

4 COPs, One Ocean: The ocean as a unifying agenda across the Rio Conventions and BBNJ Agreement

Key messages

- **There is one global ocean** that connects all continents and people on the planet. It plays a central role in regulating the climate, safeguarding biodiversity and sustaining the global hydrological cycle, and by extension is critical for food security, economic prosperity and social well-being.
- **Four UN conventions share a mutual, direct or indirect, relationship with the ocean**, which informs their scope and is affected by their outcomes:
 - The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (**UNFCCC**)
 - The Convention on Biological Diversity (**CBD**)
 - The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification (**UNCCD**)
 - The Agreement 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 (**BBNJ Agreement** under UNCLOS)
- **The holistic and overarching nature of the ocean provides opportunities** to increase cohesion, harmonise indicators, and integrate governance frameworks across these conventions and their respective Conferences of the Parties (**4 COPs**).
- **Possible actions for collaborative and aligned engagement include:**
 - Shared metrics and joint scientific panels and assessments to reduce duplication of efforts that can introduce unnecessary implementation and reporting burdens.
 - Shared capacity and equity efforts through co-designed objectives and priorities, meaningful participation by Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and engagement from non-State and subnational actors.
 - Use of the ocean as a focal point to support transboundary conflict management, effective dispute resolution, and capacity development across ocean-related sectors.

Background

It is important to assess synergies across the environmental governance landscape. Parties across the **Rio Conventions** (UNFCCC, CBD, UNCCD) are calling for greater focus on implementation, cross-institutional coordination, and recognition of ocean-climate-biodiversity synergies in their ocean action plans. They further highlight the need to strengthen cooperation among the Rio Conventions and the newly adopted **BBNJ Agreement**. The BBNJ Agreement includes a dual-ended requirement of enhancing coordination and coherence, and not undermining relevant legal instruments, frameworks and bodies (IFBs; Articles 5(2) and 8), which include the Rio Conventions.

The ocean and its ecosystems provide nutrition, income, coastal protection, recreation, energy, transport, communication, and security, and, critically, hold widespread cultural and spiritual significance. Upcoming Conferences of the Parties (COPs) provide opportunities for enhanced collaboration around common goals. This Policy Brief summarises the ocean roles connecting the work of these four conventions and their respective COPs (**Figure 1**), and shares recommended action items to harness the ocean for a unified agenda across the **4 COPs**.

