

OceanCare sailing towards the UNOC 2025

The world is facing a triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, putting the future existence also of us humans at severe risk. Ocean ecosystems and marine wildlife are increasingly threatened, degraded or destroyed by human activities, reducing its ability to carry out the crucial functions on which life on Earth depends. Main threats are, among others, climate change, marine pollution, unsustainable fisheries and destruction of marine and coastal habitats.

The UN Oceans Conference UNOC 2025 provides a unique opportunity for governments to agree on a global strategy for protecting and restoring the ocean. It is of utmost importance that such strategy does address the core gaps of current failure making governments most likely to fail meeting the targets defined within the Sustainable Development Goal 14 – Life below water – and others, as well as the objective of the Paris Agreement to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and limit the temperature increase to 1,5° above pre-industrial levels. The window of opportunity for meaningful action is likely to close within the next 5 to 10 years.

The “*Let’s be NICE to the Ocean*” initiative provides a great platform to share, promote and raise awareness of OceanCare’s objectives to call on governments to commit towards five main conservation objectives and make them part of the UNOC 2025 declaration:

1. Ban oil & gas exploration at sea and phase out existing hydrocarbon exploitation.
2. Reduction of vessel speed in shipping.
3. Ban destructive fishing practices, such as bottom trawling.
4. Create and implement global rules to stop plastic pollution addressing the full plastic life cycle.
5. Impose a global Moratorium on deep-sea mining.

Those objectives are complementary and consistent with the core operational propositions of the “*Let’s be NICE to the Ocean*” initiative, especially in support of, among others:

- The Protection Principle.
- Zero discharge targets.
- Deep-sea protection and conservation.
- Modernized Mediterranean protection.

1. Ban oil & gas exploration at sea and phase out existing hydrocarbon exploitation

Denmark, France, New Zealand, Portugal and Spain are among those States that have already banned hydrocarbon exploration in its waters, although their national policies differ in their phase-out approach.

Halting any hydrocarbon exploration activities for new hydrocarbon deposits in the ocean is an intrinsic policy being consistent with a thorough and needed transition of the energy sector. It would also stop one of the loudest man-made ocean noise sources – the employment of seismic airguns during seismic surveys – which pose a severe threat to all marine life.

Mediterranean specific: To improve the transparent and measurable phase-out of the fossil fuel era, in line with the UNFCCC principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, the Mediterranean Range States, working together in the framework of UNEP/MAP, shall develop and agree upon a regional carbon budget, defining the total amount of emissions of CO₂-eq that may be released until 2050 in line with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

2. Reduction of vessel speed in shipping

Being the backbone of international trade and thus of the world economy, as defined by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the maritime shipping sector is a key emitter of GHGs (with almost 3% of total global emissions) and results in a continued severe negative environmental impact on climate, public health and biodiversity. While investment into alternative fuels and technological improvements to lower the carbon footprint of shipping is of utmost urgency, the most cost-effective way to reduce the environmental impact of shipping is by reducing vessel speed.

It is an immediately applicable measure, has hardly an impact on the overall cost of the shipping industry and leads only to a marginal increase in logistics and supply chain costs for consumers.

The reduction in vessel speed would immediately reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as well as emission of ocean noise and air pollutants and reduces the risk of colliding with endangered marine megafauna when navigating through their habitats.

Mediterranean specific: Fin whales and sperm whales are two of the most precious treasures that the Mediterranean Sea still holds. Unfortunately, we are losing them. The Mediterranean subpopulations of fin whales and sperm whales are classified as "endangered" in the Red List of the IUCN. Collisions with boats are the main cause of human-induced death for fin whales and sperm whales in the northwestern Mediterranean. This problem has been recognized by the IMO, which at the proposal of France, Italy, Monaco and Spain, designated in 2023 the northwestern Mediterranean (which includes the marine protected areas of the Pelagos Cetacean Sanctuary in the Ligurian Sea and the Cetacean Migration Corridor in Spanish waters, both declared SPAMI by UNEP/MAP) as a Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA).

