

Oceans in the UNFCCC Process and the Ocean Dialogue¹

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This note provides a characterization of the inclusion of the ocean in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. Despite the relevance of the oceans in climate change mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage, its recognition in the process has been challenging. Here we outline the evolution of this topic in the UNFCCC until the establishment of an ocean's dialogue, while also presenting the dialogue.

Article 4(1)(d) of the Convention indicates that all Parties should "Promote sustainable management, and promote and cooperate in the conservation and enhancement, as appropriate, of sinks and reservoirs of all greenhouse gases not controlled by the Montreal Protocol, including biomass, forests and oceans as well as other terrestrial, coastal and marine ecosystems;" Despite the initial optimism this article may create as to the protection of ocean's, they received very little acknowledgement in the UNFCCC process until the creation of the 'Because the Ocean' initiative which spearheaded the calls for a clear space to discuss oceans in the UNFCCC process.

1. The Because of the Ocean Initiative

In 2015, at COP 21, the 'Because the Ocean' initiative was launched with the support of Chile's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France's Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy, the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation, the Global Ocean Commission, the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI) and Tara Expeditions.

23 countries signed the [First Because the Ocean Declaration](#) ahead of COP 21 (Aruba, Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Fiji, France, Guinea Bissau, Kiribati,

¹ Produced by Legal Response International, August 2024.

Madagascar, Mexico, Monaco, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Palau, Peru, Senegal, Seychelles, Spain, and Sweden).

This First Declaration had three main components:

- A pledge of support for a Special Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to address fully the relationship between oceans and climate change
- A call for a High-Level UN Conference on Oceans and Seas
- A dedicated space to discuss oceans in the UNFCCC process called the Ocean Action programme

The first two components of this Declaration were quickly achieved after 2015. A [Special Report](#) was produced by the IPCC in 2019 and the first UN Ocean's Conference took place in Malta in 2017, the second took place in Lisbon, Portugal in 2022 following a two year-delay due to the pandemic, and the third Conference is set to take place in Nice, France in 2025.

The final component has recently been somewhat achieved as will be seen in the following section.

This initiative participated in the calls for a reference to the importance of oceans in the text of the [Paris Agreement](#) (PA). As a result, the preamble of the PA notes "the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans".

The [Second Because the Ocean Declaration](#), launched at COP 22 in 2016 attracted 33 signatory countries by the end of COP 23 (Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Fiji, Finland, France, Honduras, Indonesia, Italy, Malta, Mexico, Monaco, New Zealand, Palau, Peru, Republic of Marshall Islands, Romania, Senegal, Seychelles, Spain, Sweden. Belgium, Guatemala, Haiti, Jordan, Luxembourg, Morocco, Netherlands, Singapore, United Kingdom and Uruguay).

This Second Declaration contained two main components:

- An encouragement to UNFCCC Parties to submit Nationally Determined Contributions that "promote, as appropriate, ambitious climate action in order to minimize the adverse effects of climate change in the ocean and to contribute to its protection and conservation."²
- An underlining of the importance of further scientific knowledge.

2. The push for an agenda item and the Glasgow Dialogue on the Oceans

Following its establishment, this initiative continuously pushed for a dedicated space to discuss oceans in the UNFCCC process and ultimately achieved this with the support of the 'Friends of the Ocean' group of countries (Monaco, Costa Rica, Fiji, Indonesia, Norway, among others) at COP 25.³

² Second Declaration of the Because the Ocean Initiative.

³ A post in the 'Because of the Ocean Initiative' webpage reports on this events: 'COP25 #BLUECOP — TO BE CONTINUED IN GLASGOW' <https://www.becausetheocean.org/cop25-bluecop-to-be-continued-in-glasgow/>

The Chilean presidency of COP 25 had made clear their intention to promote the role of oceans at COP 25, which they called ‘the blue COP’, calling for ambition in this area in the months leading to COP 25.

