

OCEANS

Regional Seas

(1) INTRODUCTION

This was a landmark year for global ocean governance, marked by a series of high-level events, multilateral negotiations, and ambitious commitments aimed at strengthening the protection and sustainable use of the marine environment. The year began with the sixth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-6), which was held in Nairobi on 26 February–1 March. Fifteen resolutions were adopted at UNEA-6, including measures that directly addressed the protection of marine and coastal ecosystems, the management of chemicals and waste, and environmental recovery in conflict-affected areas. For the first time, the Assembly dedicated an entire day to multilateral environmental agreements, reinforcing the role of legal instruments in international environmental governance.

This was followed by the ninth ‘Our Ocean’ Conference (OOC-9), held in Athens on 16–17 April, which reaffirmed the importance of multilateral partnerships in promoting ocean protection. With over 3,500 participants, the conference expanded its scope to include sustainable coastal tourism, eco-friendly shipping, and marine pollution reduction. It also led to the creation of a permanent Secretariat under the World Resources Institute. Notably, OOC-9 promoted the ratification of the Biodiversity beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement, which is considered of critical importance in the race for ocean biodiversity protection.

Also important was the convening of the ‘Immersed in Change’ High-Level Event hosted by Costa Rica on 7–8 June as part of the preparatory process for the third United Nations Ocean Conference to be held in Nice in 2025. The event brought together governments, financial institutions, community leaders, and civil society to promote ocean-based solutions, facilitate matchmaking for marine-coastal initiatives, and reinforce political commitment to ocean sustainability. Concrete outcomes included the mobilization of financial and technical support for projects in the Latin American and Caribbean region, and a resounding call for the rapid ratification and implementation of key legal frameworks, including the BBNJ Agreement and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

On 21 May, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea issued its first advisory opinion on climate change. For the first time, an international tribunal has clarified the legal obligations of states under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to address climate change: specifically, the duty to prevent, reduce, and control marine pollution from greenhouse gas emissions. This opinion sets a precedent that is likely to shape future advisory opinions and policy responses at both global and regional levels.

Throughout the year, attention to the marine environment was also elevated by new scientific reports, such as the *Global Resource Outlook 2024* and the *Global Waste Management Outlook 2024*, both of which highlight the urgent need to shift towards circular and low-impact economies to protect ocean health. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report *Used Heavy-Duty Vehicles and the Environment: A Global View of Used Heavy-Duty Vehicles: Flow, Scale and Regulation* further emphasized the transboundary impacts of marine-related air and water pollution, calling for stronger regulation of polluting sectors. Taken together, these events and initiatives reflect a renewed global consensus on the need to place the ocean at the heart of environmental multilateralism.

(2) ARCTIC

The Arctic Congress Bodø 2024, held on May 29–June 3 in Bodø, Norway, combined three major conferences: the eleventh International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences, the UArctic Congress 2024, and the High North Dialogue 2024. This event facilitated knowledge exchange and discussions on sustainable development in the Arctic, involving researchers, policymakers, students, business representatives, and Indigenous peoples. Key topics included the well-being of Arctic communities, sustainable economic development, climate and environmental challenges, and ocean governance (<<https://arctic-council.org/news/arctic-congress-bodo-2024-a-three-in-one-conference-for-arthropod-experts-and-arctic-ambassadors-alike/>>).

(3) ANTARCTIC

The forty-third Annual Meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources took place in Hobart on 14–25 October. Discussions focused on Antarctic marine conservation and the geopolitical impacts of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Divergent views among member states affected decision-making processes, particularly regarding the establishment of new marine protected areas and krill fishing regulations. Notably, China and Russia opposed the renewal of krill fishing restrictions, raising concerns among conservationists about the potential impact on the Antarctic ecosystem (<<https://meetings.ccamlr.org/en/ccamlr-43>>).

(4) BALTIC SEA

The 2024 Ministerial Meeting on the Baltic Sea Marine Environment was held on 25 April in Riga and hosted by Latvia. The meeting convened high-level representatives from Baltic coastal states and the European Union (EU) to review progress and reinforce commitments to protect the region's marine environment.

A central focus was the presentation of the third holistic assessment by the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission, also known as the Helsinki Commission (HELCOM), and summarized in the *State of the Baltic Sea 2023* report. This assessment evaluates the ecosystem health of the Baltic Sea from 2016–21, providing a scientific foundation to track progress towards the goals of the Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) 2021–30. The Ministerial Meeting used these insights to guide future implementation steps, prioritizing climate resilience, pollution reduction, and biodiversity protection.

