GOBI
Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative

Newsletter

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2026: The year it all began or another false dawn?

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by Dominic Pattinson, GOBI Coordinator

The entry into force of 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 (the BBNJ Agreement) on 17 January 2026 was a major milestone in the long journey to safeguard ocean biodiversity. One of its four core elements provides - for the first time at a global level - a mechanism for establishing area-based management tools (ABMTs), including marine protected areas (MPAs), in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ).

So, does 2026 mark the beginning of a new era in ocean protection? Only time will tell, but there are positive signs that the BBNJ Agreement has the potential to make a significant contribution to reversing destructive trends affecting the ocean and help address the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and marine pollution.

Encouragingly, several proposals for ABMTs, which can be submitted individually or collectively by Parties to the BBNJ Agreement, are already being developed. There is also evidence that the process outlined in the Agreement to encourage greater cooperation and coordination between Parties and relevant global and regional bodies is starting to change behaviours, with many organisations discussing and developing guidance on implementation of the Agreement. Crucially, the requirement for all ABMT proposals to include draft management plans should avoid the establishment of so-called 'paper parks'.

Importantly for the GOBI network, ABMT proposals in international waters must set out a description of the area to be protected, a description of the state of the surrounding marine environment, and information on the criteria specified in Annex I of the BBNJ Agreement. The latter includes many of the same or very similar criteria used by CBD to describe ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs). The EBSA portfolio, which includes the contributions of many GOBI partners, provides an important, ready-made knowledge base that can and should be used in the development of proposals for ABMTs.

Finally, the BBNJ Agreement has also galvanised political and policy interest in the high seas, with many governments, philanthropic organisations and NGOs pursuing initiatives to support its implementation. One such initiative is the Living High Seas Partnership (www.livinghighseas.org), in which GOBI is one of three core partners along with GIZ and IUCN, and partner countries Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Indonesia, Micronesia and Senegal. Focusing on five EBSAs known for their high biodiversity value in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans as initial scoping regions, the Partnership aims to identify potential candidate sites to co-develop into scientifically robust, regionally supported ABMT proposals.

So, yes: there are reasons to hopeful that 2026 - like 2008 when CBD Parties adopted the EBSA criteria and the MPA network criteria and when GOBI was formed - will be seen as another landmark year for the protection of the marine environment.

A tribute to Piers Dunstan

By David Johnson, GOBI Senior Advisor

Some very sad news to share. Piers Dunstan was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lymphoma a year ago and was battling it until he sadly passed in September. Piers and Nic Bax (CSIRO) led the technical work on EBSAs for the regional CBD workshops in the southern hemisphere. He was a key member of the 'engine room' of GOBI, a scientist with strong policy rapport and sound judgement trusted by politicians. He was part of the core team of experts and a great team player working on GOBI's previous IKI project, delivering Susutainable Ocean Initiative workshops and advising Australia on marine biodiversity issues. An inspiration, a colleague and a friend. As a tribute, I can't do better than to share the short note I sent to his wife below.

23 September 2026

Dear Simone,

I am so sad Piers has gone. Sad for you and the family. Sad for the ocean. And sad for our work together. Piers gave our Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative lots of his time, promoting science and better understanding. Our small select group achieved a lot. I have many happy memories from missions and meetings with him – held in exotic and not so exotic places. From negotiations in New York, workshops in Africa and Thailand, being lost in China to a well-earned beer and late-night swimming in the Maldives. Special moments with your exceptional, athletic, cheeky, professional, warm-hearted, handsome man. We will miss him hugely.

I am sure Sunday will be a tough day. Stay strong and a big hug from me and many other friends and colleagues all over the world.

Very best wishes and condolences,

David Johnson

Where the seabirds go

Re-evaluating seabird tracking data in the South West Pacific to inform future area-based management

by Tammy Davies, BirdLife International

White-necked petrel over the Tasman Sea. Image courtesy John J. Harrison

The South Tasman Sea, located between Australia and New Zealand, hosts some of the highest seabird densities in the world. Recognising this area as a biodiversity hotspot, an ecologically or biologically sgnificant marine area (EBSA) was described for the South Tasman Sea in 2012 during the CBD Regional Workshop for the Western South Pacific. The description was primarily based on seabird data, including the Key Biodiversity Areas identified from seabird tracking data in the region.

