



THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

3 May 2021

Excellency,

The last year has brought many challenges and opportunities for our work at the United Nations, as well as for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. If anything, the pandemic has demonstrated how much is at stake if we fail to rectify the imbalanced relationship between our societies and nature. Ocean acidification; illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing; and marine pollution all continue unabated. Our actions have threatened to undo the delicate balance of this ecosystem that allows billions the world over, nutritional, economic, and social value.

In the above context, I have decided to convene a high-level thematic debate on the ocean and Sustainable Development Goal 14: Life Below Water on Tuesday, 1 June 2021, at United Nations Headquarters in New York. With the support of the Governments of Portugal and Kenya – co-hosts of the 2nd United Nations Ocean Conference, as well as H.E. Mr. Peter Thomson, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Oceans, this gathering will serve as a drumbeat to generate momentum towards the Conference in Lisbon, when public health safety measures allow.

You may find attached herewith a concept note for the high-level thematic debate and a draft programme for the meeting. The high-level thematic debate will include an opening segment, followed by two consecutive multi-stakeholder panel discussions in the morning and two in the afternoon, and a closing segment.

Delegations wishing to participate in the interactive panel discussions are invited to express an interest to pose questions to the panel by inscribing through the e-speakers module in the e-deleGATE portal (<https://edelegate.un.int>), which will open at 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 5 May 2021. As there are four panel discussions, delegations may provide an expression of interest to speak in any of the panels, in the order of preference, should the first choice become over-inscribed. The deadline for inscription is 5 p.m. on Friday, 14 May 2021. The provisional list of speakers will be circulated in advance of the meeting. In order to hear as many delegations as possible within the limited time available for the interactive discussion, a time limit of two minutes will be observed for questions and comments.

For further information, your office may contact my Adviser, Ms. Nehali Anupriya (nehali.anupriya@un.org; +1 (929) 505-3864).

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Volkan Bozkir'.

Volkan BOZKIR

All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers to the United Nations
New York



High-Level Thematic Debate in Support of SDG14: Life Below Water
10:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.; Tuesday, 1 June 2021
General Assembly Hall, United Nations Headquarters, New York



Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed and even reversed progress on some SDGs, and a green recovery is key to addressing this slow down. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of SDG 14 by the 2030 deadline seems even more daunting. Given the widespread health and economic impacts of the pandemic, and the urgent need for relief measures, some difficult tradeoffs will be made and governments' priorities will be re-evaluated; however, it is crucial that any interim measures implemented are done in a way that will not exacerbate the existing challenges—both socioeconomic and environmental—facing the ocean and coastal communities.

Coastal and marine ecosystems provide food, livelihoods, and coastal protection to more than a billion people worldwide. The value of the ocean related economic activities are already in excess of \$1.5 trillion USD annually. The abundance of our ocean and its resources is an imperative to protect, not just for the enjoyment of future generations, but for the well-being, prosperity and resilience of the present generation. Ocean acidification driven by CO₂ emissions and pollution threaten marine environments and ecosystem services. A 100-150% rise in ocean acidity is projected by 2100, affecting half of all marine life. In addition, it is expected that the metric weight of plastic in the ocean will exceed the metric weight of fish by 2050 if current pollution trends continue.

It has been more than three years since the first UN Ocean Conference. With the second Conference still delayed due to the ongoing pandemic, and four SDG14 targets having matured in 2020, Member States and the international community will benefit from a progress update on the achievement of SDG14, and the ocean related goals. As such, the President of the General Assembly will convene a high-level thematic debate at United Nations Headquarters on 1 June 2021, to support the positive momentum of implementation of SDG14.

With support from the Governments of Kenya and Portugal, as well as the United Nations Special Envoy for the Ocean, this high-level thematic debate will serve as a drumbeat ahead of the 2nd UN Ocean Conference. As we ride the tide into the 2nd UN Ocean Conference, there must be a clear demonstration of progress, with more ambitious and innovative commitments to restoring and conserving our marine environments.

