SDG 14: Conserve and Sustainably Use the Oceans, Seas and Marine Resources for Sustainable Development.

Introduction

SDG 14, "Life Below Water," aims to conserve and sustainably manage oceans and marine resources. It addresses key challenges such as pollution, overfishing, and ocean acidification to maintain healthy ecosystems and support global economies. Core targets include reducing marine pollution, ending overfishing, protecting marine habitats, and enhancing sustainable ocean-based economic benefits, particularly for developing nations.

Key Components

- **Planetary Health:** Oceans regulate the global climate, provide 50% of the oxygen we breathe, and play a vital role in the water cycle.
- **Human Well-being:** They are a critical food source for billions of people and a major source of economic activity through trade, tourism, and fisheries.
- **Biodiversity:** Oceans are home to vast biodiversity, much of which is still undiscovered and provides essential ecosystem services.

Challenges and Progress

SDG 14 (Life Below Water) is facing a critical state of emergency, with many targets falling behind due to worsening plastic pollution, overfishing (now affecting over one-third of stocks), and rapid ocean warming/acidification. While progress includes increased marine protected areas (covering over 8% of the ocean) and new international agreements on plastic and biodiversity, action lacks the necessary speed and scale.

Challenges

- Pollution: Plastic pollution is increasing, and coastal eutrophication from fertiliser runoff and other sources remains a global trend.
- Overfishing: Over a third of global fish stocks were overfished in 2019, and this trend has worsened in some regions, with unsustainable practices continuing to threaten marine ecosystems.
- Ocean warming and acidification: These are growing threats driven by climate change, leading to coral bleaching and other negative impacts on marine life.
- Data and monitoring gaps: There are challenges in data availability and sharing, hindering effective monitoring and policy-making, particularly in developing countries.

- Uneven progress: Progress is inconsistent across regions, with some areas showing significant setbacks in key targets like coastal protection and clean waters.

Progress

- Marine Protected Areas (MPAs): The percentage of ocean area designated as MPAs is increasing, though it remains far below the 30% target for 2030. Only a small fraction of these are considered to be under high protection.
- Illegal fishing: There has been progress in combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing through increased international cooperation and implementation of agreements.
- Sustainable fishing practices: Efforts to promote sustainable fishing are being made, with a slight improvement in the overall proportion of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels compared to the past, although many are still over-exploited.
- Pollution reduction: Some regions have made progress in regulating single-use plastics and reducing nutrient inputs, leading to some success in controlling algal blooms in certain areas.
- International agreements: There is increasing participation **in international instruments related to ocean protection and sustainable use.**

Targets and Indicators

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	
Targets	**Indicators**
14.1 By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution	14.1.1 (*a*) Index of coastal eutrophication; and (*b*) plastic debris density
14.2 By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans	14.2.1 Number of countries using ecosystem-based approaches to managing marine areas

14.3 Minimise and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels	14.3.1 Average marine acidity (pH) measured at an agreed suite of representative sampling stations
14.4 By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics	14.4.1 Proportion of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels
14.5 By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information	14.5.1 Coverage of protected areas in relation to marine areas
14.6 By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognising that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organisation fisheries subsidies negotiation[3]	14.6.1 Degree of implementation of international instruments aiming to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing
14.7 By 2030, increase the economic benefits to small island developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable	14.7.1 Sustainable fisheries as a proportion of GDP in small island developing States, least developed countries and all countries

management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism	
14.a Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology, taking into account the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology, in order to improve ocean health and to enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular small island developing States and least developed countries	14.a.1 Proportion of total research budget allocated to research in the field of marine technology
14.b Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets	14.b.1 Degree of application of a legal/regulatory/ policy/institutional framework which recognises and protects access rights for small-scale fisheries
14.c Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides the legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources, as recalled in paragraph 158 of "The future we want"	14.c.1 Number of countries making progress in ratifying, accepting and implementing through legal, policy and institutional frameworks, ocean-related instruments that implement international law, as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, for the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans and their resources

SDG 14 and the UNEP Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) 2026–2029

The UNEP Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) focuses on tackling the triple planetary crisis—climate change, nature loss, and pollution—with a strong emphasis on sustainability, including ocean health (SDG 14). It prioritises systemic solutions to protect ecosystems, reduce pollution, and promote circular economies, ensuring a healthy planet through 2030.