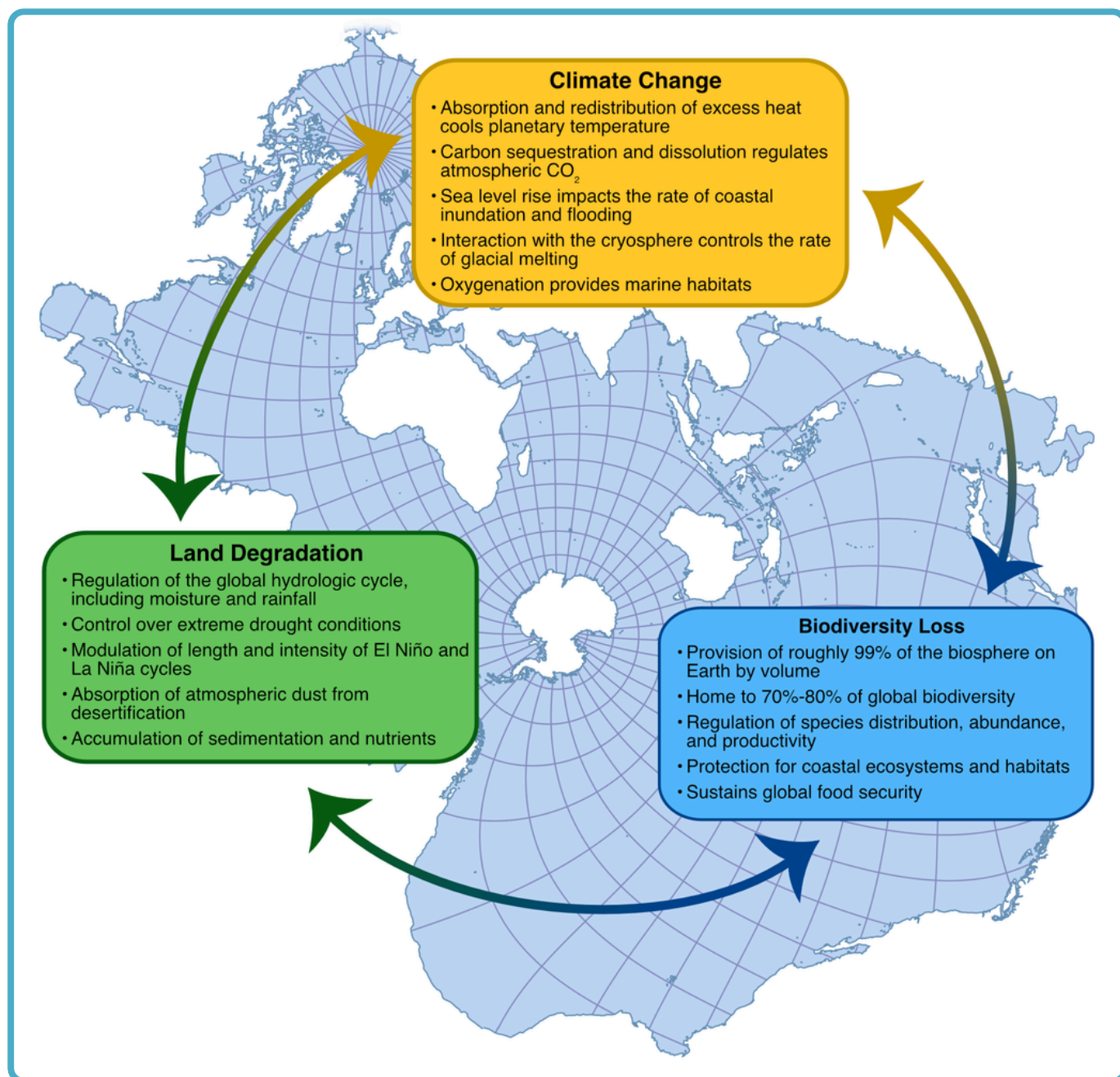


Figure 1: Ocean roles in climate, biodiversity, and land processes, modified from [Geddes, Berman et al. 2026](#).

Connecting the conventions and their 4 COPs

I. The ocean in Earth systems

The ocean functions as the heart and lungs of the planet - controlling major cycles of water, carbon, wind, nutrients, and ultimately life. The ocean has absorbed over 90% of excess heat and 29% of excess carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. It covers more than 70% of the planet and hosts a wealth of ecosystems and biodiversity, which are responsible for producing oxygen in the ocean, supporting food webs that feed us and provide livelihoods, regenerating nutrients that fuel productivity, uptaking and transferring carbon to deep waters, and increasingly providing a source of novel pharmaceutical and industrial agents. The global ocean controls patterns of drought, wildfires and the creation of atmospheric rivers that control rainfall and flooding.

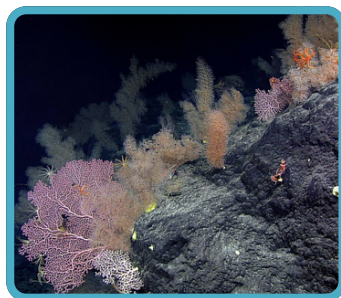
II. Marine biodiversity protection

Protecting marine biodiversity honours the rights of nature and spiritual values and sustains critical functions that make our planet habitable. Area-based management efforts to protect marine biodiversity can be aligned across environmental conventions by the use of shared criteria and elements of protection, leveraging ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs; CBD), vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs; regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs)), areas of particular environmental interest (APEIs; International Seabed Authority (ISA)), area-based management tools including marine protected areas (ABMTs and MPAs; BBNJ) and strategic and environmental impact assessments (SEAs and EIAs; BBNJ, ISA). Together, these tools can help achieve the CBD's Global Biodiversity Framework target of protecting at least 30% of the ocean by 2030.

At the same time, actions that conserve marine biodiversity can help mitigate climate change and augment food security reduced by desertification. UNCCD actions at the land-sea interface, such as restoring wetlands, maintaining freshwater inflow, reducing agricultural fertilisers and pesticides, and minimising soil erosion, sedimentation inputs to the ocean and saltwater intrusion, can protect marine biodiversity. Ensuring that climate change mitigation measures under the UNFCCC do not harm marine and coastal ecosystems is also essential. The BBNJ Agreement explicitly recognises the functions of the carbon cycle that underpin the role of the ocean in climate and lays out that Parties shall be guided by an integrated approach to ocean management that builds ecosystem resilience (Article 7(g-h)).