This led to the Chile Madrid Time for Action Decision at COP 25 ([Decision 1/CP.25](#)), paragraph 31

“Requests the Chair of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice to convene at its fifty-second session (June 2020) a dialogue on the ocean and climate change to consider how to strengthen mitigation and adaptation action in this context;”

At COP 26, in the Glasgow Climate Pact it became clear that Oceans would not be considered under an additional agenda item as Paragraph 60 [Decision 1/CP.26](#)

“Invites the relevant work programmes and constituted bodies under the UNFCCC to consider how to integrate and strengthen ocean-based action in their existing mandates and workplans and to report on these activities within the existing reporting processes, as appropriate;”

Thus, the Parties decided at COP 26 that Oceans should be integrated into existing workstreams and not considered independently. However, Parties also agreed to reconduct the Dialogue on ocean and climate change which took place at SB 52 and had been mandated by COP 25 as a one-off event. Thus, Paragraph 61 of Decision 1/CP.26:

“invites the Chair of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice to hold an annual dialogue, starting at the fifty-sixth session of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (June 2022), to strengthen ocean-based action and to prepare an informal summary report thereon and make it available to the Conference of the Parties at its subsequent session;”

This paragraph ensures that the Ocean and Climate Change dialogue is a recurring event in the UNFCCC process and offers some space to discuss oceans independently.

At COP 27, the format of the Ocean and Climate Change dialogue was further refined as Parties decided that it would be facilitated by two co-facilitators, responsible for deciding topics and conducting the dialogue. Paragraph 49 Decision 1/CP.27

“decides that future dialogues will, from 2023, be facilitated by two co-facilitators, selected by Parties biennially, who will be responsible for deciding the topics for and conducting the dialogue, in consultation with Parties and observers, and preparing an informal summary report to be presented in conjunction with the subsequent session of the Conference of the Parties;”

Following each Dialogue, an informal summary report was produced to ensure inclusive and open access to the discussions that took place during the Dialogue.

3. Themes under the Oceans dialogues

The 2020 Dialogue, the first Ocean and Climate Change dialogue to take place, highlighted the lack of understanding between stakeholders of the relationship between the ocean and climate change. Nevertheless, according to the [informal summary report](#), Parties also underlined the opportunity for change through the “rich scientific knowledge base on the ocean and climate change”⁴. They also noted that the ocean must be part of the solutions for both mitigation and adaptation actors. However, Parties were encouraged to strengthen their ambition and financing for integrated ocean and climate action.

The 2022 Dialogue, according to the [informal summary report](#), centred on strengthening and integrating national ocean climate action under the PA along with enablers of ocean climate solutions and support, including, specifically, financial support. One of the key messages to come out of this Dialogue was that “Ocean-based measures offer significant mitigation and adaptations options”, part of these measures includes another key message that “Marine Technology and coastal nature-based solutions should be integrated to ensure that action is more robust, comprehensive and cost-effective than when using either solutions alone”. Multiple participants made reference to blue carbon as part of these key messages and underlined its value. Paragraph 30 notes that over 37 NDCs “include ‘blue carbon’ ecosystems in their NDCs as part of their mitigation and/or adaptation strategies.”

The 2023 Dialogue, according to the [informal summary report](#), took place over two days and focused on two topics, first, coastal ecosystem restoration, including blue carbon, and second, fisheries and food security. As part of the first topic, three key messages were suggested following the dialogue:

- **Integrating mitigation and adaptation action into policies** and management practices, including in NDCs and NAPs, which is crucial for governments to signal their commitment and financial mobilisation. It also allows a better streamlining of national focus areas with other international instruments.
- There is a crucial need for Parties to strengthen **blue carbon accounting** methodologies and tools. This could be done notably by adopting the [IPCC Wetlands Supplement](#) in their national GHG inventories – which extends the content of the 2006 IPCC Guidelines with updates and covers inland organic soils, wetland on mineral soils, coastal wetlands including mangrove forests, tidal marshes, seagrass meadows, and constructed wetlands for wastewater treatment.
- Further observation and research is required to assess **blue carbon storage**, ocean acidification and to conduct impact assessments.