Format

The one-day high-level thematic debate will feature four multi-stakeholder panels. Each multi-stakeholder panel will seek to address progress on relevant targets of SDG14 and the 2030 Agenda more broadly. The panels will also provide an opportunity for UN Member States to engage in an interactive discussion with representatives from the relevant funds, programmes and agencies of the UN System that are delivering on the vision for a healthy ocean, for people and for planet.

The panels will be enhanced with five, one-minute long transition videos from a variety of stakeholders to share solutions, best practices, lessons learnt, and innovative developments from across all actors in the ocean space.

Draft Programme

10:00 a.m. – 10:50 a.m.	Opening Segment
10:50 a.m. – 11:50 a.m.	Panel 1 – Bringing together UN processes on the Ocean
11:50 a.m. – 11:55 a.m.	Video transition – Youth
11:55 p.m. – 12:55 p.m.	Panel 2 – Towards a pollution-free, protected and climate-resilient ocean
12:55 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.	Video transition – Private Sector
1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.	BREAK
3:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.	Panel 3 – Fisheries and Aquaculture
4:00 p.m. – 4:05 p.m.	Video transition – Academia
4:05 p.m. – 5:05 p.m.	Panel 4 – A Sustainable Ocean Economy
5:05 p.m. – 5:10 p.m.	Video transition – Civil Society
5:10 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.	Closing Segment

Panel 1 – Bringing Together UN Processes on the Ocean

A plethora of initiatives, conventions and processes across the UN system aim to convene Member States, UN entities, and the international community to work together to maximize the conservation, preservation, and sustainable use of our ocean and ensure that it has a central role in supporting the achievement of the 17 SDGs. These processes include:

- The second UN Ocean Conference
- The Intergovernmental Conference on an international legally binding instrument 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
- The UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development,

- The annual review of ocean affairs and the law of the sea by the General Assembly
- The Regular Process for Global Reporting and Assessment of the State of the Marine Environment, including Socioeconomic Aspects,
- The UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration as well as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity,
- The World Ocean Assessment and many others.

Existing and emerging initiatives, conventions and processes have the potential to create synergistic, optimal outcomes for the ocean. Enhanced connections and collaborations among stakeholders facilitated along the entire science – policy – action value chain aligned in their aims can produce tangible outcomes.

This panel will start with an overview of key UN Ocean processes and explore the synergies and interlinkages across the 2030 Agenda and complementary global and regional policy frameworks to ensure our ocean remains as plentiful, as abundant, and as healthy as possible and thus be able to contribute to the 2030 Agenda. It will: (i) investigate challenges that have been encountered to date, (ii) examine the enabling factors to improve synergies, and (iii) hear from those actors that need to be engaged in discussions. This will include a discussion of progress towards SDG target 14.a to increase scientific knowledge, research capacity and transfer marine technology to improve ocean health and to enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular small island developing States (SIDS) and least developed countries (LDCs). As a cross-cutting theme, this panel will explore the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected – for better and for worse – the functioning of UN ocean processes and draw lessons for the future.

Guiding questions:

1. What have the challenges been to date in aligning and creating synergies between UN ocean processes? Where have there been successes and what common factors can be identified from these successes?
2. Where are the weak spots in the science – policy – action value chain and how can these weak spots be strengthened through collective action and collaboration across the UN system?
3. How can the ten-year initiatives – Ocean Decade, UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration and the UN Decade of Action for the SDGs act as triggers for increased alignment and synergies?
4. What are the enabling conditions to ensure that UN Ocean processes are inclusive, equitable and accessible to all parties? Which actors have been missing from the processes and how can we engage them?

5. As new processes are being developed or the next cycles of processes are getting underway, what mechanisms could be integrated from the outset to ensure maximum efficiency and avoid duplication?
6. How can we move from UN processes to tangible action that achieve real impact for the ocean?