Key Aspects of SDG 14 in the 2026-2029 Strategy:

- **Integrated Ecosystem Management:** The strategy promotes living in harmony with nature, specifically targeting the health of oceans alongside land and freshwater systems.
- **Pollution Control:** Action is prioritised against pollution to foster a cleaner marine environment, a key component of SDG 14.
- **Targeted Action:** The strategy aims to implement solutions that enhance the sustainability of marine resources and protect biodiversity.
- **Operational Focus:** UNEP supports member states in developing national policies and legal frameworks for ocean protection as part of the 2030 Agenda.

The strategy emphasises science-driven, country-led solutions and strengthens environmental governance to achieve these goals.

Relevant linkages with other SDGs

SDG 14 (Life Below Water) is intrinsically linked to all Sustainable Development Goals, acting as a crucial enabler for climate action, poverty reduction, and economic growth. Key synergies include protecting marine biodiversity (SDG 15), strengthening climate resilience (SDG 13), fostering sustainable fisheries (SDG 12), and improving coastal livelihoods (SDG 1, 8).

Key Interlinkages with Other SDGs:

- SDG 13 (Climate Action)**:** The ocean is a massive carbon sink. SDG 14 directly supports climate action by reducing ocean acidification (Target 14.3) and protecting marine ecosystems, which in turn mitigates climate impacts.
- SDG 1 (No Poverty) & SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)**:** Marine fisheries and aquaculture provide vital nutrition and income for billions. Sustainable fisheries (Target 14.4) are essential for food security and livelihoods.
- SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production)**:** Reducing marine pollution, particularly plastic debris (Target 14.1), is directly tied to managing life-cycle impacts of products and waste management.
- SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)**:** A sustainable "blue economy" promotes long-term economic growth, innovation, and employment through responsible ocean industries.
- SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)**:** Protecting coastal ecosystems (Target 14.2) safeguards coastal cities from natural disasters, such as storm surges, and ensures sustainable coastal management.
- SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation)**:** Reducing nutrient pollution and waste from land-based sources (Target 14.1) is vital for both marine life and coastal water quality.

Key science reports for SDG 14

Key scientific reports and assessments tracking progress on SDG 14 (Life Below Water) are primarily produced by UN agencies, focusing on ocean acidification, marine

pollution, and sustainable fishing. These reports highlight that while some progress has been made in protecting marine areas, overall trends in ocean health are deteriorating.

Key UN and Scientific Reports on SDG 14

- **The Sustainable Development Goals Report (Annual - UN Secretary-General):** Provides the official annual progress assessment on all SDG 14 targets, highlighting data on acidification, marine protection, and fishery sustainability.
- **SDG 14 Extended Reports (Annual - UN Stats):** Detailed technical reports accompanying the main SDG report, providing in-depth data, such as the *2025 Extended Report on SDG 14*, which includes analysis of marine spatial planning and acidification (unstats.un.org).
- **The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture (SOFIA - FAO):** A crucial biennial report assessing the percentage of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels (Target 14.4).
- **IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate:** Provides key scientific evidence on ocean warming, acidification, and deoxygenation.
- **UNEP "Out of the Blue: The Value of Seagrasses" Report:** Assesses the ecological and carbon-storage role of coastal habitats.
- **Status of Coral Reefs of the World (UNEP/GCRMN):** A landmark report assessing the 14% loss of coral reefs, relevant to Target 14.2 (ecosystem management).
- **The Global Carbon Budget (Global Carbon Project):** Assesses the ocean's role in absorbing CO2, directly relevant to tracking Target 14.3 (ocean acidification).

Funding SDG 14

Financing SDG 14 (Life Below Water) requires an estimated **$175 billion annually** to achieve 2030 targets, yet it remains the least funded SDG, with less than $10 billion invested annually between 2015 and 2019. Bridging this massive gap requires scaling up blended finance, blue bonds, public-private partnerships, and reforming harmful subsidies to drive investment into sustainable ocean solutions.