The 2024 Dialogue took place during the SB 60 negotiations in Bonn. The informal summary report has, as such, not yet been published. However, taking from information in ENB’s negotiation reporting and from the [information note](#) published prior to the Dialogue, two topics were discussed. The first on marine biodiversity conservation and coastal resilience and the second on technology needs for the ocean. It was also intended to enable Parties that have integrated coastal and marine mitigation and adaptation measures within their NDCs to share positive examples that can inform the new or updated NDCs in 2025. Participants also highlighted the importance of restoring mangroves and

⁴ ‘Ocean and climate change dialogue to consider how to strengthen adaptation and mitigation action’ Informal summary report by the Chair of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice, 29 April 2021. Para 5.

nature-based sea walls for their value in sequestering carbon, protecting against erosion and serving as a natural habitat.

4. Oceans in COP decisions and SB conclusions from Glasgow (COP 26):⁵

Since Parties decided in COP 26 in Glasgow to reconduct the Oceans Dialogue as an annual event, COP decisions and conclusions from the Subsidiary Bodies (SBs) have engaged with the ocean through various negotiation streams. We highlight some of the most relevant examples below:

On technology development and technology transfer through the Technology Mechanism, [Decision 9/CP.26](#) (2021):

“12. Also welcomes the successful organization of the Technology Day events in 2020– 2021 **to promote innovative approaches to adaptation technologies** related to climate-smart agriculture and **ocean and coastal adaptation** and encourages the Technology Executive Committee to continue using such events to strengthen the impacts of its work and to reach target audiences;”

[Decision 16/CP.26](#) (2021) on Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform notes, in its preamble, the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including, among others, oceans when addressing climate change.

[Decision 1/CP.27](#) (2022) Sharm el-Sheikh Implementation Plan, contains a section on the Ocean, referring first to the ocean’s dialogue, where it decides a mode of work with two co-facilitators, and second, it encourages Parties to consider on ocean-based action in the pursuit of national climate goals, including NDCs.

“49. Welcomes the outcomes of and key messages from the ocean and climate change dialogue in 2022 and decides that future dialogues will, from 2023, be facilitated by two co-facilitators, selected by Parties biennially, who will be responsible for deciding the topics for and conducting the dialogue, in consultation with Parties and observers, and preparing an informal summary report to be presented in conjunction with the subsequent session of the Conference of the Parties;

50. Encourages Parties to consider, as appropriate, ocean-based action in their national climate goals and in the implementation of these goals, including but not limited to nationally determined contributions, long-term strategies and adaptation communications;”

⁵ We considered decisions and conclusions from COP 26, because it was at that COP that Parties were advised to integrate oceans into existing workstreams. See: Paragraph 60 Decision 1/CP.26

[Decision 22/CP.27](#) (2022) on Research and Systematic Observation, in regard to the implementation of the Global Climate Observing System:

“3. Emphasizes the need to address systematic observation gaps, particularly in developing countries and for ocean, mountain, desert and polar regions and the cryosphere in order to improve understanding of climate change, climate-related risks and tipping points, and adaptation limits and to ensure enhanced delivery of climate services and early warning systems;”

Following on the decisions above, the first Global Stocktake -assessing collective progress on implementation of the Paris Agreement- taking place during COP 28 (Dubai, 2023), contains several references to the ocean. [Decision 1/CMA 5](#) in its preamble, notes the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including the ocean. Further, its mitigation section ‘invites Parties to preserve and restore oceans and coastal ecosystems and scale up, as appropriate, ocean-based mitigation action’ (para.35). Similarly, its adaptation section ‘notes that ecosystem-based approaches, including ocean-based adaptation and resilience measures, as well as in mountain regions, can reduce a range of climate change risks and provide multiple co-benefits (para. 56), and finally, the concluding part of the decision on guidance and way forward, ‘welcomes the outcomes of and the informal summary report on the 2023 ocean and climate change dialogue and encourages further strengthening of ocean-based action, as appropriate.’ (para. 180).

