

OCEANS

Regional Seas

(1) INTRODUCTION

Ocean governance has entered a more structured and implementation phase, marked by the consolidation of international commitments and their translation into regional and sectoral action. Across global and regional fora, the focus has increasingly shifted from agenda setting to operationalizing legal and policy frameworks addressing marine biodiversity, climate change, pollution, and the sustainable use of resources. A key milestone is the tenth Our Ocean Conference, held in Busan, Korea, on 28–30 April (<<https://www.ouroceanconference.org/conferences/busan-2025/>>). The conference focused on ‘Digital Oceans,’ underscoring the important relevance of data governance, monitoring systems, and technological innovation in supporting compliance, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making in ocean-related policies. Among the most significant outcomes, the host country’s Blue Action Plan outlined a comprehensive set of measures combining climate, fisheries, pollution, and blue economy priorities. These included targeted actions to address ocean-based climate impacts through adaptation strategies and the enhancement of nature-based carbon sinks, alongside substantial investments to strengthen fisheries governance, improve traceability, and support coastal communities. Additional commitments focused on scaling up a sustainable blue economy through the deployment of data-driven management tools, digital technologies, and the expansion of marine renewable energy and ecotourism. Notably, the conference also advanced policy responses to marine pollution, with new initiatives promoting a full life-cycle approach to marine litter, including waste reduction, improved management systems, and measures such as fishing gear recycling. Taken together, these commitments reflect an increasing integration of environmental, economic, and technological dimensions within ocean governance as well as a growing emphasis on implementation, accountability, and measurable outcomes.

This trajectory was further reinforced at the twenty-fourth Global Meeting of the Regional Seas Programme, convened on 11 June in Nice, France, in conjunction with the 2025 United Nations Ocean Conference (<<https://www.unep.org/events/conference/twenty-fourth-global-meeting-regional-seas-programme>>; <<https://unocn2025.org/en/>>). The meeting resulted in the adoption of the Regional Seas Strategic Directions 2026–29, providing a coordinated framework to guide the implementation of global commitments at the regional level. Particular attention was given to aligning regional action with key international instruments and targets, including the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework as well as the emerging regime under the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas

beyond National Jurisdiction. Taken together, these developments reflect an evolving legal and institutional landscape in which regional seas frameworks are increasingly positioned as operational hubs for the implementation of international ocean governance.

(2) ARCTIC

This year, the Arctic emerged as a key arena for advancing sustainable ocean governance, scientific cooperation, and inclusive policy-making. The year opened in Tromsø, Norway, with the Arctic Youth Conference (24–26 January), the first event of its kind, placing young leaders at the centre of Arctic decision-making. The initiative highlighted the growing importance of youth engagement and intergenerational dialogue in shaping future ocean and climate policies (<<https://arctic-council.org/news/inaugural-arctic-youth-conference-a-new-space-for-the-young-arctic-leaders-of-today/>>).

Immediately following this, also in Tromsø, Arctic Frontiers 2025, which was held on 27–30 January, focused on resilience across environmental, economic, and social systems (<<https://www.norden.org/en/arctic-frontiers-2025-0>>). A key theme was ecosystem-based management, which is seen as essential for balancing marine resource use with biodiversity protection. Discussions also emphasized the strategic importance of Nordic cooperation and the expanding role of multi-use marine spaces in sustainable ocean development.

Scientific priorities took centre stage during the Arctic Science Summit Week 2025 and the fourth International Conference for Arctic Research Planning (20–8 March) in Boulder, Colorado (<<https://icarp.iasc.info/engagement/events/19-icarp-iv-summit-arctic-science-summit-week-2025>>). The Summit outlined research directions for the next decade, with a strong focus on climate dynamics, ecosystem responses, and the resilience of Arctic marine and coastal systems within the global environment.