III. Ocean roles in combating climate change

Rising greenhouse gas (GHG) levels in the atmosphere remain a major challenge to ecosystems in the ocean and on land, and to people. Greenhouse gases are warming the planet and creating and worsening drought, wildfires, sea-level rise, flooding, and ocean deoxygenation and acidification. Ocean-based solutions to climate change include offshore sources of renewable energy (wind, tidal, wave), green (low-emission) shipping and seagoing research technologies, restoration and enhancement of blue carbon ecosystems (mangroves, seagrasses, wetlands), climate-smart fishing practices, climate-resilient marine protected area design and management, potential marine carbon dioxide removal (mCDR) pursued in accordance with the precautionary approach, and genetic resources that scrub GHGs. These solutions can be shared in overlapping goals across Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans (UNFCCC), National Action Programmes (UNCCD), National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (CBD), and ABMTs and EIAs (BBNJ).



Images courtesy of [NOAA National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service](#), [Schmidt Ocean Institute](#), [European Space Agency](#) & [NOAA Ocean Exploration](#)

Ocean action items

- **Enhance cooperation and coordination among scientific and technical bodies** informing the 4 COPs (BBNJ: Scientific and Technical Body; UNFCCC: Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technical Advice; CBD: Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice; UNCCD: Committee on Science and Technology). This will require affording these science bodies the mandate to cooperate with others, as well as designing and funding mechanisms to facilitate regular and sustained cooperation.
- **Exchange knowledge and synthesise ocean content in global assessments**, including from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), UN World Ocean Assessment, Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP), and other reports and outreach materials. Encourage and facilitate joint outputs and/or consult across conventions to co-design the scope of assessments and reports, to help harmonise outputs and messages and reduce duplication of costs and efforts.
- **Harmonise ocean databases** via standardised descriptors, [essential ocean variables](#), and shared community standards for data collection and sharing. Design and build the BBNJ Agreement's Clearing-House Mechanism so that it is interoperable with similar mechanisms under other conventions, as well as with global repositories and databases. **Leverage global networks of scientific communities** to better understand best community practices and to cultivate and disseminate standardised approaches of collecting, sharing, and using ocean data.
- **Ensure scientific robustness** of biodiversity-carbon cycle linkages and recognise current limitations of observing changes in the strength of the global biological carbon pump. **Co-design action plans and strategies** across conventions to enhance long-term observation efforts.
- **Share, develop and build capacity** for ocean science (exploration, observing and modelling), technology and conservation. Capacity development and technology transfer are called for across all four conventions and could be enhanced by working together to identify and deliver capacity needs. Needs assessments and Clearing-House Mechanism match-making tools under the BBNJ Agreement can be designed in ways to support the development of capacity that helps Parties meet obligations across multiple conventions. By sharing lessons learned, resources and strategies, common goals around capacity and equity can be achieved across fora.
- **Include diverse knowledge systems** representing a wide suite of values, priorities and approaches in decision-making. Ensure that Indigenous Peoples and local communities can meaningfully participate in and contribute to all aspects of design and implementation. Take all necessary actions to ensure that Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and under-represented voices hold leadership positions in all 4 COPs and their scientific and technical advisory bodies so that those who are most affected by climate change and biodiversity loss are at the forefront of discussions and actions.
- **Ensure that funding streams are robust for critical ocean observing systems** and systems are responsive to evolving needs for ocean data. Integrated, innovative ocean-based finance mechanisms, funds and tools should evolve to achieve multiple convention objectives and shared aspirations regarding conservation and sustainable use of the global ocean.
- While this brief focuses on the BBNJ Agreement together with the three Rio Conventions, delegates and stakeholders should draw on, and work with, all other relevant conventions and agreements to **collaboratively achieve multilateral climate and biodiversity goals through ocean action**.

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About DOSI

The Deep-Ocean Stewardship Initiative is a global network of experts that integrates science, technology, policy, law and economics to advise on ecosystem-based management of resource use in the deep ocean and strategies to maintain the integrity of deep-ocean ecosystems within and beyond national jurisdiction.

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