In addition to COPs, the Subsidiary Bodies have also referred to the Ocean in multiple occasions:

[Report of the SBSTA 52-55](#) (2021) Conclusions relating to the Nairobi work programme on impacts, vulnerability and adaptation to climate change:

“20. The SBSTA welcomed the progress of the work of the secretariat, in partnership with NWP thematic expert groups, under the following of the priority NWP thematic areas:

(a) Forests and grassland;

(b) Oceans, coastal areas and ecosystems, including mega deltas, coral reefs and mangroves”

[Report of the SBSTA 52-55](#) (2021): Conclusions relating to Research and Systematic Observation:

“70. The SBSTA encouraged Parties and relevant organizations to strengthen support for sustained systematic observations of the climate system for monitoring changes in the atmosphere, ocean and cryosphere, and on land, including by improving the density of observations in areas of poor coverage, developing and providing long-term data sets and facilitating free and open access to data”

“72. The SBSTA also encouraged Parties and relevant organizations to strengthen systematic observation and research, and address related gaps and needs, including with regard to:

[...] (d) Understanding the **opportunities for and challenges of implementing nature-based solutions in land and ocean ecosystems for supporting adaptation and mitigation action;**”

[Report of the SBSTA 56](#) (2022) Conclusions relating to Research and Systematic Observation:

“62. The SBSTA encouraged Parties and relevant organizations to strengthen research and research capacity and to address related research needs, as indicated at the fourteenth meeting of the research dialogue, particularly in countries with limited research capacity such as certain developing countries, especially the LDCs and small island developing States, and to share scientific information globally, including in relation to understanding:

[...] (b) Climate change impacts on and risks for the ocean and cryosphere, and related ecosystems;”

[Report of the SBSTA 57](#) (2022) Conclusions relating to Research and Systematic Observation:

“43. The SBSTA noted with appreciation the progress in supporting systematic observation, such as through the development of the Systematic Observation Financing Facility. It encouraged the Facility to continue to prioritize the least developed countries and small island developing States in its provision of support and to evaluate opportunities to support developing countries. It also **encouraged efforts to further strengthen support for sustained systematic observations of the ocean**, cryosphere, land, biosphere and atmosphere.

45. The SBSTA **emphasized the need to address systematic observation gaps, particularly in developing countries and for ocean**, mountain, desert and polar regions and the cryosphere in order to improve understanding of climate change, climate-related risks and tipping points, and adaptation limits and to ensure enhanced delivery of climate services and early warning systems.”

These decisions and conclusion show that some negotiation streams, particularly technology and research and systematic observation, have adopted COP26’s mandate to consider the ocean, while the COPs have continuously emphasized the importance of ocean ecosystems and ocean-based actions for mitigation and adaptation. The next section will review if and how countries have responded the multiple calls from the initiative and from COPs to bring the ocean into their NDCs.

5. Ocean in the NDCs

As part of the [Second Because the Ocean Declaration](#), Parties were encouraged to submit NDCs that “promote, as appropriate, ambitious climate action in order to minimize the adverse effects of climate change in the ocean and to contribute to its protection and conservation.”⁶ This call was also reinforced during the 2023 Oceans dialogue and in the first Global Stocktake Decision – [Decision 1/CMA 5](#) – again calls parties to consider ocean-based commitments in their NDCs in relation to

⁶ Second Because the Ocean Declaration

mitigation and adaptation. Not all countries consider the ocean in their NDCs, however, there are plenty of countries doing so.

A report⁷ from September 2023 examines 148 new or updated NDCs, finding that 97 have included coastal and marine nature-based solutions. Among these, 61 countries included coastal and marine nature-based solutions for both mitigation and adaptation purposes, 1 for mitigation only and 35 for adaptation only, while 68 countries are explicitly committed to creating enabling conditions for actions, such as research, technology transfer, capacity-building and finance mobilisation.

Below we outline some examples of NDCs treatment of the ocean:⁸

The United-Kingdom [NDC updated in September 2022](#) contains under the heading “Other contextual aspirations and priorities acknowledged when joining the Paris Agreement” a section on ocean and marine environment which refers to the Scottish Blue Carbon forum and the draft Marine Plan for Northern Ireland, which will consider advancements in the field of blue carbon.