The South Tasman Sea is a dynamic ocean area with high primary productivity supporting a rich and diverse food web, including sharks and turtles, and serves as a migratory corridor for humpback and southern right whales. The region has complex topography with abyssal plains and seamounts supporting cold-water corals and sponges. The area also supports high seas fisheries, particularly for southern bluefin tuna.

The South Tasman Sea also has some of the highest rates of seabird bycatch in longline fisheries, which is of particular concern for female Antipodean albatross who forage in the productive waters of the South Tasman Sea whilst raising their chicks. The Antipodean albatross is listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List due to the severe population decline and highly skewed sex ratios caused by bycatch in fisheries.

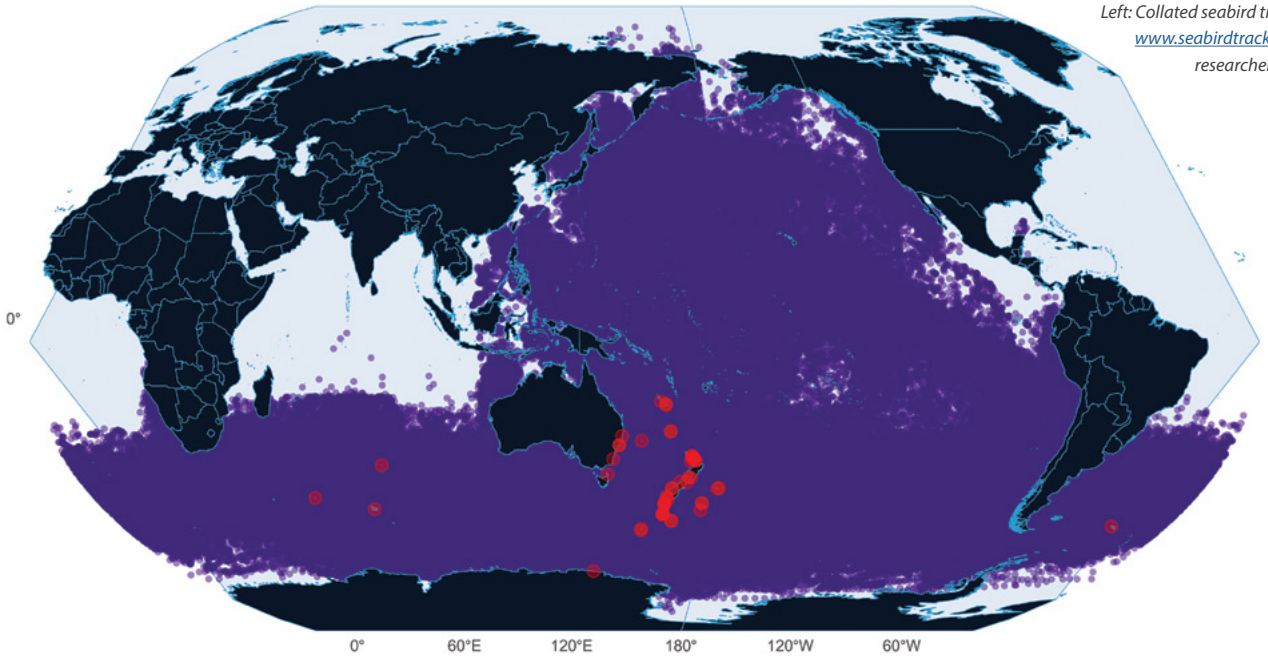
Since the description of the EBSA over 14 years ago, a considerable amount of further seabird tracking data has been collected, with improvements in species coverage and resolution. The Seabird Tracking Database now hosts more than 90 million data points for more than half of all seabird species. These data provide an opportunity to better understand the biological importance of the region.

