



***United Nations Environment Assembly***

**Topic B: Protection of Oceans, Seas, and Coasts**

*“Humanity counts on the ocean. But can the ocean count on us?” – Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres<sup>1</sup>*

**Introduction**

The protection of oceans, seas, and coasts is one of the most pressing environmental challenges of our time. Covering over 70% of the Earth’s surface, oceans are essential to regulating the global climate, providing food, and supporting diverse ecosystems.<sup>2</sup> They are home to more than 80% of the planet’s biodiversity and play a critical role in the carbon cycle, helping to mitigate the impacts of climate change.<sup>3</sup> Coastal areas, where land and ocean meet, are among the most biodiverse and productive ecosystems on Earth. They are inhabited by 40% of the global population, and oceans more broadly directly provide livelihoods for approximately 500 million people, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).<sup>4</sup> As the United Nations (UN) continues to strive to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, protecting the oceans remains an important topic of discussion and action, especially for SDG 14: Life Below Water.<sup>5</sup>

Part of the challenge of achieving the SDGs is that these vital resources are under increasing threat. Pollution, particularly plastic waste, is suffocating marine life, while overfishing is depleting fish stocks and disrupting food chains. Of that pollution, roughly 80 percent begins on land.<sup>6</sup> The destruction of coral reefs and mangroves, critical coastal habitats, exacerbates the vulnerability of coastal communities to storms, floods, and rising sea levels. Additionally, climate change is contributing to ocean acidification, coral bleaching, and shifting marine species distributions, further destabilizing these ecosystems.<sup>7</sup>

Threats to oceans, seas, and coasts affect the entire global community, even countries that do not lie within these regions themselves. Downstream effects of ocean and sea destruction can result in economic and political instability due to disrupted trade and

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<sup>1</sup> Guterres. “‘Let’s Put the Ocean First,’ Secretary-General Says in Message on World Day, Urging All to Keep Pushing for Conservation, Sustainable Use of Resources.” United Nations. May 31, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Rosane. “First-of-its kind study offers blueprint for ocean protection.” World Economic Forum and EcoWatch. March 23, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Rosane. “First-of-its kind study offers blueprint for ocean protection.” World Economic Forum and EcoWatch. March 23, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> “Tackling Ecosystem Degradation & Pollution.” United Nations Environment Programme. N.d.

<sup>5</sup> *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations General Assembly. A/RES/70/1. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> “Tackling Ecosystem Degradation & Pollution.” United Nations Environment Programme. N.d.

<sup>7</sup> “Ocean and Coastal Observations.” United Nations Environment Programme. N.d.

food supplies.<sup>8</sup> Working cooperatively and upholding international agreements such as the *UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)*, the *Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)*, and initiatives like the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment will be an important aspect of meeting long-term global climate and environment goals.

## **Background**

UN action in marine protection dates back to the mid-20th century, as international awareness grew about the need for collective action to address mounting threats to the marine environment. In the aftermath of World War II, as nations sought to rebuild and cooperate on global issues, the *Charter of the United Nations (Charter)*, adopted in 1945, provided a foundation for international cooperation in numerous fields, including environmental protection.<sup>9</sup> Though the *Charter* does not specify a responsibility to the environment, elements of Articles 1, 55, and 56 on international economic and social cooperation would be used as a cornerstone to pursue environmental action.<sup>10</sup> However, the early focus was more on economic development and human rights, with little attention to environmental concerns. By the 1960s, however, growing awareness about the degradation of the marine environment—due to pollution, overfishing, and the exploitation of marine resources—highlighted the need for coordinated international action.

