

The blue whale in the room: tourism and the ocean governance agenda

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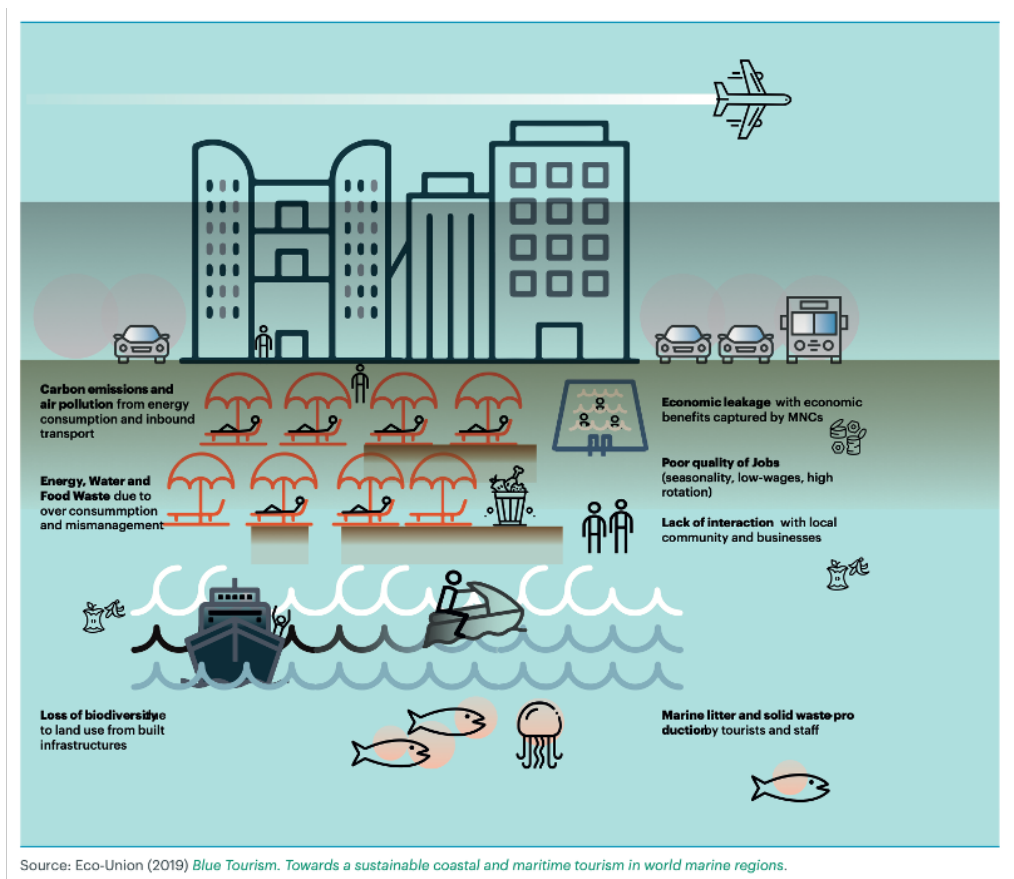
We welcome the identification in the Let's Be Nice to the Ocean e-book published in November 2023, of the need to address the impacts and vulnerabilities caused by current models of mass tourism (Opportunity #3, Let's Be Nice to the Ocean), including the suggestion that there could be a role for regional seas programmes such as the Mediterranean Action Plan.

One of the world's fastest growing and most globalized sectors, tourism has long been governed by economic policies aimed at increasing visitor numbers, with limited consideration for environmental and social sustainability, if any. This approach is progressively changing, driven by the recent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting market preferences, and the sector's pressing need to contribute to climate and biodiversity objectives. However, tourism remains largely outside the scope of the ocean governance agenda. Could the Third United Nations Ocean Conference, taking place in June 2025 in France, be an opportunity to reverse this trend?

Tourism is one of the [most globalized and growing sectors](#). In 2023, tourism contributed, directly and indirectly, to 9.1% of the global GDP, an increase of 23% from 2022, demonstrating a rapid recovery from COVID-19. Blue tourism, i.e. coastal and marine tourism activities, accounts for approximately 50% of global tourism, significantly contributing to the ocean-based economy. In the Mediterranean alone, in 2019, international tourism represented about 35% of all global international arrivals and 30% of global tourism receipts. In the Caribbean, tourism contributes to over 30% of employment, and in 2022, it recorded approximately 28 million international tourists, indicating a swift recovery from the impact of the pandemic.