A significant policy transition occurred on 12 May, when the Arctic Council formally passed its chairship from Norway to Denmark during its fourteenth meeting (<<https://arctic-council.org/news/14th-meeting-of-the-arctic-council/>>). Denmark's 2025–27 program places oceans at the heart of its agenda, prioritizing marine conservation, spatial planning, pollution reduction—including marine litter and microplastics—and safer Arctic shipping. The program also promotes the blue bio-economy and reinforces the role of Indigenous knowledge in ocean governance. During the meeting, the Arctic States and Permanent Participants issued a joint statement (the Romssa-Tromsø Statement) reaffirming their commitment to maintaining peace, stability, and cooperation in the Arctic and acknowledging the role of the Arctic Council as the pre-eminent forum for circumpolar cooperation for nearly three decades. It further recognizes the individual and collective rights of Arctic Indigenous peoples, their vital role in the Arctic Council, and their special relation to the Arctic.

Later in the year, in Reykjavík, the Arctic Circle Assembly 2025, which was held on 16–18 October, brought together policy-makers, scientists, and industry leaders to address the intersection of geopolitics, climate change, and ocean systems. Key discussions focused on sea-ice decline, sustainable shipping, energy security, and innovation in marine sectors such as aquaculture (<<https://www.arcticcircle.org/assemblies/2025-arctic-circle-assembly>>).

(3) ANTARCTIC

The forty-fourth Annual Meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, held in Hobart, Australia, in October and November, concluded with limited concrete progress on long-standing marine protection goals. Despite this, the meeting underscored a shifting balance towards stronger protection of Antarctic marine

ecosystems, even as geopolitical and economic pressures persist (<<https://www.asoc.org/news/ccamlr-2025-closing-press-release/e-cc-44-rep.pdf>>). At the heart of the debate were two closely linked issues: the creation of a marine protected area (MPA) in the Antarctic Peninsula and the regulation of krill fisheries operating in the same region. A bloc including Chile, Argentina, the European Union (EU) and its member states, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea successfully resisted proposals to expand krill fishing in ecologically sensitive areas. The proposed Antarctic Peninsula MPA—championed by Chile and Argentina and backed by over 150 scientific studies—remains one of four major protection plans still awaiting adoption. If approved alongside existing measures, these initiatives would protect up to 26 per cent of the Southern Ocean, contributing significantly to global ocean conservation targets. One tangible outcome was an agreement to strengthen transparency in fishing operations through new rules on trans-shipment at sea. All vessels involved will now be publicly listed.

(4) BALTIC SEA

The Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission Stakeholder Conference, held online on 31 March, highlighted the persistent threat of hazardous substances entering the Baltic Sea. Despite progress in banning legacy chemicals, participants stressed the need for a more integrated 'One Baltic' approach to reduce pollution and achieve the Baltic Sea Action Plan goal of a sea free from harmful contaminants. Regional cooperation was reinforced during the Council of the Baltic Sea States Ministerial Session, held on 15–16 May in Estonia (<<https://cbss.org/event/ministerial-session-2025/>>). Discussions focused on resilience and sustainability, including the development of green shipping corridors and a new initiative to create a digital twin of the Baltic Sea, using real-time data to better understand and manage marine conditions. Later in the year, the third Our Baltic Conference took place on 30 September, bringing together policy-makers and stakeholders to launch a renewed, integrated strategy addressing pollution, ecosystem management, maritime security, and support for coastal communities.

(5) EAST ASIAN SEAS

The East Asian Seas region strengthened its approach to ocean governance through a series of initiatives addressing climate resilience, pollution, and data management and transparency. The year began with the thirty-third Executive Committee Meeting of Partners in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia (PEMSEA), held in Busan, Korea, and concluded on 28 April (<<https://pemsea.org/index.php/resources/news/next-steps-2030-pemsea-maps-future-partnerships-33rd-executive-committee-meeting>>). The meeting focused on extending the Sustainable Development Strategy for the Seas of East Asia to 2030, aligning regional ocean governance with global frameworks such as the UN Decade of Ocean Science and the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. A key development was progress on the regional Blue Carbon Program, which aims to establish standardized methods to measure and certify carbon stored in coastal ecosystems, while also exploring new market mechanisms such as nature-based credits.