Recognition of the ecological importance of the South Tasman Sea, and waters extending northwards to Lord Howe Island, has led to interest in considering area-based management tools for this region under the BBNJ Agreement. To ensure the best available evidence is available for such decision-making processes, BirdLife International has collated available seabird tracking data for the region. The huge compiled dataset, shared by over 40 researchers, totals more than five million location points, from 46 species, including albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters, as well as terns, penguins and storm-petrels, with birds tracked

from six different territories. The analysis of these data will follow standard approaches to delineate core use areas with the resultant sites evaluated against the criteria for Key Biodiversity Areas, an approach that has successfully informed both the description of EBSAs and designation of marine protected areas. Key Biodiversity Areas are the most important sites for nature and are a complementary indicator for Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

BirdLife International is working with a consortium of NGOs and the High Seas Alliance to compile the evidence base and engage with Indigenous peoples and governments to support the development of a robust area-based management proposal for the region.

For further information see: birdlife-hatch.org/topics/31466/page/lord-howe-rise-and-south-tasman-sea



Left: Collated seabird tracking data from www.seabirdtracking.org shared by researchers for the analyses

BirdLife International Partnership flocks together

The BirdLife International Partnership met in Nairobi in early September for the quadrennial Global Partnership Meeting and the second Global Flyways Summit. The gathering of more than 100 BirdLife Partners from around the world was an opportunity to reconnect, be inspired by each others' work and explore shared challenges.

Marine highlights during the event included a session on the BBNJ Agreement and what it means for conservation. This session covered BirdLife's tools and experience with informing area-based management of the high seas through seabird data, Key Biodiversity Areas, and advocacy at regional fisheries management organisations. The session also showcased the IUCN Global Ocean Program and Technical Assistance Facility, as well as the efforts of various BirdLife Partners in supporting national BBNJ ratification efforts.

The latest State of the World's Birds was also launched during the meeting. The sixth edition of this flagship publication focuses on migratory birds and their flyways, and what they reveal about the state of nature, the drivers of biodiversity loss, and the solutions needed to reverse declines.

Demonstrating our collective commitment to reverse the decline of migratory birds while protecting or restoring the places they and we need, the Nairobi Flyways Declaration was signed by key stakeholders including governments, scientists, NGOs, conservationists and financial institutions. The Declaration recognises that migratory birds cross borders and continents; their survival depends on action by many stakeholders across entire flyways, not isolated national efforts.

With special thanks to our hosts Nature Kenya for making it such a memorable week.

The new Important Marine Mammal Area Specialist Group expands its remit... and heads for the south-east Atlantic

by Erich Hoyt, Co-chair, IUCN SSC WCPA IMMA Specialist Group

Blue Whale in the Gulf of California IMMA. Image courtesy Lucy Molleson, WDC and Erich Hoyt

Earlier in October, the IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force - a longtime GOBI collaborator - announced that it has been invited by IUCN to form a Specialist Group within the IUCN and its two commissions, the Species Survival Commission (SSC) and the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA).

This changes the group from a temporary, more informal Task Force to a permanent Specialist Group. The new full name will be the IUCN SSC WCPA Important Marine Mammal Areas Specialist Group. Or, for short: the IMMA Specialist Group.

"We are honoured to be asked to become a permanent body within the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the IUCN," says Specialist Group co-chair Giuseppe Notarbartolo di Sciara.

Co-chair Erich Hoyt adds: "We like to describe our work as giving whales and other marine mammals a seat at the negotiating table when it comes to marine spatial planning, EIA assessments and creating new or expanded marine protected areas in national waters and on the high seas. That will continue to be our guiding mission."

For the past 13 years since its founding, the Task Force/ IMMA Specialist Group has devised, developed and launched the new Important Marine Mammal Area (IMMA) tool for biodiversity conservation. To date, working with more than 350 regional experts and a dedicated review panel, the group has examined 79.1% of the global ocean and put 323 IMMAs and 191 Areas of Interest (AoI) on the map, making them easily accessible for policymakers, governments and a wide variety of users. The IMMA shapefiles and layer have been downloaded by more than 1500 users to date.