Canada’s [NDC updated in July 2021](#) as part of the mitigation co-benefits resulting from adaptation actions mentions that ‘the Government of Canada is committed to protecting 25% of the land and 25% of the oceans in Canada by 2025 and working towards 30% of each by 2030.’.

Australia’s [NDC updated in June 2022](#). This NDC contains under the heading “II. Australia’s action to advance adaptation and resilience” a mention of investing in the health and resilience of ocean ecosystems.

Norway’s [NDC updated in November 2022](#). Does not make reference to oceans and their role in climate change.

Chile’s [NDC from 2020](#). Contains multiple references to oceans and climate change. Including an entire sub-section within the adaptation and mitigation integrated approach section on oceans. This presents an undertaking to establish new protected areas, to ensure an administration or management plan is in place for all marine protected areas up to 2020 and to assess the benefits with regards to both adaptation and mitigation (the integrated approach). An [update](#) to the NDC from 2022 enhances the conservation commitment by committing 30% of the ocean to be under a protected area or other conservation measure.

Morocco’s [NDC updated in June 2021](#) does not make reference to oceans and their role in climate change but does discuss coastlines and their particular vulnerability to climate change impacts. They present ambition for observation systems and an integrated management approach to coastlines.

⁷ Lecerf, M., Herr D., Elverum, C., Delrieu, E. and Picourt, L., (2023), Coastal and marine ecosystems as Nature-based Solutions in new or updated Nationally Determined Contributions, Ocean & Climate Platform, Conservation International, IUCN, Rare, The Nature Conservancy, Wetlands International and WWF.

⁸ A more comprehensive review of NDCs can be found in documents such as “[‘Blueing’ the NDCs: A Review of the Nationally Determined Contributions of Commonwealth Coastal and Island Countries for Ocean-Based Actions and Commitments](#)” by The Commonwealth; the publication “[Blue Carbon and Nationally Determined Contributions](#)” by the Blue Carbon Initiative; the working paper “[Enhancing Nationally Determined Contributions: Opportunities for Ocean-Based Climate Action](#)” by the World Resources Institute, among other resources.

Madagascar Their [second NDC submitted in January 2024](#) contains a subsection on coastal areas in the Adaptation section. This discusses early warning systems and improving coastal resilience practices.

Belize's [NDC updated in September 2021](#) contains many references to coastal areas and the ocean. It also includes references to 'blue-carbon' and its importance as a nature-based solution to climate change with mitigation, adaptation and resilience co-benefits. The NDC also presents the first Blue Carbon Working Group for Belize "formed to value the blue carbon potential and adaptation co-benefits of Belize's coastal ecosystems, in order to inform targets and recommendations to strengthen their protection and effective management over the long-term."

Costa Rica's [NDC updated in December 2020](#) contains multiple references to oceans and coastal areas, and particular references to the importance of restoring and conserving damp coastal habitats for blue-carbon related purposes

Seychelles' [NDC updated in July 2021](#) contains multiple references to oceans and coastal areas. A particular chapter is dedicated to ocean climate action and blue carbon as nature-based solutions. Seychelles is committing to protecting at least 50% of its seagrass and mangrove ecosystems by 2025, and 100% by 2030, with external support. Seychelles also intend to include the GHG sink of Seychelles' blue carbon ecosystems within the National GHG Inventory by 2025. The NDC also highlights the role blue carbon ecosystems play in resilience, notably "mangroves, seagrass and saltmarsh ecosystems help to buffer against storm surges, filter water, shelter and nourish a wealth of biodiversity."

6. Way forward:

As Executive Secretary Simon Stiell highlighted, the 2025 deadline for updated NDCs is a crucial opportunity for countries to include ocean commitments in their NDCs, and to adopt the calls of the Second Because of the Ocean Declaration. Additionally, in 2025, the UN Ocean Conference will be held in Nice, France, and will focus on linkages between the ocean, the climate and biodiversity. It also hopes to demonstrate the role of international conventions, such as the UNFCCC, in mainstreaming a holistic approach to addressing the ocean. Thus, 2025 will give a strong indication of how committed countries are to addressing the question of oceans and climate change.