Momentum continued at the seventeenth East Asian Seas Partnership Council Meeting, held on 22–3 July in Manila, Philippines (<<https://pemsea.org/index.php/resources/news/17th-eas-partnership-council-meeting-convenes-manila>>). Governments and partners reviewed progress on sustainable ocean governance and emphasized the need to better integrate tools such as integrated coastal management and marine spatial planning.

A key step towards long-term implementation was taken during the thirty-fourth Expanded PEMSEA Executive Committee Meeting, held virtually on 21 October

(<<https://pemsea.org/index.php/resources/news/step-forward-toward-2030-pemsea-holds-34th-expanded-executive-committee-meeting>>). Participants approved the Regional Blue Carbon Accounting Protocol, a major milestone designed to harmonize how carbon stocks and emissions are measured across coastal ecosystems.

Shortly afterwards, global coordination took centre stage at the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Regional Seas Indicators Working Group workshop, held on 4–6 November in Bangkok, Thailand. Bringing together all 18 Regional Seas Programmes, the workshop worked to update a shared set of indicators used to track ecosystem health, pollution, biodiversity, and socio-economic conditions (<<https://www.unep.org/events/workshop/regional-seas-indicators-working-group-meeting>>).

The year concluded with the sixth SEA of Solutions Forum, organized by UNEP and the Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia and held in Bangkok on 16–17 December (<<https://www.unep.org/cobsea/events/conference/sea-solutions-2025>>). Focused on plastics pollution, the forum highlighted the importance of knowledge-sharing platforms and regional cooperation, while stressing that effective solutions must combine technological innovation with behavioural change.

(6) MEDITERRANEAN SEA

This year, the Mediterranean and Black Sea countries reinforced regional cooperation on fisheries management, sustainability, and climate resilience. The year's main milestone came in November, when the forty-eighth session of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean—part of the United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization—was held in Málaga, Spain. Bringing together 22 countries and the EU, the meeting resulted in the adoption of 12 measures aimed at strengthening sustainable fisheries and aquaculture across the region. A central outcome was the reinforcement of compliance mechanisms to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. New tools to improve data reporting and monitoring systems were introduced, alongside stricter requirements for vessel traceability, including mandatory identification numbers for larger vessels operating beyond national waters. These steps are expected to enhance transparency and ensure more effective enforcement of regional rules.

On fisheries management, the Commission adopted a landmark harvest control rule for black-spot seabream in the Alboran Sea, marking a significant step towards rebuilding depleted stocks. In the Adriatic Sea, measures were introduced to further reduce fishing pressure on vulnerable species such as Norway lobster, while supporting sustainable fisheries like common sole.

Climate change also entered the policy agenda more prominently, with the creation of a new regional network of experts to integrate climate considerations into fisheries science and management. In parallel, sustainable aquaculture emerged as a key priority. The Commission endorsed stronger environmental monitoring and introduced initiatives to develop aquaculture zones dedicated to ecosystem restoration, reflecting a shift towards more ecosystem-based practices. These efforts build on a broader regional vision for sustainable aquaculture under the forthcoming MedFish4Ever Declaration (<<https://thefishsite.com/articles/gfcm-adopts-12-measures-to-strengthen-sustainable-fisheries-and-aquaculture>>).