The meeting also marked fifty years of regional cooperation, celebrating the anniversary of the 1974 Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area. Under the theme 'Proud Past, Promising Future,' Contracting Parties reaffirmed their

commitment to the HELCOM framework and adopted a Ministerial Declaration outlining a set of strategic actions, including:

- full implementation of the BSAP and achievement of its goals by 2030;
- enhanced efforts to reduce nutrient inputs and reach net input ceilings by 2027, addressing eutrophication;
- development of shared spatial protection goals and a regional framework for marine protected areas by 2028, including a commitment to protect 30 per cent of the Baltic Sea area, with 10 per cent under strict protection;
- adoption of the HELCOM Science Agenda to support evidence-based policy-making; and
- the launch of the fourth Holistic Assessment (HOLAS 4), running from 2024–29.

The geopolitical dimension of the meeting was marked by strong condemnation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, with the EU and eight Baltic Sea states (H9) reaffirming their support for Ukraine's sovereignty. As a consequence, HELCOM meetings involving Russia were suspended (<<https://helcom.fi/helcom-at-work/ministerial-meetings/2024-riga/>>).

(5) EAST ASIAN SEAS

The twenty-sixth Intergovernmental Meeting of the Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA) was held in Siem Reap, Cambodia, on 23–25 October. Key outcomes included the approval of biennial workplans for the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter and Marine and Coastal Ecosystems, endorsement of the report *Towards a Regional Assessment on Marine Litter in the East Asian Seas (Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam)* and adoption of the COBSEA Collaborative Action Framework on Nutrients Management.

Following this, the East Asian Seas (EAS) Congress 2024 took place in Xiamen, China, on 6–8 November, alongside World Ocean Week. The event gathered 855 delegates from twenty countries under the theme 'Blue Synergy for a Shared Future: One Sustainable and Resilient Ocean.'

A highlight was the eighth EAS Ministerial Forum, where partners reaffirmed their commitment to sustainable ocean and coastal governance through the adoption of the Xiamen Ministerial Declaration. Signed initially by seven countries, the Declaration calls for strengthened cooperation across the region and aligns with global sustainability and Blue Economy goals. It sets out ten synergistic actions across four priority areas: effective governance (advancing integrated coastal management through science, innovation, and cross-sector collaboration); healthy and resilient ocean (promoting climate solutions, ecosystem-based disaster risk reduction, and blue carbon strategies); sustainable Blue Economy (mobilizing finance, enhancing monitoring, and integrating climate-smart, ridge-to-reef planning); and healthy people (addressing food security and public health by embedding blue food and marine health into policy frameworks). Conclusions from the plenary and technical sessions echoed the Declaration's priorities, forming a clear continuum from high-level commitments to coordinated regional action (<<https://eascongress2024.pemsea.org/https://www.unep.org/cobsea/news/story/cobsea-igm-26-and-working-group-meetings-successfully-convended-siem-reap-cambodia>>).

(6) SOUTH ASEAN SEAS

The sixteenth meeting of the Governing Council of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme was held in Thimphu, Bhutan, on 24–26 June. Key outcomes

included strengthened alignment between national and regional environmental goals, particularly in the areas of plastic waste management, air pollution reduction, and biodiversity conservation. Member states also emphasized the need to integrate environmental priorities into broader socioeconomic planning. The Council approved new initiatives and reforms to enhance internal governance, transparency, and external partnerships (<http://www.sacep.org/pdf/Reports-GC-SACEP/GC_16_Report.pdf>).

(7) MEDITERRANEAN SEA

The forty-seventh session of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), held in Rome on 4–8 November, produced robust fisheries governance outcomes. One major achievement was the creation of a shared Fisheries Restricted Area in the Otranto Channel, an unprecedented collaboration between EU and non-EU countries (Italy and Albania) to protect vulnerable deep-sea habitats. The session also adopted a long-term harvest strategy for demersal and small pelagic stocks in the Adriatic and expanded conservation measures in both the Mediterranean and Black Seas.

Twelve binding recommendations and five resolutions were adopted, covering topics ranging from red coral and European eel management to new research roadmaps and vessel monitoring standards. The Commission also approved a multi-year budget (2025–7) and restructured its governance bodies to enhance compliance and scientific advice.

