



Why an Ocean Sustainable Development Goal is Good News

“This is the people’s agenda, a plan of action for ending poverty in all its dimensions, irreversibly, everywhere, and leaving no one behind,” Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary -General as the goals were finalised in July 2015.

The Ocean Goal (14)
Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
14.1 By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution
14.2 By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans
14.3 Minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification , including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels
14.4 By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics
14.5 By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas , consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information
14.6 By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation
14.7 By 2030, increase the economic benefits to Small Island developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism
14.a Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology , taking into account the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology, in order to improve ocean health and to enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular small island developing States and least developed countries
14. b Provide access for small scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets
14.c Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in UNCLOS , which provides the legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources, as recalled in paragraph 158 of The Future We Want.

The Process

- The goals and new targets were debated by civil society and UN member states for more than two years. The 17 [sustainable development goals](#) (SDGs), which contain 169 targets, will replace the millennium development goals (MDGs), which [expire at the end of the year](#). Implementation of the sustainable development agenda will begin on 1 January 2016.
- The UN has estimated that the new goals could cost as much as [\\$172.5tn \(£110.67tn\) over the 15-year timeframe](#).
- The ocean was given a marginal role in the Millennium Development Goals, despite its significant contribution to sustainable development.
- Poverty eradication and sustainable development cannot be ended without including the ocean and seas.

The Importance

- An ocean goal places the critical role of oceans to our planet and to humanity squarely in the post-2015 development agenda, and provides a framework to orient development of new measures to tackle existing governance gaps in relation to the high seas.
- By reducing many of the direct stressors to ocean life from human activities like industrial fishing, the SDG Ocean targets will help to support resilience and abundance, regenerating ocean life with benefits that extend across communities and beyond borders.
- An Ocean SDG alone is not enough to guarantee a secure future for the global ocean but it sends a number of important messages, garners valuable recognition, and builds momentum and resources. It should trigger the kind of action necessary for international recognition that the global ocean is an Earth system, the health of which is essential to communities around the world, and to the planet as a whole.
- We must address the fragmented approach that is currently driving ocean decline. A concerted effort is required, underpinned by key reforms in global ocean governance and implemented by every government, by civil society and by the private sector so that the words on paper become action in the water.
- In the 21st century, humanity's struggle is to balance the needs and aspirations of a growing population with the planet's ability to provide everything upon which we depend. This has been described by many as the defining moment of our era.
- There is a causal relationship between oceans and climate change, i.e. the recent cyclone that devastated Vanuatu has been linked to higher-than-average surface water [by their President](#) .
- The ocean is like the earth's circulatory system; it provides us with food, fresh water, energy, medicine and the oxygen in every second breath we take. It links peoples and culture, countries and lives and allows goods and services to be transported around the world.
- What we also tend to forget, is that the Earth is one living system. Both the physical and biological processes of the ocean play a key role in the water cycle, the carbon cycle, and climate variability. The microscopic plants that live in the ocean are responsible for almost half the oxygen we inhale.

- As a natural carbon sink, the ocean absorbs approximately 25 per cent of all the CO₂ emitted by human activities. Scientists now understand that this comes with a cost to its overall health. The increasing amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the air is reacting with the ocean to alter its chemistry.
- Ocean acidity has increased by 30 per cent since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. If CO₂ emissions continue to increase, the rate of acidification will accelerate in the coming decades. The most obvious threat is to [creatures with shells](#). Higher acidity compromises shell growth. This would affect many organisms including [seafood favourites](#) such as oysters, clams, scallops, lobsters, crabs and shrimp.
- Acidification also appears to impede the capacity of some fish to hunt and to sense predators, by affecting their senses of [hearing](#) and [smell](#). Other animals such as squid and sea urchins may also be affected directly. Impacts of acidification will be felt all the way up the food chain. For example, [marine snails \(pteropods\)](#), whose shells are now thinning in Antarctic waters and [off the US West Coast](#), are an important feedstock for fish, squid and birds.
- Already, the rate of change, to the best of our knowledge, is unprecedented: many times faster than anything experienced in the last 250 million years. And slowing that down requires action on land and on the water to reduce emissions, build resilience and help to restore life in the sea.
- Saving the ocean, 70 per cent of the planet, and those who live from and by it, requires monumental shifts in thinking and action. The ocean has an amazing ability to regenerate itself. We need to help it, and the targets set in the Ocean SDG will help us do just that.
- With respect to sustainable fishing, the goal confronts overfishing generally, as well as specific problems, including illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and subsidies that contribute to overcapacity in fishing fleets and unfair trade.
- With respect to the marine environment, the goal must encourage the protection of vulnerable marine areas and address the stressors on fragile marine ecosystems, including pollution, destructive fishing practices, and ocean acidification.

Relevance to other goals

The ocean is relevant to many other goals. Without a healthy ocean we won't be able to:

- end hunger, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture;
- promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth;
- promote sustainable infrastructure and industrialization and foster innovation;
- make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;
- ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns or halt biodiversity loss.

These are all either stand alone goals or indicators. In a nutshell: we need to limit climate change damage and to ensure a healthy, productive ocean to be able to deliver upon the other goals. For the ocean, prompt and swift action on climate change will be the single most important action we can make.

Relevance in 2015

Pope Francis, in his recent encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* has written powerfully about the state of the oceans, particularly in paragraphs 40 and 41.

In paragraph 174, the Pope goes deeply into the legal dimensions:

“Let us also mention the system of governance of the oceans. International and regional conventions do exist, but fragmentation and the lack of strict mechanisms of regulation, control and penalization end up undermining these efforts. The growing problem of marine waste and the protection of the open seas represent particular challenges. What is needed, in effect, is an agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of so-called ‘global commons’.”

While the SDGs are not legally binding, they do represent the overarching development norms and priorities of the international community, adopted by consensus.

Thus, the implementation of the Ocean SDG could prove vital in ameliorating the “fragmentation” that the Pope lucidly writes about and could provide pathways for more effective “systems of governance” for the global ocean commons.

The international community has a unique opportunity in 2015 to put in place strong and effective mechanisms to ensure the health of the global ocean for the sake of the planet and future generations, including:

- Connecting the dots between the summit and the Post-2015 review and follow-up process.
- Creating formal links to the UNFCCC process.
- Establishing a robust new UN agreement to protect and conserve marine life in the high seas.