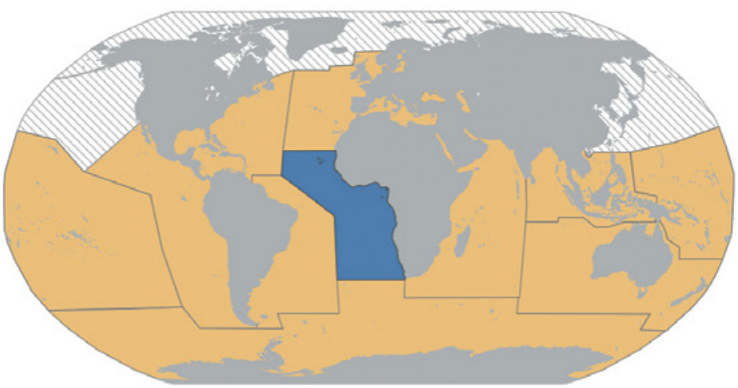
Primary support for the IMMA project came from GOBI's programme of work under the International Climate Initiative (IKI) during the period 2016-2023, which sponsored seven IMMA regional workshops. Four others were sponsored by the French Biodiversity Agency, Water Revolution Foundation and MAVA Foundation, with help from University of St Andrews, Animal Welfare Institute, OceanCare, and others, and administrative support from the Tethys Research Institute and Whale and Dolphin Conservation.

IMPORTANT MARINE MAMMAL AREAS SPECIALIST GROUP

In late November 2026, the IMMA work forges on, travelling to Saly in Senegal, to focus on the Southeastern Atlantic (western African coast) with 30 experts from the region. This effort, supported as part of the Global Ocean Programme Component 1, funded by the EU and implemented by IUCN, will complete the IMMA work in the southern hemisphere and in the Atlantic. The remaining three regions awaiting IMMA examination, subject to further funding, are the northeastern and northwestern Pacific and the Arctic. Then, the IMMA work will revisit and expand efforts to identify more IMMAs in each of the 15 ocean regions including substantial portions on the high seas. Currently, 48% of all the IMMAs are in the high seas, while 52% are in national EEZ waters. IMMAs occupy 11.2% of the high seas areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ) surface.

Besides IMMA identification, the IMMA group has also been involved in monitoring and implementation projects in a number of IMMAs in South America, Southeast Asia, East Africa and the Caribbean. Recently, a survey of the more than 1500 users of the IMMA layer has been conducted revealing many unforeseen positive outcomes. Full results will be published in early 2027.

Global rollout of IMMA regional workshops



+ 79.1% of ocean examined
+ 11 regional workshops
+ 320+ experts

- COMPLETED
- PLANNED NOV 2026
- TO BE ARRANGED

Filefish under Sargassum.
Image courtesy Lindsay Martin

Most compelling science case yet for the conservation of the Sargasso Sea released

by Fae Sapsford, Sargasso Sea Commission

The Sargasso Sea Commission has released its groundbreaking 'Socio-Ecosystem Diagnostic Analysis' (SEDA), the first of its kind for this iconic high seas ecosystem.

Edited by Dr David Vousden, the SEDA is a culmination of more than four years' work with contributions from more than 25 experts. It brings together knowledge across oceanography, fisheries, shipping, deep-sea ecosystems, marine biodiversity, and legal and regulatory frameworks. The analysis was produced with the support of the UNDP-GEF Sargasso Sea Stewardship Project, a part of the FAO-led Common Oceans Program, and the French Facility for Global Environment's five-year 'SARGADOM' project.

Situated in the middle of the North Atlantic, the Sargasso Sea, a gyre where currents meet, benefits from being the site of the longest-running time series for oceanographic data in the world, which is implemented by the Bermuda Institute of Ocean Sciences. This long-term record provides an important baseline for understanding how ocean conditions are changing. The wealth of scientific data collected on the Sargasso Sea over time, along with the realisation that this is an increasingly stressed high seas ecosystem facing multiple climate change-related threats, makes it an ideal 'sentinel' ecosystem for monitoring global ocean-climate linkage.