A traditionally domestic, growth-focused policy

For decades, tourism policies have been characterized by two key features: their domestic character and their focus on growth targets. This trend toward “tourist hunting” has often led to mass coastal tourism, jeopardizing nature and communities’ well-being. Examples include coastal artificialization and erosion in the Mediterranean, marine plastic pollution in the Caribbean, tourism-enhanced biodiversity loss in the Indo-Pacific Islands, and excessive water use and overconsumption in many countries, affecting the environment and the well-being of local communities.



A recent and emerging shift towards sustainable practices

Sustainability perspectives have however progressively been integrated in the tourism agenda, supported by different factors, including the COVID-19 recovery perspectives, discontent among local populations, changes in consumers' values and behavior, and the sector needs to better respond to shocks and to contribute to climate and biodiversity commitments. This has been supported by some intergovernmental organisations, such, for instance as the UN Tourism or the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCDE) that contributed to the development of policy initiatives and related indicators on sustainability. As a result, environmental and social sustainability is increasingly integrated into tourism policies and strategies even if it is being formalized and implemented in different ways, and at different speeds, depending on the country and destination.

The blue whale in the "Ocean room"

However, despite its various impacts on marine and coastal ecosystems, with a few rare exceptions, tourism has not yet entered the discussion on coastal and ocean governance. For example, there was no mention of tourism in the final declaration of the 2022 UN Ocean Conference. Moreover, despite the sector's importance in the ocean sphere, the Second World Ocean Assessment does not dedicate a full chapter to tourism, but only some limited developments. Additionally, although most marine regions suffer from tourism impacts on marine and coastal zones, no dedicated agreement has yet been adopted and tourism is not a topic generally addressed by regional seas conventions and action plans.

Yet, there are many benefits to be gained from integrating tourism issues more firmly into the ocean governance agenda and strengthening it as a topic of intergovernmental cooperation. This is particularly true for the cruise tourism sector, requiring more integrated governance mechanisms to navigate complex regulatory layers and effects of regional competition, minimize its impact, address and control its growth and enhance sustainability reporting. Moreover, this integration would allow resource and data sharing within and among marine regions to inform national and regional policies and foster open innovation for a more resilient blue economy. More broadly, strengthening the tourism / ocean interface would help agree on common policies to avoid the harmful effects of competition between States or destinations which, most often, results in a denial of sustainable development. Such an approach would promote more cooperation over intense competition, facilitate cohesive actions and policies to address transboundary issues, collectively adopt climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies for the sector, including coastal adaptation, along with enforcing and incentivising compliance with international, regional and national agreements.

UNOC 2025 as an accelerator?

The authors of *Let's Be Nice to the Ocean* (November 2023) raised key questions in the section in the context of the Mediterranean (*Ibid*, Opportunity #3), which can also be extended to other maritime and coastal tourism destinations: *"Should there be new provisions to regulate the sustainable, regenerative, and equitable blue economy, including addressing the economic and environmental vulnerabilities which excessive reliance on blue tourism entail? Can the Barcelona Convention and its Protocols address issues which have emerged in the last 30 years, such as the proliferation of hyper cruise liners and their environmental, social, and cultural adverse impacts, plastic litter, or climate change impacts including sea level rise on cities, agriculture and infrastructure? And could the Protection Principle's reversal of the burden of proof become a goal which would make the Mediterranean truly exemplary?"*

Co-hosted by France, a world leading tourist destination, and Costa Rica, known for its nature-based tourism model, the Third United Nations Ocean Conference (Nice, June 2025) is convened to "Accelerate action and mobilise all actors to conserve and sustainably use the ocean". In line with this mandate, the conference could serve as a launching platform for elevating the place of sustainable tourism in the ocean governance agenda, through new initiatives such as:

- Establishing an intergovernmental coalition that could serve as a multilateral political platform for more sustainable and inclusive governance of coastal and marine tourism;
- Launching regional initiative(s) aimed at strengthening policy and technical cooperation on sustainable blue tourism and agreeing on common objectives and rules;
- Forming a multistakeholder alliance, gathering not only governments but also sub-national decision-makers, the private sector, and civil society, committed to addressing the challenges of sustainable blue tourism.

The ocean community can no longer turn its attention away from the threats and vulnerabilities posed by tourism to ecosystems, species, and populations. The time for action is now.