That early awareness crystallized for environmental diplomacy in the 1970s. The 1972 Stockholm Conference was the first major international gathering to address global environmental issues, resulting in the *Stockholm Declaration*, which called for the protection of the marine environment.<sup>11</sup> The *Stockholm Declaration* recognized that oceans and ocean-dwellers could be affected by negative actions from thousands of miles away, and that oceanic ecosystems were highly vulnerable and worth protecting.<sup>12</sup> This was the beginning of a broader understanding that oceans, seas, and coasts were not only valuable resources but also vulnerable ecosystems requiring protection. In the same year, the UN established UNEP, which became instrumental in coordinating global efforts to safeguard the environment, including marine ecosystems.<sup>13</sup> UNEP's Regional Seas Programme, launched in 1974, promoted regional cooperation to address marine pollution and protect coastal and marine biodiversity.<sup>14</sup>

A landmark event in UN action on ocean protection was the adoption of the *UNCLOS* in 1982.<sup>15</sup> Often referred to as the "Constitution of the Oceans," *UNCLOS* provided a comprehensive legal framework for the governance of the oceans, covering territorial

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<sup>8</sup> Bates. "Oceans Will Not Survive 'Business as Usual'." Global Issues. 2012.

<sup>9</sup> *Charter of the United Nations*. United Nations. 1 UNTS XVI. 1945.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> "United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, 5-16 June 1972, Stockholm." United Nations. N.d.

<sup>12</sup> *Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*. United Nations. 1972.

<sup>13</sup> "UNEP: 50 years of Environmental Milestones." United Nations Environment Programme. N.d.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. United Nations. A/CONF.62/122. 1982.

waters, maritime boundaries, marine pollution, and conservation of marine resources.<sup>16</sup> It established the principle of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), granting coastal states sovereign rights over marine resources within 200 nautical miles of their coasts.<sup>17</sup> The 1990s saw further policy development with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, which emphasized the need for sustainable management of oceans and coasts as part of the broader agenda for sustainable development.<sup>18</sup> Its outcome document, the Agenda 21 action plan, particularly Chapter 17, focused on oceans, calling for improved scientific understanding and international cooperation to protect marine ecosystems.<sup>19</sup>

The early 21st century continued in a similar vein, with a greater recognition of the interconnectedness of ocean health and climate change. The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, reaffirmed the need for stronger international cooperation on ocean protection, particularly regarding marine biodiversity and sustainable fisheries management.<sup>20</sup> In 2015, the adoption of SDG 14 (Life Below Water) as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development marked a significant milestone.<sup>21</sup> SDG 14 aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources, and includes targets to reduce marine pollution, protect coastal ecosystems, and regulate fisheries, which have become central to UN efforts in marine conservation.<sup>22</sup>

### **Current Situation**

Despite the great attention paid to the ocean in more recent decades, marine ecosystems continue to experience severe pressure. Some human activities have great direct pressure, with some the greatest impact on these environments from pollution and overfishing. Anthropogenic climate change also means many other human activities have indirect effects, endangering ocean health from another perspective.

Marine pollution is a significant and growing environmental crisis, with harmful substances entering the oceans from various sources such as plastics, chemicals, oil spills, and untreated sewage. It not only threatens marine biodiversity but also harms human health, disrupts food chains, and damages coastal economies. The accumulation of plastics, in particular, has reached alarming levels, with an estimated 8

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<sup>16</sup> Treves. "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea." United Nations Audiovisual Library of International Law. 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992." United Nations. N.d.

<sup>19</sup> *Agenda 21*. United Nations. 1992.

<sup>20</sup> "World Summit on Sustainable Development, 26 August-4 September 2002, Johannesburg." United Nations. 2002.

<sup>21</sup> *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations General Assembly. A/RES/70/1. 2015.

<sup>22</sup> "14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development." United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. N.d.

million tons entering the ocean each year.<sup>23</sup> Chemical pollutants, including pesticides, heavy metals, and pharmaceuticals, contribute to the degradation of marine ecosystems, while oil spills cause long-lasting damage to coastal habitats. UNEP is a key body coordinating global efforts to reduce marine pollution, particularly through its Regional Seas Programme, which promotes regional cooperation to address pollution and conserve marine and coastal environments.<sup>24</sup> UNEP also leads efforts to implement the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities, which addresses land-based sources of marine pollution.<sup>25</sup> The International Maritime Organization (IMO) works to prevent marine pollution from ships, regulating oil spills, garbage, and ballast water through promotion of policies and documents like the *International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL)*.<sup>26,27</sup> *UNCLOS* provides a legal framework for managing and preventing marine pollution, setting out the responsibilities of states to protect the marine environment.<sup>28</sup>