(7) BLACK SEA

A major outcome in the region was the adoption of the EU Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region on 28 May, providing a political vision for the region based on security, cooperation, and connectivity following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Black Sea Day was celebrated on 31 October and has seen the realization of a series of regional awareness campaign activities promoting the need for global efforts to preserve Black Sea marine resources. These were carried out as part of the BlackSea4Fish capacity development initiatives and supported by the Fish Ecosystem-Base Management for the Black Sea project. Activities were conducted in the context of the CetaByM, which is a sturgeon pilot initiative as well as the piked dogfish research programme, aiming to engage local communities and stakeholders in the sustainable use of Black Sea resources. A key focus of these efforts is the recovery of the Black Sea sturgeon species from their critical status and complex life cycles through the launch of coordinated actions to support their restoration (<https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-strategy-secure-prosperous-and-resilient-black-sea-region-2025-05-28_en>).

In the framework of the forty-eighth session of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean in November, progress was also noted in the Black Sea, where improved scientific advice and management plans, particularly for turbo, are beginning to yield results. Finally, the session marked a political milestone with Ukraine joining as a full member, reinforcing cooperation in the Black Sea (<<https://www.fao.org/gfcm/news/detail/en/c/1749071/>>).

(8) CASPIAN SEA

Representatives from the Caspian coastal states gathered in Turkmenistan on 15 September for the eleventh meeting of the High-Level Working Group on the Caspian Sea. The meeting focused on technical, legal, and environmental issues regarding the Caspian Sea. The group discussed, among other issues, methodologies to define the direct baselines of the Caspian Sea. Additionally, delegations addressed the question of the Caspian Sea's shallowing, and recognized the matter as a common concern, with the necessity of creating a working group on this matter (<<https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/news/details/1070690?lang=en>>).

(9) CARIBBEAN REGION

On 16 October, the eighteenth Meeting of the Contracting Parties (COP-18) to the Convention for the Protection and Development of the Marine Environment of the Wider Caribbean Region (Cartagena Convention) delivered a number of key decisions aimed at supporting ocean governance and environmental protection in the Caribbean (<<https://www.unep.org/cep/news/editorial/latin-america-and-caribbean-leaders-adopt-landmark-action-plan-blue-economy>>). Leaders adopted an action plan for Blue Economy resilience in the region, marking the realization of three inter-governmental meetings under the Cartagena Convention, including the Oil Spills Protocol, the Land-Based Sources of Marine Pollution Protocol, and the Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife Protocol. Delegates were able to proceed with the Regional Action Plan for Marine Litter, reaffirming their commitments to reduce plastic pollution through a circular economy approach and the necessity to develop new guidelines and financing mechanisms to reduce plastic leakage. Additionally, the COP adopted measures to control land-based pollution, including untreated wastewater and agricultural nutrient runoff. These actions are crucial to improving the quality of water and to preserving vulnerable coral reef ecosystems. Under the Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife Protocol, states reiterated their commitment to biodiversity conservation. The COP approved the expansion of the protected areas, including the addition of Parke Marino Aruba, thus safeguarding critical habitats such as coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass beds. The discussions also dealt with the growing incidence of sargassum influxes; a regional action plan and

management guidelines have been adopted to address these concerns. There was additional discussion about the need for stronger cooperation in ocean governance and encouraged wider ratification of the Cartagena Convention and its protocols (<<https://www.unep.org/cep/news/editorial/latin-america-and-caribbean-leaders-adopt-landmark-action-plan-blue-economy>>).

(10) NORTHWEST PACIFIC

At the fifteenth session of the Sub-Commission for the Western Pacific (WESTPAC), which was held on 11–13 March in Tokyo, Japan, WESTPAC launched the initiative ‘Collaborations for the Northwest Pacific Marine Ecosystem Prediction’ (COSMEC). It aims to address the urgent need to better understand and predict changes to the marine ecosystem in the Northwest Pacific. In September, COSMEC was formally recognized as a UN Ocean Decade Programme. It will contribute to achieving UN and regional societal goals related to the marine ecosystem and promote regional collaborative efforts among WESTPAC countries, thus contributing to UN ecological sustainable development and resilient marine communities (<<https://ioc-westpac.org/decade-actions/cosmec/#>>).

