



2025 UN Ocean Conference (UNOC-3)

ISC written inputs to the Zero Draft of the Political Declaration

This document, developed by the ISC multidisciplinary ocean expert group, outlines key themes and gaps identified in the Zero Draft (ZD) of the third edition of the UN Ocean Conference (UNOC-3) Political Declaration, which is expected to be adopted at the Conference. The comments are aimed at strengthening the declaration by incorporating multidisciplinary insights, calling for a more integrated, science-based, and equity-driven approach to addressing ocean conservation, use and sustainable governance.

At the core of these contributions is the need to recognize the new reality of a disrupted Earth system with accelerating climate change and environmental stressors, resulting in major changes in ocean functioning and health, with significant impacts on people and ecosystems. In this novel context, science plays a central role in understanding the complexities of ocean challenges and developing effective, evidence-based solutions and responses to these issues in close collaboration with relevant actors.

However, in today's context, science is becoming increasingly vulnerable due to growing geopolitical and economic pressures, constraints on scientific freedom, increased mis- and disinformation, and reliance on short-term research funding. These challenges create barriers to international collaboration at a time when coordinated, cross-border efforts are crucial to addressing complex global challenges. To safeguard science as a cornerstone of effective ocean governance and to ensure it continues to advance knowledge, drive innovation and inform effective policy options, the ZD should explicitly recognize its foundational role. It must emphasize the broader importance of science and trust in scientific endeavors, calling for stronger institutional backing, sustained financial support, and reinforced commitments to scientific cooperation across Member States.

Key themes identified in the Zero Draft

The following themes, identified in the ZD, provide a strong foundation for advancing the global ocean agenda and collective action. These points should be further built upon in the final Political Declaration to ensure it is rooted in the latest scientific evidence, informing concrete and effective action.

The themes outlined below are closely aligned with the High-level scientific contributions to the Political Declaration developed by the ISC ocean expert group. We therefore welcome their inclusion:

- **Climate change impacts (Para 2):** Acknowledges climate change impacts on the ocean and calls for urgent action on climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.
- **Inclusive decision-making (Para 2):** Emphasizes the importance of including all people – especially women and girls, people with disability, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and other marginalized groups – in ocean-related decision-making.
- **Capacity-building for SIDS (Paras 7 & 16):** Highlight the necessity to enhance Small Island Developing States (SIDS) adaptive capacities and support initiatives for capacity-building for sustainable ocean planning.
- **Marine pollution (Paras 11, 12 & 23):** Reaffirms the shared commitment to preventing and reducing marine pollution of all kinds. It also acknowledges the multifaceted impacts of plastic pollution – environmental, social, health, and economic – on sustainable development and calls for a strong international instrument to tackle these challenges.
- **Integrated ocean governance (Para 13):** Calls for stronger coastal management and adaptation strategies, with commitments to ecosystem-based management and nature-based solutions.
- **Deep-sea ecosystems and the precautionary principle (Para 14):** Highlights the necessity for further scientific research on deep-sea ecosystems and supports a precautionary approach to their management.
- **Science-policy interface (Para 24):** Stresses the importance of ocean action to be grounded in the best available science and knowledge, including Indigenous and local knowledge. It commits to supporting scientific research, implementing science-based measures, and strengthening the science-policy interface, as well as enhancing coordinated observation and data collection efforts at all levels.

Key themes identified in the Zero Draft

The following gaps have been identified in the ZD. The points outlined are either not addressed in the ZD or are addressed in a way that oversimplifies the complexity of the issue or overlooks critical aspects. Addressing these gaps is crucial to ensuring that the final Political Declaration reflects the latest scientific understanding and leads to actionable and effective commitments to prevent further environmental damage and support efforts towards ocean sustainability.

Our ocean, our future: accelerating action

- **Ocean's key role in sustainable development:** While Para 2 highlights the ocean's role in a sustainable ocean economy, it is crucial to emphasize its central role in advancing the 2030 Agenda as a whole. The ocean plays a key role in preventing further environmental degradation, mitigating the irreversible impacts of climate change and serving as a fundamental pillar of human health and well-being. Strengthening this recognition in the Political Declaration would ensure a more integrated approach to ocean governance.
- **Climate change effects:** The Political Declaration should fully reflect the extent and magnitude of climate change impacts, including changes to the ocean's biogeochemical conditions and the resulting threats to deep-sea ecosystems.
 - The Chapeau's title should be strengthened to reflect the current state of the ocean, including major shifts in ocean functioning and health, which have profound consequences for both people and ecosystems. The phrase "healthy and resilient ocean" in Para 2 does not fully capture the irreversibility of ongoing changes in ocean systems and the reality of a disrupted Earth system, within which ocean conservation, use, and sustainable management must take place.
 - Para 10, which encourages all Member States to "prevent, reduce and control the pollution of the marine environment", should explicitly mention CO₂ emissions, which contribute to ocean acidification and the degradation of marine ecosystems, reinforcing the need for urgent mitigation efforts.

Defending ocean ecosystems

- **Role of the ocean in climate mitigation:** While Para 5 notes the ocean's essential role in mitigating climate change, it should fully reflect the latest scientific research indicating a decline in the ocean's carbon sink capacity, increasing the risk of abrupt, irreversible changes. For instance, from 1994 to 2004, the ocean stored an estimated 29 billion metric tons of anthropogenic carbon, whereas from 2004 to 2014, this uptake decreased to 27 billion metric tons (Müller et al., 2023).
- **Cumulative impacts:** The Political Declaration should emphasize the need for further research on the interactions among the multiple ocean stressors to inform effective strategies and coordinated, science-informed action plans that integrate climate adaptation, pollution control, biodiversity conservation, and the reduction of GHG emissions.