Overfishing is a critical issue that depletes fish stocks, disrupts marine ecosystems, and threatens the livelihoods of millions of people who depend on fishing for food and income. It occurs when fish are harvested at rates faster than they can reproduce, leading to the collapse of fish populations and the destruction of marine biodiversity. Overfishing not only affects commercial fish stocks but also causes harm to ecosystems, including coral reefs, which are vital for marine life. The United Nations addresses overfishing through several key frameworks and initiatives. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) plays a central role in combating overfishing by promoting sustainable fisheries management and providing guidance on fish stock assessments, fishery regulations, and conservation practices.<sup>29</sup> FAO's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries offers a global framework for countries to follow in managing fisheries sustainably.<sup>30</sup> *UNCLOS* applies to this subtopic as well, requiring States to conserve marine living resources and prevent overfishing and encouraging international cooperation to manage fish stocks that traverse multiple national boundaries.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the UN Fish Stocks Agreement (1995) aims to ensure the conservation and sustainable management of straddling and highly migratory fish stocks, which are often subject to overexploitation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Fava. "Ocean plastic pollution an overview: data and statistics." United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2022.

<sup>24</sup> "UNEP Regional Seas Programme." United Nations Environment Programme. N.d.

<sup>25</sup> "Global Programme of Action (GPA)." United Nations Environment Programme. N.d.

<sup>26</sup> "Introduction to IMO." International Maritime Organization. N.d.

<sup>27</sup> "International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL)." International Maritime Organization. N.d.

<sup>28</sup> Treves. "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea." United Nations Audiovisual Library of International Law. 2008.

<sup>29</sup> "The Status of Fishery Resources." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. N.d.

<sup>30</sup> *Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Treves. "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea." United Nations Audiovisual Library of International Law. 2008.

<sup>32</sup> "UN Fish Stocks Agreement." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. N.d.

Climate change bears extra consideration in the context of UNEA: the warming of the oceans, caused by rising global temperatures, has led to ocean acidification, the reduction of ocean pH due to increased carbon dioxide absorption.<sup>33</sup> The more acidic pH weakens marine organisms, particularly corals, shellfish, and plankton, which form the foundation of marine ecosystems.<sup>34</sup> In addition to acidification, coral bleaching is also a direct consequence of rising sea temperatures, threatening vital coral reef ecosystems that support marine biodiversity and provide resources to coastal communities.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, sea level rise, driven by the melting of polar ice caps and thermal expansion of seawater, is putting low-lying coastal areas at risk.<sup>36</sup> Coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion into freshwater supplies, and increased vulnerability to storms and flooding are becoming more severe, endangering coastal populations and infrastructure.<sup>37</sup>

In response, the United Nations has led the way on efforts to mitigate and adapt to these impacts. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), through the Paris Agreement, aims to limit global warming to well below 2°C, which is critical for ocean protection.<sup>38</sup> The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction has been working with especially at-risk Small Island Developing States to create resiliency programs that mitigate the effects of climate change on their societies.<sup>39</sup> More recently, the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030) emphasizes improving scientific understanding to better protect marine environments and build resilience against climate change impacts.<sup>40</sup> Through cooperation, research, and policy frameworks, the UN is working to ensure that oceans, seas, and coasts can recover and continue to sustain life in a changing climate and meet the targets of SDG 14.

## **Future Outlook**

While awareness by Member States of the importance of ocean stewardship to communities around the globe has been increasing since the UN's creation, there remains more work to be done to secure ocean health for the future. Through efforts like the UN Decade of Ocean Science and ongoing work towards the SDGs, the UN continues to raise the bar for how States can protect the environment for themselves and others. However, as a world-spanning resource, the UN will only have greater value as a mechanism for coordination and collaboration to protect oceans, seas and coasts.

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<sup>33</sup> “How is climate change impacting the world’s ocean.” United Nations. N.d.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “The Paris Agreement.” United Nations Climate Change. N.d.

<sup>39</sup> “Small Island Developing States (SIDS).” United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. N.d.

<sup>40</sup> “United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030).” United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. N.d.

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