The IMO has addressed the environmental benefits of speed reduction, but the voluntary nature of this measure applied to the aforementioned PSSA is inadequate in light of the serious decline that these two megafauna species are suffering. Therefore, a paradigm shift towards mandatory rules on vessel speed is essential for the effective protection of these species and the ecosystems of which they are part of. One of the great advantages of mandatory vessel speed reduction is that it creates a level playing field for all shipping companies. This ensures that they are all subject to the same restrictions and that compliance does not place them at a competitive disadvantage. This has been reinforced by ACCOBAMS Resolution 8.17 (2022).

3. Ban destructive fishing practices, such as bottom trawling

Overfishing and the employment of destructive fishing gear is one of the main threats marine ecosystems face today. A primary management approach that could help mitigate the harmful effects of destructive fishing gears, and to be consistent with international commitments to protect the marine environment, entails the use of fishing gear that is less destructive, combined with the creation of more areas where destructive fishing is either not allowed or is at least effectively regulated.

In particular, trawling and dredging should become banned in vulnerable seabed habitats, as well as in areas where these fishing methods result in incidental harm and mortality of threatened megafaunal species (e.g. elasmobranchs, sea turtles, seabirds and marine mammals). Harmful fishery subsidies (including fuel subsidies) that enhance the capacity and effort of trawling and dredging fleets need to be eliminated.

Regional and Mediterranean specific: It needs to be ensured that the EU Action Plan to phase out bottom trawling within marine protected areas and Natura 2000 and other marine protected areas by 2030 is fully implemented and enforced. Bottom trawling and dredging should also be permanently banned within all Fisheries Restricted Areas created under GFCM.

4. Create global rules to stop plastic pollution addressing the full plastic life cycle

Plastic pollution is, in addition to climate change and biodiversity loss, one of the three major crisis the ocean faces. Actions to address plastic pollution, a transnational environmental problem, have to be taken at global level. UNEA Resolution 5/14 was a landmark moment in global policy making and empower and expect governments to negotiate a global plastics treaty. The new legally binding plastics treaty to end plastic pollution need to become a shining example and historic achievement of multilateralism, provided it will be addressing all aspects – the full plastic life cycle - of the plastics crisis. Its quick entry into force and the rapid implementation of its provisions will be fundamental to avert the plastic tide.

5. Impose a global Moratorium on deep-sea mining

Facing multiple, cumulative impacts resulting in long-term consequences, there is currently a critical debate on the possible launch of one of the largest extractive operations in ocean history: deep-sea mining. Scientists warn that the impacts of deep seabed mining operations on the ocean would act cumulatively to existing stressors such as climate change, pollution and overexploitation, likely causing direct and irreversible environmental and ecological effects, risking damage and loss of habitats and species. States to commit agreeing a moratorium on deep-sea mining within and by the International Seabed Authority (ISA) and in their national jurisdiction.

Finally, one of the overarching objectives must be the measurable protection, conservation and restoration of marine ecosystems and biodiversity, in particular through the proper and conservation-oriented implementation of the BBNJ Agreement. Governments should not delay ratification to ensure the rapid entry into force of the Agreement. In the meantime, governments should provisionally apply the provisions of the Agreement, as feasible, and should already undertake steps to prepare for the implementation of the Agreement.

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About OceanCare

OceanCare is an international marine conservation non-governmental organisation, founded in Switzerland in 1989. The organisation pursues the protection and restoration of the marine environment and marine wildlife with a strong policy focus, combining research, conservation projects and education. OceanCare's remit includes marine pollution - addressing chemical, plastic and ocean noise pollution - climate change, marine mammal hunting and destructive fisheries, including the environmental consequences of fisheries. Its work is supported by a team of scientific, legal and policy experts, and involves strategic collaboration with civil society organisations and coalitions around the world.

OceanCare's focus area, supporting field work, is the Mediterranean Sea.

OceanCare is an officially accredited partner and observer to several UN conventions and other international fora. Ocean holds Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (UN ECOSOC) and contributes to the achievement of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Official partnership status is recognized by the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the UNEP/MAP, the Agreement on the Conservation of Cetaceans of the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and contiguous Atlantic area (ACCOBAMS) and the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM).

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