REVIEW OF SDG 14: LIFE BELOW WATER

Key Messages

The convening of the second UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon, June 2022, and the HLPF review of global progress on SDG 14 following shortly after, provide an important opportunity for the international community to focus attention on the urgent action needed to deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. While progress has been made toward the achievement of some targets of Goal 14, action is not advancing at the speed or scale needed to deliver ocean health for the benefit of people and nature. Deadlines for four of the targets of SDG 14 passed in 2020 without being met.

At HLPF 2022, for the full and effective implementation of SDG 14 and its related targets, WWF calls upon member states and institutions to endorse the UN Ocean Conference Call for Action, as agreed in Lisbon, and reaffirm and implement the commitments made at the first and second UN Ocean Conference to deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDG14 in particular. We also urge member states to:

- Take urgent action to deliver all SDG 14 targets as soon as possible, including the four targets under the Goal with a 2020 deadline.
- Secure a transformative, comprehensive and measurable post-2020 global biodiversity framework under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), including protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030, and sustainably managing ocean ecosystems, and agree to update the biodiversity-related SDG targets with a 2020 timeline (related targets 17.1 - 17.3, 17.7, 17.9, 17.14).
- Take integrated action under SDG 13 and SDG 14, and take forward the outcomes of the Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue held during UNFCCC SBSTA56 in June 2022, in Bonn (related targets 1.5, 8.4, 8.9, 10.b, 12.b, 12.c, 13.1, 13.2, 13.a, 13.b, 17.14).
- Ensure the rights of Indigenous People and local communities are recognized and secured through the delivery of SDG 14 and that their right to free, prior and informed consent is respected and they are equitably benefiting from the sustainable use of the ocean (related targets 1.5, 2.1, 2.3, 3, 5.a, 8.9, 10.1 - 10.3, 12.b, 16.7, 16.b).
- Conclude negotiations of an ambitious new global legally binding treaty on marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ), including a process for the designation of high seas marine protected areas, which will be critical for the delivery of SDG14 (related targets 13.a, 16.3, 17.14).
- Conclude WTO negotiations to successfully end harmful subsidies that fund the vicious cycle of overfishing, threatening ocean health, coastal communities and livelihoods as committed under SDG 14.6 (related targets 1.4, 2.3, 10.1, 12.2, 12.6, 12.c, 16.3, 17.14).
- Adopt a global moratorium on deep-sea mining until it can be clearly demonstrated that such activities will not cause adverse impacts on biodiversity and the marine environment (related targets 8.4, 12.2, 13.1, 13.3, 16.3, 17.14).
● Reform the processes of the International Seabed Authority (ISA) so that any decisions taken by the ISA are done transparently, and for the benefit of humankind as a whole, both present and future generations (related targets 8.4, 16.3, 16.6, 17.14).

● Incentivize public and private sector investment to advance the delivery of SDG 14 and the application of nature-based solutions in coastal and marine areas. Adopt and implement the Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Principles, alongside its guidance, to assure an equitable and sustainable blue economy (related targets 8.4, 12.2, 12.6, 13.a, 17.2, 17.3, 17.4, 17.14).

● Deliver on the UNEA-5 resolutions to end plastic pollution and support equitable nature-based solutions: develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution and promote the use of equitable nature-based solutions for the achievement of the SDG 14 targets (related targets 1.5, 11.6, 12.1, 12.4 - 12.6, 12.8, 12.a, 12.c, 13.1, 13.2, 13.a, 16.3, 17.14).


Background

Oceans and Sustainable Development

A healthy and resilient ocean is humanity’s essential ally as we address our combined climate, biodiversity and pollution crisis. Healthy oceans and coasts are also vital for people to thrive. They provide food for more than 3 billion people, produce roughly half the oxygen that we breathe and absorb approximately a quarter of our carbon dioxide emissions. Oceans are also a major contributor to the global economy, but their asset base is being rapidly eroded. The threats to healthy oceans are complex and interlinked. Solutions must be based upon holistic thinking that includes natural, social and economic needs, and respect and recognize Indigenous Peoples’ and local communities’ (IPLCs) knowledge in managing marine resources.

The second UN Ocean conference, the theme of which is: ‘Scaling up Ocean Action Based on Science and Innovation for the Implementation of Goal 14: Stocktaking, Partnerships and Solutions, provides an important opportunity to ‘propel science-based innovative solutions aimed at starting a new chapter of global ocean action’. The outcomes of the UN Ocean Conference are expected to mobilize support and accelerate action to secure ocean health and achieve a nature-climate-people-positive future, and should be welcomed and endorsed by member states with their renewed commitment to take the actions necessary to support the implementation of SDG 14.