The third Steering Committee of the Plan of Action for a Model Mediterranean Sea by 2030 (PAMEx), held virtually in December, focused on enhancing coordination among regional partners to meet high-ambition targets aligned with UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14. PAMEx continues to organize its work around four key pillars: marine and coastal biodiversity, sustainable fisheries, eliminating plastic pollution, and sustainable maritime transport. Greece assumed the annual presidency from France, with renewed focus on scaling up marine protection to achieve the Global Diversity Framework ‘30x30’ target and supporting global negotiations on a legally binding plastic treaty (<<https://www.fao.org/gfcm/statutory-meetings/detail/en/c/1730987/>>; <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/39500/24wg610_02_engonly.pdf>).

(8) BLACK SEA

At the forty-seventh GFCM meeting in Rome, the Black Sea was a focal point for updated and science-based fisheries management. Progress included improved regulation of key species such as turbot, sprat, and Rapa whelk, alongside a total ban on sturgeon fishing in marine waters. The meeting underscored the importance of strengthened subregional cooperation, data sharing, and investment in research capacity to sustain ecological and commercial value in a changing sea (<<https://www.fao.org/gfcm/statutory-meetings/detail/en/c/1730987/>>).

(9) CASPIAN SEA

This year, the Caspian Sea emerged as a geopolitical and ecological hotspot, drawing heightened international attention due to alarming projections about its declining water levels. The region’s vulnerability to climate change was addressed at the twenty-ninth session of the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, where a high-level side event entitled ‘Caspian Sea Water Decline in Light of Climate Change’ brought together government officials, scientists, and multilateral actors to

confront the crisis. Hosted by the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources of Azerbaijan in collaboration with the Interim Secretariat of the Tehran Convention, the event served as a wake-up call for five littoral states: Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan. UNEP presented a detailed scientific report, *Caspian Sea Fluctuations and Climate Change*, which combines satellite data, hydrological modeling, and climate projections to demonstrate a potentially catastrophic 18-meter drop in water levels by the end of the century. This scenario would have dire consequences for coastal infrastructure, regional economies, and the fragile biodiversity of the world's largest enclosed inland water body. The report emphasizes the compounding impacts of poor water management, pollution, and fragmented governance. The event concluded with the adoption of a Ministerial Declaration, which reaffirmed the littoral states' commitment to enhanced cooperation, research collaboration, and the pursuit of adaptive strategies. The Declaration recognized the Caspian crisis as a transboundary environmental emergency, requiring not only regional solidarity but also international technical and financial support.

On 6–7 May, the seventh High-Level Working Group Meeting on the Caspian Sea was convened in Baku, focusing primarily on legal and political dimensions of maritime boundaries and direct access lines. Although not explicitly linked to the climate crisis, this forum reflected a broader momentum towards renewed dialogue and cooperation among the five coastal states (<<https://tehranconvention.org/en/news/cop29-leaders-unite-address-caspian-sea-water-level-crisis> <https://caspianpost.com/politics/cop29-holds-meeting-on-caspian-sea-water-decline-amid-climate-change-concerns>>; <<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2024/05/08/7th-meeting-of-the-high-level-working-group-on-the-caspian-sea-convened-in-baku/>>>).

(10) CARIBBEAN REGION

On 31 March–4 April, Santiago, Chile hosted the eighth meeting of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development—a pivotal regional platform that underscored the urgency of collective action in pursuit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With over one thousand participants, including more than 160 government representatives from twenty-four nations, the Forum provided a robust opportunity to assess progress and recalibrate strategies in light of ongoing regional disparities. Central to the discussions was the sobering data presented by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, which revealed that only 23 per cent of the region's SDG targets are on track.

A major outcome of the Forum was the adoption of a 142-point document encompassing detailed conclusions and recommendations. This text reaffirms a collective commitment to leave no one behind—particularly the most vulnerable populations, who continue to face entrenched inequalities, even in economically growing nations. The discussions also underscored the importance of multistakeholder cooperation, emphasizing the role of local governments, civil society, the private sector, international financial institutions, and academic institutions in fostering inclusive governance (<<https://foroalc2030.cepal.org/2025/en/documents/intergovernmentally-agreed-conclusions-and-recommendations-eighth-meeting-forum-countries>>>).

(11) NORTH-EAST ATLANTIC

In June, the Contracting Parties to the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR Convention) met in Berlin to advance

collective marine governance in the North-East Atlantic. This regional meeting marked a significant step in operationalizing the commitments set out in OSPAR's *Quality Status Report 2023*, which highlights ongoing challenges in marine litter, habitat degradation, and biodiversity loss.