Panel 2 – Towards a healthy, protected and climate-resilient ocean

If we are to realize a vision of humanity living in harmony with nature on a climate stable and pollution free planet, holistic policy and concerted action in the next decade is essential. By 2050, the planet will need to provide food, jobs, energy, raw materials required to sustain a population of 10 billion people. Realizing the full potential of the ocean to contribute to these objectives will require widespread changes in how we manage our economic activities in and around marine and coastal areas. This need for change is especially clear as the impacts of over-exploitation, pollution, coastal development and climate change on the ocean become increasingly visible. The long-term ability of the ocean to provide services essential to human well-being rely on cross-sector policies and economic models that promote sustainability, enhances sector efficiency and minimizes environmental impacts from human activities and consumption.

Valuable marine and coastal ecosystems and biodiversity are under increasing pressure due to complex, cumulative impacts from human activities. Up to 30% of global seagrass cover has already been lost, and over 20% of global mangrove cover. It is projected that between 70% and 90% of the world's coral reefs will be lost at 1.5 degrees Celsius warming, and up to 99% of coral reefs at 2 degrees Celsius warming. These current and projected losses in biodiversity and ecosystem function is recognized as a foundational threat to social, economic and cultural life that relies upon a healthy and productive ocean. We need to reframe our economies around sustainable use of the natural capital that underpins them, taking an ecosystem-based approach to addressing land-based and sea-based drivers of ocean degradation, enables green fiscal policy reform, adopt strategic planning that holistically considers sector dependencies and impacts on healthy marine and coastal ecosystems, and progress practical nature-based solutions underpinning climate stability.

Panel 2 will explore important barriers and enabling factors to support transformative ocean and coastal policy and management to tackle the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature loss and pollution. Centered around SDG targets 14.1 (to reduce marine pollution), 14.2 (to protect and restore ecosystems), 14.3 (to reduce ocean acidification), and 14.5 (to create effective protected marine areas), it will take a comprehensive look at the environmental aspects underpinning ocean sustainability, with due consideration to social and economic sustainability, and measures needed to conserve, protect and restore some of our most fragile ecosystems as prerequisite for social and economic well-being and resilience. The panel will explore advancements in applied interdisciplinary research, decision-support and nature-based solutions and draw upon indigenous knowledge to develop transformation pathways and delivery plans for ocean sustainability. This includes knowledge generation for policy implementation, such like

the recent launch of the Natural Capital Accounting and Valuation of Ecosystem Services (NCAVES) which has now been adopted by the UN Statistics Division of DESA.

Potential barriers and enabling factors to successful implementation of SDG14 may include:

<p>Pollution – Economic circularity and source-to-sea thinking is needed to reduce land-based sources of marine pollution, including marine litter and plastic pollution. Sustainable nutrient management and enhanced nutrient use efficiency is also required given nearly 80% of nutrients applied in agriculture is lost to the environment. Harmonization of marine litter monitoring is required to enhance policy and management interventions. Efforts to combat ship-source marine and coastal pollution, including through regulatory measures, are going to be critical, in particular for vulnerable coastal developing countries and SIDS.</p>	<p>Ecosystem-based ocean management – Strategic marine planning and area-based management that incorporates macro-economic scenarios is needed to address economic drivers and cumulative human impacts. Connected marine conservation and restoration efforts across land-sea boundaries are needed to support nature-based solutions for climate stability. Ecosystem service mapping, assessment and accounting is needed to capture the full value of the ocean in policy and planning.</p>
<p>Acidification – Gaps in research capacity on ocean acidification between the Global North and the Global South requires knowledge transfer and research support to developing countries. Innovation is needed to manage impacts of ocean acidification - apart from rapidly reducing greenhouse gas emissions, what practical interventions exist?</p>	<p>Marine Protected Areas – Enhancing performance, financing and addressing climate variability and change in holistic MPA design and implementation is essential to secure environmental, social and economic benefits. There is increasing need for evaluating and understanding the effectiveness and equitable outcomes of spatial management approaches operating around the world. For example, how is <i>Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures</i> (OECMs) applied in practice?</p>

Guiding Questions:

1. How can we advance holistic source-to-sea approaches to tackle land-based sources of marine pollution?
2. How can ecosystem-based management and restoration strengthen the opportunity for sustainable ocean development?
3. What are the main challenges to measuring ocean acidification globally, and what priority gaps need to be addressed?
4. How can marine protected areas be more effectively embedded in broader marine planning and management for ocean sustainability management?

