negotiation process on fisheries subsidies in the WTO – a process launched in Doha in 2001 to remove subsidies that contribute to the overexploitation of fisheries stocks and the overcapacity of fishing fleets, including illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. It is currently estimated that \$35 billion is allocated every year to the fisheries sector,¹⁰ 50% of which contribute to overexploitation of resources and three-quarters of which go to industrial fleets. The WTO Ministerial Conference, due to take place in June 2020 in Kazakhstan, has also been postponed.

Building a ‘different economy’

Natural resource depletion and ecosystem degradation have not traditionally been included in national accounting measures, nor have these resources been valued as capital assets.¹¹ Resource use (whether sustainable or not) reflects positively on global growth indicators such as gross domestic product. These measures of economic well-being do not register the corresponding decline in assets (wealth) that is a more appropriate measure of future economic prosperity. Many ecosystem services are available freely (such as fresh water in aquifers and the use of the atmosphere as a sink for pollutants) and so their degradation is not reflected in standard economic measures. When the economic losses associated with natural resource depletion are factored into measurements of a

9 Sarah Maxwell et al., “Mobile Protected Areas for Biodiversity on the High Seas”, *Science* 367, no. 6475 (17 January 2020): 252-254, DOI: 10.1126/science.aaz9327.

10 Roger Martini, “Many Government Subsidies Lead to Overfishing. Here’s a Solution”, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 28 February 2019, <https://www.oecd.org/agriculture/government-subsidies-overfishing/>.

11 Patrick ten Brink, ed., *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity for National and International Policy Makers*, Chapter 3 (London and Washington: TEEB and Earthscan, 2009), <http://www.teebweb.org/publication/teeb-in-national-and-international-policy-making/>.

nation's 'true' wealth,¹² and the restoration is calculated, the balance sheet of countries with economies dependent on natural resources will change significantly.¹³ It is thus critical that future development policies and indicators ensure full-cost accounting of natural capital.

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As we move towards a post-COVID-19 world, financial resources and actions should be directed at green jobs and green growth, and our economic prosperity should be built within sustainable planetary boundaries. The economic recovery/stimulus packages being designed to reboot economies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic can offer an ideal opportunity to plan for, and invest in, such a 'Green Stimulus Framework'.¹⁴ This framework can include policies and incentive mechanisms to encourage and support the uptake of renewable energy investments, smart buildings, green and public transport, and more sustainable consumption and production through a circular economy model. This can also involve creating stable regulatory frameworks for emerging sectors such as blue finance, marine energy, and deep-sea mining. An integral part of this vision is restoring and protecting degraded landscapes and seascapes, which provide abundant socio-economic opportunities while generating net benefits from productive fisheries, watershed protection, better crop yields, and water purification.

Economic recovery/stimulus packages being designed to reboot economies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic can offer an ideal opportunity to plan for, and invest in, such a 'Green Stimulus Framework'

12 UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "Global Dialogue on Ocean Accounting and First Annual Meeting of the Global Ocean Accounts Partnership", <https://www.unescap.org/events/global-dialogue-ocean-accounting-and-first-annual-meeting-global-ocean-accounts-partnership>.

13 Romy Chevallier, "The Importance of Valuing Africa's Natural Riches" (Opinion and Analysis, South African Institute for International Affairs, Johannesburg, October 2012).

14 Stéphane Hallegatte and Stephen Hammer, "Thinking Ahead: For a Sustainable Recovery from COVID-19", World Bank Blog, March 30, 2020, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/climatechange/for-a-sustainable-recovery-from-covid-19>.

2020 – the year to galvanise support for oceans and climate action

Much is still needed to meet the multi-dimensional, scale-related challenges to climate mitigation and adaptation, as well as to ocean warming, acidification, salinity, and nutrient and oxygen concentrations. While many governance frameworks for climate-resilient marine and coastal adaptation have been developed in recent years, there are substantial variations in capacity between and within countries, and across development status. This trend of increasing complexity is likely to continue, requiring continuous research and effective communication across the science-policy interface. It also requires the conclusion of importance political processes.

The current ecological crisis demands a radical shift in the way people interact with the coastal and marine environment

The current ecological crisis demands a radical shift in the way people interact with the coastal and marine environment. While updated and new sustainability goals are urgently needed for the ocean, coasts and high seas, previous practices of setting targets for the distant future, without converting these into nationally achievable outcomes, must be avoided. Through meetings' being cancelled and postponed, 2020 now provides the space to reflect on the shortcomings of current ocean governance mechanisms, take account of what science is telling us, continue with the substantial preparatory work required and remain committed to the various approaches that are already agreed on to accelerate the implementation of existing oceans targets within various climate change, biodiversity and SDG frameworks. As the COVID-19 pandemic disrupts global negotiations on biodiversity, climate and the oceans, the global community needs to design new and creative avenues to progress and finance environmental agendas, reinforce momentum, ensure alignment and mobilise a broader and varied audience around the ocean-climate change interface.

2020 now provides the space to reflect on the shortcomings of current ocean governance mechanisms, take account of what science is telling us, continue with the substantial preparatory work required and remain committed to the various approaches to accelerate the implementation of existing oceans targets

The ocean is indifferent to endless conferences and political stalemates. On all levels, deliberations will rely on increasing global and regional cooperation and integration, and widening participation from other non-state audiences. In 2020 the globe must focus on real achievements and implementation, rather than promises made.

Conclusion

It is increasingly evident that human pressure and economic activities are compromising the resilience of coastal and marine ecosystems and eroding their natural capacity to deliver vital ecosystem services. Long-term, transformative policies and incentive structures are urgently needed to address the underlying and systemic causes of ocean exploitation and degradation, and to ensure that existing national commitments to advance ocean health, climate mitigation and adaptation are implemented without delay. As we chart a way forward, policymakers should support the implementation of natural resource management frameworks that are cross-sectoral and integrated, working with private sector partners to encourage new economic development pathways founded on full-cost natural capital accounting and environmental restoration. The post-COVID-19 'green' stimulus packages being proposed must aim to reconcile socio-economic development with balanced and environmentally sustainable outcomes. These economic recovery programmes must be ambitious, measurable and inclusive – for nature as well as for people. The perspectives and needs of communities, those at the coalface of these challenges, are paramount to the inclusive response needed in this and other global challenges.

Long-term, transformative policies and incentive structures are urgently needed to address the underlying and systemic causes of ocean exploitation and degradation

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Cover image

A freediver holds a sign that reads 'World Ocean Day' at Resort World Sentosa's S.E.A Aquarium in Singapore on June 7, 2016. As part of global celebration for World Oceans Day (Roslan Rahman/AFP via Getty Images)

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