Delivering on ocean health will not only deliver on SDG 14, but on sustainable development as a whole and several SDGs. The below sections outline some of these key linkages and opportunities.

Ocean Economy

Related targets: 1.1, 2.3, 2.b, 3, 5, 8.4, 8.9, 10, 12.2, 12.b, 13, 15.5, 17

The sustainable, inclusive and equitable management of ocean and coastal ecosystems has enormous potential to create both major economic gains for coastal communities, as well as significant
environmental and climate benefits.

The case for a sustainable ocean economy is clear: total goods and services from the ocean amount to US$2.5 trillion per year in the form of fishing, transportation, energy, tourism and more (Hoegh-Guldberg et al, 2015). Healthy ocean ecosystems play a fundamental role in protecting marine biodiversity and providing habitats that underpin these activities. It is estimated that more than 3 billion people rely on the ocean for their livelihoods, with the vast majority in developing countries, and that 500 million people depend on coral reefs for their daily food, income and other needs (Hoegh-Guldberg et al, 2019). Small-scale fisheries account for about 90% of primary marine fisheries employment, highlighting how SDG 14 is connected to other SDGs, in particular SDGs 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, 13 and 17. These issues highlight the scale and significance of the ocean to society, particularly in supporting low-income coastal communities.

Two-thirds of the base economic value of oceans is produced by assets that rely on healthy ocean conditions. However many aspects of current ocean activities and resource use are undermining ocean health. The world’s fish stocks are under considerable pressure, and continue to decline (FAO, 2021a) with 34.2% of stocks overfished at biologically unsustainable levels (FAO, 2020a). Harmful subsidies to the fishing sector and the widespread practice of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing are some of the drivers of overfishing. The result is lost economic benefits of approximately $83 billion a year (World Bank, 2017).

The opportunity exists, therefore, through better management and protection of critical ocean resources and biodiversity, to secure the long-term benefits from a healthy ocean economy. Investing $2.8 trillion today in just four ocean-based solutions – offshore wind production, sustainable ocean-based food production, decarbonisation of international shipping, and conservation and restoration of mangroves – could yield an estimated net benefit of $15.5 trillion by 2050, a benefit–cost ratio of more than 5:1 (Konar and Ding, 2020).

Investing in the recovery, protection and resilience of our ocean and its dependent societies should be considered essential to secure national economies, advance ocean-related mitigation and adaptation solutions and support the delivery of the Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Investors, insurers, banks, public sector finance institutions and governments need to redirect finance toward development in accordance with the Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Principles. Supporting the adoption, implementation and mainstreaming of the Sustainable Blue Economy Finance Principles, alongside its guidance, is needed as a guiding framework to assure an equitable and sustainable blue economy, protect and restore marine and coastal ecosystems and build the resilience of vulnerable coastal communities.

**Food Security**

*Related targets: 2.2, 2.3, 11.6, 12.1, 12.5, 16.7.*

More than 3.1 billion people obtain almost 20% of their animal protein from fish, and the majority of the planet’s fish comes from the ocean (FAO, 2016). Productive fisheries, however, rely on healthy ecosystems and fish stocks continue to decline (FAO, 2021a). Sustainably fished stocks decreased to 65.8% in 2017 (59.6% is maximally sustainably fished and 6.2% underfished) while 34.2% of stocks are fished at biologically unsustainable levels (FAO, 2020a). Overfishing leads to an annual loss of
$88.9 billion in net benefits (UN, 2021b).

Overfishing, destructive fishing practices, habitat destruction and other pressures threaten the long-term security of this important global food supply. Improving the management of fisheries resources and related habitats through effective management tools that are culturally and socially acceptable, and economically relevant, the long-term benefits of this important protein source can be conserved. In particular, community co-management approaches such as locally managed marine areas (LMMAs), are vital and effective tools to achieve better management, including higher voluntary compliance, both within and outside protected areas, with consequent benefits to food security and livelihood provision.

**Climate Resilient and Carbon Neutral Economy**

*Related targets: 1.5, 6.6, 7.1, 7.2, 9.4, 11.b, 11.b, 13.1, 13.2, 13.3, 13.b*

A healthy and resilient ocean is critical to address our combined climate, biodiversity and pollution crisis, and essential as we build our climate mitigation and adaptation toolkit. Governments should support and incentivize public and private sector investment into nature-based solutions in coastal and marine areas, with a focus on protecting the regions and communities that need it most.