Müller, J.D., Gruber, N., Carter, B., Feely, R., Ishii, M., Lange, N., Lauvset, S.K., Murata, A., Olsen, A., Pérez, F.F., Sabine, C., Tanhua, T., Wanninkhof, R. and Zhu, D. (2023) 'Decadal trends in the oceanic storage of anthropogenic carbon from 1994 to 2014', AGU Advances, 4(3), pp. 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2023AV000875>

- **Global agendas:** While Para 6 addresses the importance of the ocean–climate–biodiversity nexus, it needs to also emphasize the necessity to better integrate existing global agendas (e.g., 2030 Agenda, Paris Agreement, Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework) to promote synergistic implementation, advancing interlinkages and minimizing trade-offs. Moreover, Member States should commit to ensuring the enforcement of international agreements on the sustainable use of marine resources.
- **Micro- and nano-plastics:** The Political Declaration should explicitly address the alarming scale of microplastics and nanoplastics, which are now found in the deepest parts of the ocean in deep sea sediments, and their potential to absorb pollutants, cross biological barriers, and disrupt oceanic and human health.
- **Ocean-related extreme events:** While Para 13 encourages the implementation of the Early Warning for All initiative to ensure vulnerable communities have access to information, it should also acknowledge the intensifying ocean-related extreme events that are driving escalating socioeconomic and environmental costs, especially for vulnerable coastal communities and the need to address their root causes. It should commit to global adaptation strategies and real-time monitoring to reduce socioeconomic risks.
- **Polar oceans and sea level rise:** Para 7 should acknowledge the critical role of polar oceans in sea level rise, particularly due to glacier melting, and other global impacts (e.g., altered weather patterns, ocean circulation changes). The declaration should furthermore urge international action to enhance the monitoring of polar systems, support Indigenous and local communities, and strengthen the enforcement of global agreements to safeguard these regions, such as the Antarctic Treaty.
- **Deep-sea ecosystems:** Para 14 should call for building a shared knowledge base through international collaboration to effectively address knowledge gaps and enable informed decision-making to safeguard deep-sea ecosystems, including assessments of equitable benefit sharing.

Sustainable ocean economies

- **Central role of the ocean:** While Para 18 underscores the central role of the ocean supporting billions of lives, the declaration should go beyond and recognize the intrinsic value of marine life, shifting from a solely human-centric perspective to one that includes the concept of “Earth heritage” and the plural values of nature and nature’s contributions to people.
- **Marine Protected Areas (MPAs):** While Para 17 commits to achieving 30% of MPAs by 2030 and restoring at least 30% of degraded ecosystems (30x30), calling for higher investment in MPAs, it should also emphasize the need for co-designed, co-developed and co-governed MPAs with coastal communities and Indigenous Peoples. Additionally, MPAs must be scientifically designed, climate-adaptive, well-managed, and adequately funded, with a focus on climate-driven shifts and pollution impacts to ensure their long-term effectiveness.
- **Decarbonization of shipping:** Para 20 welcomes the International Maritime Organization’s (IMO) adoption of the 2023 Strategy on Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Ships but should place greater emphasis on the implementation of the strategy.

Accelerating action

- **Knowledge co-production and plurality:** Para 24 should explicitly consider knowledge co-production and transdisciplinary research as essential to defining the “best available science and knowledge”, ensuring equitable representation and participation of Indigenous Peoples and knowledge holders. This includes committing to the co-production of sustainable ocean plans with Indigenous Peoples and traditional knowledge holders [Para 16]. It should also acknowledge the existence of plural understandings of the ocean, emphasizing respect for all knowledge systems.
- **Indigenous Peoples and inclusive governance:**
 - Para 2 should explicitly commit to inclusive and transparent ocean-related decision-making, ensuring full and effective participation and access to justice, including guaranteeing free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
 - The Political Declaration should commit to the fair distribution of ocean benefits (e.g., 30x30, Para 17), requiring identification of both monetary and non-monetary outcomes of ocean development, conservation and management actions.
 - Para 17 should go beyond recognizing the role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities and explicitly define their role in the self-governance, co-management, and stewardship of MPAs and other conservation measures.
- **Scientific capacity-building:** Para 24 should commit to stronger international cooperation, prioritizing Global South leadership and increased Global North support for capacity-building. This includes investing in early-career researchers, technicians, and engineers, expanding access to higher education and research, and promoting regional initiatives led by Global South.
- **Sustainable ocean observing system:** Para 24 should also explicitly address the need to develop a sustainable, fit-for-purpose and cost-effective ocean observing system. This should include the development of governance systems designed around equity and the employment of frugal, low-cost equipment, which is crucial for enabling monitoring by, in, and for low-income countries, supported by stable funding. The declaration should commit to strengthening capacities and tools for monitoring tipping points, like potential changes in ocean currents, as these abrupt changes can dramatically affect marine ecosystems.
- **Resource mobilization:** Para 25 should call for a comprehensive assessment of financial needs required for ocean conservation and sustainable use to identify funding gaps and priority areas, align financial flows and mobilize resources from diverse sources.
- **Ocean literacy:** The Political Declaration should urge the integration of ocean and climate literacy into education and public awareness initiatives, promoting transdisciplinary and inclusive learning approaches.
- **Human rights:** The Political Declaration should commit to protecting human rights, including those of Indigenous Peoples, small-scale fishers, and coastal communities. It should emphasize the need to safeguard marine tenure and access rights of coastal communities, uphold the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable coastal and marine environment and establish effective accountability mechanisms.