Key Requirements to Finance SDG 14:

- **Massive Capital Mobilisation:** An annual investment of approximately $175 billion is needed to secure ocean health, combat pollution, and foster a sustainable blue economy.
- **Innovative Financing Mechanisms:** Utilising blue bonds, debt-for-nature swaps, and impact investment to de-risk early-stage ventures and attract private capital.
- **Redirecting Harmful Subsidies:** Ending subsidies that encourage overfishing and pollution, which undermine marine ecosystems.
- **Strengthened Governance and Data:** Developing a shared taxonomy for ocean finance to better track investments and implementing frameworks like the High Seas Treaty.

- **Increased ODA:** While not sufficient alone, increasing Official Development Assistance (ODA) for the ocean is critical to catalyse other investments.
- **Targeted Investments:** Focusing on sustainable food production, mangrove restoration, shipping decarbonization, and offshore renewable energy, which can yield high economic returns.

Current efforts are heavily focused on reducing plastic pollution and implementing the 30x30 goal (protecting 30% of land and sea by 2030).

SDG 14 and Just Transition

SDG 14 (Life Below Water) contributes to a "just transition" by fostering a sustainable, equitable "blue economy" that balances environmental protection with the economic and social needs of coastal communities, indigenous peoples, and workers in marine industries. It ensures that the transition to a low-carbon, sustainable ocean economy does not leave vulnerable populations behind, specifically by focusing on the following areas:

1. **Protecting Livelihoods of Small-Scale Fishers**
   - **Access and Equity:** SDG 14 calls for providing access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets, which is crucial for reducing poverty and ensuring food security.
   - **Regulating Subsidies:** By aiming to eliminate harmful fisheries subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, SDG 14 helps protect the livelihoods of local, small-scale fishers from industrial overexploitation.
2. **Promoting an Equitable Blue Economy**
   - **Inclusive Planning:** The implementation of SDG 14 involves Marine Spatial Planning (MSP), which, when done correctly, includes local communities and indigenous populations in decision-making, ensuring their traditional knowledge and rights are respected.
   - **Sustainable Job Creation:** The "blue economy" promoted by SDG 14 involves developing sectors like sustainable aquaculture and renewable marine energy, which can create new, decent jobs for coastal populations.
3. **Advancing Social Justice and Equity**
   - **Empowering Women:** The transition to sustainable fisheries encourages the inclusion of women, recognising their vital role in the sector and supporting them with new, inclusive opportunities.
   - **Addressing Vulnerability:** It focuses on protecting Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and least developed countries, which are on the front lines of climate-related ocean changes like acidification and rising sea levels.
4. **Socially Responsible Maritime Transition**
   - **Just Transition in Shipping:** Initiatives linked to SDG 14, such as the 'Maritime Just Transition Task Force,' ensure that the decarbonization of the shipping industry puts seafarers at the centre of the transition, providing training and support for new, green technologies.
5. **Protecting Ecosystem Services**

- **Reducing Pollution:** By reducing marine pollution (including plastics), SDG 14 protects the coastal ecosystems that provide essential food, livelihoods, and natural buffers against storms for millions of people.

While SDG 14 is a critical component of a just transition, it is noted that the transition must be managed carefully to avoid negative impacts on or further marginalisation of local communities and workers in coastal areas.

UN Oceans and Partnerships and Commitments

UN Oceans

UN-Oceans is the inter-agency mechanism that seeks to enhance, strengthen and promote coordination, coherence and effectiveness of the activities of the United Nations system and the International Seabed Authority (ISA) on ocean and coastal issues. It reports annually to the Board through the High-level Committee on Programmes.

UN-Oceans was established to:

- Strengthen and promote coordination and coherence of United Nations system activities related to ocean and coastal areas;
- Regularly share ongoing and planned activities of participating organisations within the framework of relevant United Nations and other mandates with a view to identifying possible areas for collaboration and synergy;
- Facilitate, as appropriate, inputs by its participating organisations to the annual reports of the Secretary-General on oceans and the law of the sea and on sustainable fisheries to be submitted to the Secretariat;
- Facilitate inter-agency information exchange, including sharing of experiences, best practices, tools and methodologies and lessons learned in ocean-related matters.

SDG 14 Partnerships and Commitments

SDG 14 focuses on conserving and sustainably using oceans, seas, and marine resources, driven by over 3,000 voluntary commitments from governments, businesses, and organisations. These partnerships tackle marine pollution, ocean acidification, and illegal fishing through technology transfer, capacity building, and innovative funding like blue bonds, aiming to secure sustainable ocean economies.