Panel 3 Fisheries and Aquaculture

The world will have an additional 2 billion people to feed over the next 30 years. Today, the ocean makes a significant contribution to food security and nutrition, and it holds the potential to play an even bigger role in the global food system.

The ocean plays a fundamental role in supplying the global population with nutritious food, making a significant contribution to food security and nutrition. In 2018, fisheries and aquaculture produced 156 million tonnes of fish for direct human consumption, a 7-fold increase from 1950, providing 3.3 billion people with almost 20 percent of their average per capita intake of animal protein.

Fish is a unique food commodity. It represents 56% of all animal protein exports and about 38% of all fish harvested enters international markets. People have never consumed as much fish and fish products as they do today, with fish consumption growing at a rate twice that of population growth, reaching an unprecedented level of 20.5kg per capita in 2018. Fish contains crucial micronutrients with increasing beneficial health effects, especially for pregnant women and children, and therefore aquatic food consumption is projected to continue increasing (up to 60% more by 2050 relative to 2013), driven also by dietary preferences of an increasingly health conscious planet.

In addition to food, fisheries and aquaculture provide employment for over 200 million of people working as fishers and harvesters but also in pre- and post-harvest activities. In particular, the small-scale fisheries sector generates 90% of fisheries employment in capture fisheries, and women constitute about half of the workforce. Maintaining and improving livelihoods of those working in small-scale fisheries requires addressing policies and capacity that empowers small-scale fishing communities in resource stewardship and management, but also address food security and nutrition, poverty, gender equity and overall socio-economic development needs of fishers and their communities.

However, while global marine fish landings have remained relatively stable at around 90 million tonnes since 1995 and the majority of marine fish landings (an estimate of 78.7%) come from biologically sustainable stocks, the sustainability of world fishery resources has continued to decline. The fraction of marine stocks fished within biological sustainable levels has decreased from 90% in 1974 to 65.8% in 2017 and the percentage of stocks fished at biologically unsustainable levels increased from 10% in 1974 to 34.2% in 2017. Even though these trends slowed down in the last decade, all regions of the world show a variable percentage of unsustainable fishing that needs to be tackled.

While the sustainability of fisheries declined, the industry continued to receive subsidies, which in some cases have resulted in further pressure on the resources. Recent estimates account subsidies to the fishing industry to be around \$35.4 billion per year, of which

around \$22.2 billion were given to activities (such as fuel subsidies and below market loans) that tend to enhance capacity. Public support to the fisheries sector by OECD Members (OECD 33) and other analyzed States has reached an annual average of \$9.3 billion during the period 2010-2015.

Reducing and eliminating harmful or otherwise ineffective management approaches and practices that may lead to overcapacity, overfishing, and/or illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing are important means for sustainability and require innovative policy, regulatory and entrepreneurial marine economic approaches, including in the way to trade and conduct business.

Aquatic ecosystems cannot continue to maintain the same level of ecosystem services, let alone increasing fish and fisheries production, if biodiversity loss and habitat destruction from anthropogenic activities, including pollution, habitat degradation, and climate change, as well as unsustainable fishing and aquaculture, continues. On the other hand, examples around the world indicate that when effective fisheries and aquaculture management and governance is implemented, sustainability, biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development are improved, as good management is the best conservation tool. Sustainable practices also lead to increased resilience of the sector to acute crisis such as the one created by COVID-19 pandemic and to long-term impacts of climate change.