Coastal ecosystems such as coral reefs, seagrass, salt marshes and mangroves ecosystems are some of the ocean’s most productive and provide valuable natural infrastructure and ecosystem services including food, disaster reduction and livelihoods, which could enable human development and ocean-based businesses well into the future. Innovative policy solutions and investment are needed to support communities, including IPLCs and the most vulnerable, to protect and restore these ecosystems, stop unsustainable fishing, reduce carbon emissions, pollution of all kinds and damaging development activities, so these critical habitats can better withstand the assaults from climate change. Well-designed and managed marine protected areas are a priority tool for restoring and protecting ocean health and resilience, which is why it is critical to ensure that at least 30% globally of land, inland waters, marine and coastal areas are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures.

Despite the value of healthy oceans, very little financing from all sources supports ocean health. The data shows that SDG 14 is one of the most under-funded. Most biodiversity-related ODA is focused on terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity, with only about 4% addressing marine biodiversity (Financing for Sustainable Development Report, 2022). When it comes to private sources of finance, a similar picture emerges. SDG 14 received only 1% of total impact finance in 2020 (Blue Marine Foundation, 2021). As such, current financial resources available fall far short of what is needed. This challenge also extends to climate finance, which still falls far short of what is needed to keep global warming within 1.5°C — and only a tiny fraction of this goes to biodiversity and nature-positive ocean-based solutions. Just 3% of climate finance is finding its way into nature, with ocean resilience being the least invested in (Financing the Transition to a Sustainable Ocean Economy, 2020). In particular, to support nature-based adaptation investment and strengthen resilience, adaptation and disaster protection in least developed countries and small island developing states and facilitate the transition to low-carbon economies.
Ocean and Health

Related targets: 2.4, 3.9, 6.3, 6.a, 11.6, 12.1, 12.4, 12.5, 12.8, 12.a, 12.b

Pollution on land has a huge impact at sea. Approximately 11 million tonnes of plastic leak into the ocean every year, contaminating food webs, damaging ecosystems and impacting human health and livelihoods. Plastic production is expected to quadruple by 2050. This challenge demonstrates the toxic legacy of our unsustainable, linear economy that has profound social, economic, and ecological costs and will outlive all of us for many centuries.

Land-based sources, including agricultural run-off, discharge of nutrients and pesticides and untreated sewage including plastics, account for approximately 80% of global marine pollution (GOC, 2014). The resulting eutrophication has contributed to algal blooms and the creation of large low-oxygen areas devoid of marine life. There are now close to 500 of such dead zones covering more than 245,000 km² globally, equivalent to the surface of the United Kingdom (Erisman et al, 2015).

The dumping of wastes and debris also creates navigational hazards, smothers coral reefs, and injures and kills wildlife: at least 17% of species affected by entanglement and ingestion of marine debris are listed as threatened or near threatened (Gall & Thompson, 2015).

Poor ocean health and the coastal impacts of the climate crisis disproportionately impact some of the world’s most vulnerable communities. Addressing this requires mobilising finance that can reduce poverty, enhance the resilience of at-risk communities, empower women and girls, and protect marine resources from stressors, including climate change, marine pollution, overfishing, destructive fishing, IUU fishing, and habitat loss globally.

Ocean and Human Rights

Related SDG targets: 2.3, 8.8, 8.9, 16.10, 16.b

Ocean health is interwoven with the fulfilment of human rights. Fisheries are a vital source of food security and livelihoods, particularly for many of the world’s poor coastal communities. In some countries, as much as half of the animal protein consumed is fish. However it is these same communities who bear the brunt of ocean degradation, to the detriment to their rights to food, nutrition and health. Reforming fisheries management to ensure sustainable fisheries is therefore crucial to the long-term viability of fish stocks underpinning coastal communities' food security and livelihood options. The overexploitation of world fisheries resources also contributes to the vulnerability of the fisheries sector to transnational organized crime and human rights abuses.

Harmful fisheries subsidies by governments that enhance fleet capacity or fishing effort beyond biologically sustainable levels or contribute to illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing are one of the key drivers of the global overfishing crisis. Governments around the world have to date failed to fulfil their double mandates to curb the public money that supports overfishing and degrades our oceans by 2020 as agreed by World Trade Organization (WTO) members at the 11th Ministerial Conference 2017 and as committed under SDG 14.6.

After two decades of negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO), there is no more time to waste. The WTO must end harmful subsidies that fund the vicious cycle of overfishing, threatening
ocean health, coastal communities and livelihoods.