The Berlin meeting saw the adoption of a comprehensive set of new measures. Among the most notable was the establishment of a regional target to reduce beach litter by 70 per cent by 2030. This target complements existing efforts aimed at single-use plastic reduction and specifically addresses maritime-related litter, with phased targets including a 50 per cent reduction by 2025 and a 75 per cent reduction by 2030. In line with this objective, new regulations targeting the fishing industry's contribution to marine litter were introduced. Measures were agreed upon to improve the disposal of expanded polystyrene and extruded polystyrene fish boxes, which often escape port waste management systems and contribute to long-term plastic pollution.

Another major decision was the adoption of a Regional Action Plan for Marine Birds. This followed troubling findings in the *Quality Status Report 2023* indicating continued declines in bird populations due to climate change and habitat loss. The RAP outlines a multi-tiered approach involving both conservation and habitat restoration initiatives, alongside measures to reduce incidental bycatch across all fishing gears.

In parallel, the Commission endorsed best practice guidelines in a range of areas, including seagrass restoration, sediment monitoring for micro litter, and sustainability training for fishers. Particularly innovative was the agreement on a new Harmonised Comparative Assessment Methodology for offshore decommissioning, providing legal clarity and standardization for the removal of disused marine infrastructure.

These environmental commitments were complemented by initiatives in the field of marine disaster risk reduction. The nineteenth session of the Intergovernmental Coordination Group for the Tsunami Early Warning and Mitigation System in the North-Eastern Atlantic, the Mediterranean and Connected Seas, held in Paris on 27–9 November, advanced the region's preparedness objectives. Six new communities were granted recognition under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization–Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Tsunami Ready Programme, with the aim of achieving full preparedness in twenty-five communities by 2026.

Fisheries governance, however, remains an area of considerable friction. The forty-third annual meeting of the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), held in November, highlighted critical disputes regarding enforcement and compliance. For the first time in its history, the NEAFC failed to publish a compliance report. The EU voiced strong objections, particularly in response to persistent infringements by Russian vessels engaging in bottom fishing beyond permitted zones. Despite these challenges, the NEAFC did adopt scientifically advised catch limits for key pelagic species and agreed to an extended moratorium on redfish fishing in the Irminger Sea (<<https://www.ospar.org/news/actions-agreed-to-further-protect-and-serve-the-north-east-atlantic> <https://www.ioc.unesco.org/en/articles/north-east-atlantic-mediterranean-and-connected-seas-neam-region-committed-achieving-25-tsunami>>).

(12) WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN

On 26–8 June, the city of Swakopmund in Namibia became the epicenter of regional marine policy dialogue in Africa, hosting a high-level meeting convened by the Nairobi Convention and the African Union Commission's Sustainable Environment and Blue Economy Directorate. The objective of this gathering was to accelerate progress towards the

harmonization of the Western Indian Ocean's (WIO) Regional Ocean Governance Strategy (ROGS) with the African Union's broader continental strategy. This meeting brought together diverse stakeholders from African Regional Seas Conventions, the UNEP Regional Office for Africa, and key policy-makers, including national focal points and the WIO ROGS Task Force. It emphasized the need for high-level political mandates, sustained financial support, and cross-sectoral coordination to foster coherence in regional marine governance. The resulting deliberations focused on the alignment of institutional mandates, legal frameworks, and developmental priorities to craft a cohesive continental approach to sustainable ocean management.

The eleventh meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Nairobi Convention was held on 20–2 August in Antananarivo, Madagascar, and concluded with the adoption of a ten-year Integrated Regional Programme (2025–35) and a four-year Programme of Work (2025–8). The strategic framework includes provisions for environmental monitoring, financing mechanisms, and the operationalization of the science-policy interface. Parties urged the ratification and implementation of the BBNJ Agreement and aligned their goals with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework—notably, the '30x30' target. Efforts to combat plastic pollution were intensified, including through participation in global treaty negotiations and the update of the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter. Additionally, the conference adopted an Information Management Strategy, called for the finalization of regional action plans on seagrasses and mangroves, and supported blue carbon initiatives under the WIO Climate Change Strategy. The region also committed to finalizing protocols on marine protected areas, source-to-sea pollution control, and marine spatial planning tools such as the WIO Symphony (<https://www.nairobiconvention.org/clearinghouse/RegionalOceanGovernanceMeeting_SwakopmundNamibia_June2024>; <https://nairobiconvention.org/clearinghouse/sites/default/files/UNEP_EAF_COP11_5_Final_Adopted_Decisions_COP11_22Aug2024.pdf>).

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