The annual meeting for the North Pacific Marine Science Organization, held on 8–14 November in Yokohama, Japan, focused on the impacts of climate change and human activities on marine ecosystems, with an emphasis on major oceanic transformations resulting from increasing ocean temperature variability (for example, frequency and magnitude of marine heatwaves) and the widespread impacts these changes are having on ecosystems, fisheries, and coastal communities (<<https://dev.meetings.pices.int/publications/Briefings/PICES-2025-Briefing.pdf>>). Parties addressed the urgent necessity to update traditional scientific methods and develop more timely responses to rapidly changing environmental conditions affecting the region. Tools such as long-term observational datasets, ecosystem modelling, environmental DNA (eDNA), and plankton recorder surveys are enabling the identification of shifts in species repartition, identification of harmful algal blooms, and providing early warnings of ecological stress. Furthermore, discussion also focused on the importance of Indigenous knowledge to ocean science, strengthening scientific understanding while respecting cultural perspectives (<<https://events.unoceanprediction.org/pices-2025>>).

(11) NORTH-EAST ATLANTIC

The Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic’s (OSPAR Convention) ministerial meeting took place in Vigo, Spain, on 26 June to assess the progress of the North-East Atlantic Environmental Strategy (NEAES). The meeting was also used to set priorities for the next five years and establish new actions for implementation. Some of the key points made by OSPAR were the necessity of implementing and funding NEAES 2030 and making sure it remains fit for purpose. The OSPAR Maritime Area was expanded to include Macaronesia, adding more than 2.5 million square kilometres of ocean. New shipping pollution reduction measures were adopted, including guidelines for scrubber discharge water, which is in line with global standards as set by the International Maritime Organization. A regional action plan was adopted to address underwater noise associated with shipping, construction, geophysical surveys, and marine infrastructure.

OSPAR also began implementing phase one of its Regional Action Plan for Benthic Habitats by addressing the impact of offshore wind energy and bottom-contact fishing. Under the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter, OSPAR produced an update regarding the management of marine litter, including new sets of best practice guidelines and progress

report. The identification of other effective area-based conservation measures was emphasized as essential for achieving the target of 30 per cent marine protection by 2030.

The Vigo Ministerial Declaration was adopted during the ministerial meeting, establishing the commitment of the OSPAR minister and the EU commissioners to the preservation and sustainable use of the North-East Atlantic Ocean. The Declaration underlines OSPAR's engagement to science-based, collaborative, and adaptive ocean governance. It provides an agenda to protect marine ecosystems, safeguard human livelihoods, and enhance resilience to climate change in the North-East Atlantic (<<https://www.ospar.org/ministerial25>>).

(12) WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN

The chairs of the Western Indian Ocean Marine Protected Areas Management Network met on 28 September in Mombasa, Kenya, for the annual Regional Chairs Meeting. The meeting provided an opportunity for leaders from Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros, South Africa, and La Réunion to assess the progress done so far and set the network's agenda for the next two years (2025–26). Each participating national chair reported on what had occurred since the last annual chairs meeting, which included joint monitoring and ranger training in Kenya; legal recognition of locally managed marine areas in Madagascar; enforcement and assessment of the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool in South Africa; and new blue financing partnerships in Mozambique. The meeting addressed issues such as strengthening management effectiveness and technical capacity in MPAs and locally managed marine areas; gender inclusivity; youth engagement; improving legal frameworks for locally managed areas and other effective area-based conservation measures; and increasing peer learning and certification through the Western Indian Ocean Certification of Marine Protected Areas Professionals. Participants stressed that regional coordination is essential for achieving the '30x30' targets under the Global Biodiversity Framework (<<https://blog.wiomsa.net/2025/10/21/wiompan-chairs-meeting-2025-strengthening-the-ties-that-bind-the-western-indian-oceans-marine-practitioners/>>).

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