- Voluntary Commitments: Governments, the private sector, and other organisations make voluntary commitments to support SDG 14, which are registered in the UN Ocean Conference's Registry of Commitments. There are over 3000 partnerships.
- Community of Ocean Action: These groups help members implement commitments by facilitating the exchange of progress reports, lessons learned,

and best practices, particularly in areas like science, technology transfer, and education.
- Scientific and technological cooperation: Commitments focus on enhancing scientific knowledge, building research capacity, transferring marine technology, and using technology for more sustainable fishing methods and pollution monitoring.
- Financial mobilisation: Partnerships are designed to mobilise funding through innovative finance solutions, such as blue bonds and debt-for-nature swaps, and by leveraging private investment.
- Inclusivity: Partnerships emphasise the inclusion of underrepresented groups, including Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and youth, ensuring they have a central role in ocean initiatives and decision-making.
- International legal frameworks: Partnerships also focus on implementing international law, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, to guide conservation and sustainable use efforts.

Examples of SDG 14 partnerships

- Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Fiji: WCS works with the Government of Fiji, local communities, and private sector partners like the Fiji Locally Managed Marine Areas and the Fiji Sugar Industries to implement conservation efforts.
- Marine Stewardship Council (MSC): An international non-profit organisation working to ensure sustainable fisheries by using its certification and eco-label program.
- UN Environment Programme – Blue Carbon Initiative: This initiative focuses on the role of coastal and marine ecosystems, such as mangroves and seagrasses, in climate change mitigation.
- Ocean Conservancy: A leading conservation organisation that works with scientists, policymakers, and the public to protect the ocean.
- IDEAS For Us: This organisation partners on projects focused on sustainable aquaculture, environmental education, and community-driven coastal clean-up initiatives.
- Global Mangrove Alliance: An alliance focused on the conservation and restoration of mangrove ecosystems, which are vital for coastal protection and carbon sequestration.
- Fiji Fishing Industry Association (Fiji FIA): This partnership works to guide fishing operations to minimise their impact on non-target species and marine ecosystems.
- WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature): WWF is involved in numerous partnerships for ocean conservation, including working with governments and local communities to implement marine spatial planning and protect marine life.
- Regional Partnerships: Partnerships like the one for the Western Indian Ocean are crucial for implementing SDG 14 on a regional scale, focusing on areas like resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards.

Key events for Oceans in preparation for the 2027 High-Level Review of the SDGs

December 2025: Launch of the UN Decade of Sustainable Transport, which will have a direct impact on ocean health through sustainable shipping and logistics.

February 22-27, 2026: **Ocean Sciences Meeting 2026** in Glasgow. It will address:

- Cutting-Edge Research: Discover the latest findings across diverse fields, from marine ecosystems to climate change impacts.
- Collaboration & Networking: Connect with peers, leading experts, and organisations dedicated to ocean sustainability.
- Industry & Innovation: Engage with 100+ scientific organisations and ocean-focused companies through exhibitions, partnerships, and sponsorships.

March 1, 2026: Youth4Climate Call for Solutions with an "Oceans and SIDS" theme

June 16-18, 2026: 11th Our Ocean Conference in Kenya

November 17-20, 2026: World Conference on Marine Biodiversity in Bruges, Belgium

Previous UN Oceans Conferences

The UN Ocean Conference is a series of high-level international meetings aimed at conserving and sustainably using the oceans and marine resources for sustainable development.

- **Third UN Conference (UNOC3**) The most recent conference was held in Nice, France, from June 9–13, 2025, and was co-hosted by France and Costa Rica. The primary theme was "Accelerating action and mobilising all actors to conserve and sustainably use the ocean."
- **The Second UN Ocean Conference (UNOC2)** was held June 27-July 1, 2022, in Lisbon, Portugal. Co-hosted by Portugal and Kenya. The primary theme was “Save our Ocean, Protect our Future.
- **The First UN Ocean Conference (UNOC1**) was held in New York from June 5-9, 2017, co-hosted by Fiji and Sweden. Theme: "Our oceans, our future: partnering for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14". Its main purpose was to support the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, which focuses on conserving and sustainably using oceans, seas, and marine resources. During the conference, leaders adopted a "Call for Action" to address the decline of ocean health, combat pollution and illegal fishing, and strengthen partnerships for sustainable ocean use.