The contribution of fisheries and aquaculture to the global fight to eradicate poverty, hunger and malnutrition in all its forms and dimensions, requires putting sustainability of the sectors at the top of agendas across the world; there is no alternative to sustainability if we are to achieve the goals set in the 2030 Agenda.

This third panel will discuss and explore opportunities and challenges to the implementation of targets 14.4 (sustainable fisheries), 14.6 (end harmful subsidies), and 14.b (support small scale fishers). It will also address actions to progress towards these targets and therefore contributing to other areas of the 2030 Agenda, especially SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (strong partnerships).

In addition, the panel will discuss the recently endorsed Declaration for Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture of the FAO Committee on Fisheries and the UNCTAD-FAO-UNEP Inter Agency Plan of Action on SDG 14. These instruments acknowledge the need to take action to ensure that our ocean is resilient, that fisheries and aquaculture activities and related trade are fully sustainable and meet growing demand for nutritious, safe and affordable food, while maintaining sustainable ecosystems, economies and societies that leave no one behind.

Guiding questions:

1. What are the main obstacles that prevent fisheries and aquaculture from being managed sustainably? How do we develop solutions or adapt existing approaches to support the sector to adapt to climate change?
2. Given the increasing contribution of aquatic foods to nutrition and food security, what strategies should fisheries and aquaculture adapt for nutrition-sensitive policy development, particularly in countries facing famine and malnutrition?
3. What incentives and opportunities exist for collective action to ensure these instruments' implementation?
4. How can the new World Trade Organization rules and disciplines on fisheries subsidies improve global fisheries' sustainability?
5. Which joint efforts and actions are needed to mitigate these impacts while strengthening the sector's longer-term resilience and its contribution to a blue recovery?

Panel 4 – A Sustainable Blue Economy

The great disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic generated never seen impacts on the global economy. Prolonged uncertainty halted economic and social activities in both developing and developed countries overnight. The pandemic has sensitized the world to our shared fragility. It has brought into sharp relief the ways in which human well-being and resilience are intrinsically related to a healthy planet and our stewardship of nature. The pandemic has made clear just how quickly years of progress toward poverty and hunger eradication can unravel without the sustainable management of the planet's natural resources. It pushed inequities of our current economic system to the forefront and further exposed the severe impacts on those with existing vulnerabilities, including SIDS, coastal communities, the poor, the vulnerable, women and girls.

To move forward, deep structural changes are required in our economies, trade, patterns of consumption and production, food and transport systems, in ways that may have seemed too disruptive or expensive before. A sustainable use of the ocean must align with the principles inherent in the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), safeguarding ocean health and resource use for future generations, while leaving no one behind. It is an opportunity to root the ocean economy in ways that consider the sustainable use of marine resources and identify and develop opportunities that prioritise not only reducing inequality in income, but also improve equitable access and opportunities. Investments in sustainable ocean value chains can reduce emissions, pollution, waste and loss potentially making them more diverse and resilient. Responding to changing markets and re-activating chains affected by the COVID-19 pandemic is essential and recognizing that benefits from the ocean economy (including fisheries and aquaculture, tourism, marine genetic resources, energy and shipping) cannot be measured only in terms of their contribution to GDP, but also their contribution to

livelihoods, diversification, resilience, sound ecosystem services, social norms and cultural values.

The overall value of key ocean assets is estimated as much larger than official valuations (goods and services are estimated at US\$2.5 trillion) and has been estimated conservatively to be at least UD\$24 trillion. Existing estimates may be too low, as they may not fully take into account all sectors and activities. Also, not all ecosystem benefits are readily quantifiable. A sustainable ocean economy is vital for achieving the 2030 Agenda and to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tourism presents a key element of the ocean economy in many parts of the world. Rebuilding inclusive, resilient, and sustainable tourism will require fresh investment that protects and regenerates the ecosystems on which it depends and reinvest tourism revenues into local communities to build capacity and increase local employment, diversify economic opportunities and increase resources for coastal and marine restoration and protection. Lower to zero emissions means of transport will be key to making the tourism sector more resilient and help meet global climate goals. In addition, investment in energy efficiency and renewable energy will be important for continued energy security and may bring major co-benefits, in terms of climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as reduced dependency on energy imports and related expenditure. This is particularly critical for SIDS and other countries that are facing longer term supply-chain disruptions and a reduction in earnings potential as a result of the impacts of the pandemic on major economic sectors, such as tourism.

Fisheries and aquaculture represent another key pillar of the ocean economy. Fish and fish products are not only crucial for nutrition food security and livelihoods, in particular for small-scale fishing communities, but are one of the most internationally traded foods, with a total export value of USD 164.1 billion in 2018. Developing countries have a share of about 54 percent by value and 60 percent of traded quantities and, with a net revenue higher than that of all other agricultural commodities combined. Moreover, sustainable marine capture fisheries make a substantial contribution to GDP, in particular of SIDS and LDCs where fishing activities are vital to local communities and indigenous people. Countries can increase the participation of the fisheries and aquaculture sector in their GDP by implementing effective fisheries management, supportive and transparent government initiatives, better access to information and the implementation of new technologies along the value chains. The sustainable use of marine resources requires innovative policy, regulatory and entrepreneurial marine economic approaches that ensure equitable access to and use of fisheries resources, including for small-scale fisheries, and in the way to trade and conduct business. It should also include efforts to conclude a multilateral fish subsidies agreement that would allow phasing out harmful economic incentives for stocks sustainability and to channel fresh resources towards blue investment.

Shipping and seaports provide crucial linkages in the network of global supply-chains and are essential for the ability of all countries, including those that are landlocked, to access global markets. Over 80 per cent of the volume of world merchandise trade is carried by sea, from port to port. For SIDS, seaports are lifelines for external trade, food and energy security, and tourism, as well as in the context of disaster risk reduction and resilience. However, these assets are projected to be at increasing risk of coastal flooding, from as early as in the 2030s, unless effective adaptation action is taken. Sustainable and climate-

resilient seaports are key to enabling SIDS to explore the full potential and harness the benefits of the ocean economy.

Globally, the market value of marine and coastal resources and industries equate to a significant proportion of global GDP. Marine industries present opportunities, but only if marine resources are managed appropriately and sustainably within planetary boundaries. The widespread need for a more integrated and equitable ocean management approach is gaining pace to balance marine conservation and production with population, economic growth and social equity. At present, ocean management often occurs in siloes, on a sectoral basis, with little intergovernmental or cross-ministerial coordination. For ocean-based climate solutions to advance in tandem with other sustainable ocean industries and important sources of livelihoods there is a need to better integrate ocean management and planning with nature-based solutions, the decarbonization agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. The engagement and leadership of the private sector can play a significant role in the achievement of a sustainable ocean economy. The empowerment and meaningful participation of local coastal communities, including indigenous peoples and other stakeholders are critical to a successful outcome of an integrated ocean management and planning strategy for the benefit of the whole-of-society.

Panel 4 will review the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ocean economy and its major pillars and highlight the opportunities and challenges of the next nine years in order to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

Guiding Questions

1. What are the main opportunities to ensure a sustainable inclusive ocean economy while building back better from the pandemic?
2. How can we reach a better understanding and accounting of the ocean's contribution to the global economy?
3. What role can international collaboration, legal and policy frameworks and agreements play in ensuring a sustainable and inclusive ocean economy? And how can their implementation be leveraged and fast-tracked?
4. How can economic and trade policies and agreements contribute to successful implementation of SDG 14?
5. What measures are taken to integrate sustainability and conservation criteria into trade and development strategies in the ocean economy and trade sectors?
6. How can innovation and technological entrepreneurship enable and catalyze protection and sustainable use of marine resources?