"The Sargasso Sea provides ecosystem benefits of enormous global importance," Dr David Vousden, Chief Technical Advisor for the report said. "The Sargasso Sea is a superhighway for iconic marine animals as well as supporting a unique open-ocean habitat with its own endemic organisms. It is also subject to threats to ecosystem resilience and long-term stability, with the greatest risk coming from the impacts of climate change."

Findings of the Socio-Ecosystem Diagnostic Analysis (SEDA)

The Sargasso Sea has warmed by about 1.2°C over the last 40 years, causing knock-on effects that have, and continue to, fundamentally alter the Sargasso Sea ecosystem including a decrease in oxygen, increases in salinity and acidification, variability in nutrient levels, and changes in the planktonic community. The Sargasso Sea constitutes less than 1% of the ocean, but the area continues to sequester an outsized net 7% of the global carbon pump, making it a vital mitigator of climate change.

The SEDA identifies the Sargasso Sea as one of the world's most distinctive open ocean ecosystems. The Sargasso Sea provides important migratory corridors and spawning grounds for a range of species that connect ecosystems and economies across the Atlantic and beyond. It is also the only known spawning area for the European and American anguillid eels, both of which are experiencing severe population declines. These eels support a massive

international food trade, including illegal smuggling, and their unique high seas spawning grounds are currently unregulated.

The SEDA found that less than 0.5% of global high seas fishing activity occurs within the Sargasso Sea. However, the fisheries that exist target ecologically important species like tuna and billfish. Furthermore, pelagic longline fisheries operate in the region and can result in bycatch of sharks, turtles and seabirds. There is also a growing interest in fishing for squid and mesopelagic fish, important prey species that if removed from the ecosystem could have catastrophic effects on the food chain.

The Sargasso Sea is a major international shipping route. Vessel traffic presents potential risks to cetaceans through ship strikes and underwater noise, alongside risks associated with vessel discharges and other pollution. Additionally, seabed mining is a possible future threat that has the potential to damage or destroy unique and slow growing deep-sea ecosystems and cause wide-ranging ecosystem pollution.

Development of a Strategic Action Programme (SAP) for the Sargasso Sea's conservation

The SEDA report will form the basis for negotiation of a Strategic Action Programme (SAP) for the conservation of the Sargasso Sea, which will be agreed by Sargasso Sea stakeholders, including scientific expert Commissioners and representatives of the signatory governments of the Hamilton Declaration. Signed in 2014, the Hamilton Declaration is a non-binding political agreement signed by interested countries including the UK and Bermuda, for the voluntary conservation of the Sargasso Sea ecosystem.

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 (also called the BBNJ Agreement or High Seas Treaty) which came into force in January 2026, provides new pathways to conservation for the Sargasso Sea. The BBNJ Agreement allows for international legally binding marine protected areas to be established in ocean areas beyond national jurisdiction for the first time.

Hamilton Declaration II

The finalisation of the SEDA comes as the Governments of Bermuda and the UK launch a new initiative to strengthen the stewardship of the Sargasso Sea – Hamilton II. This non-binding declaration, signed in Bermuda on 19 October 2026, provides a mechanism for Signatories to signal political support for developing a collective area-based management tool (ABMT) proposal under the BBNJ Agreement for the Sargasso Sea.

"The Sargasso Sea has attracted global interest in its conservation for over a decade," said Dr David Freestone, Executive Secretary of the Sargasso Sea Commission. "Now is our chance to protect this iconic ecosystem under international law. The Strategic Action Programme being developed for the Sargasso Sea could include a proposal for its recognition by the BBNJ Conference of the Parties."

Left: Signing of the Hamilton II Declaration in Bermuda on 19 October 2026. From left, Andrew Murdoch, Governor of Bermunda; Uma Kumaran, UK Minister for Overseas Territories; Jaché Adams, Bermuda Minister of Public Works and Engagements, and David Burt, Bermuda Premier.

Right: The ceremony took place at Hamilton House in Bermuda. Both images courtesy Sargasso Sea Commission.

From criteria to practice:
Developing a Reading Guide for the 22 indicative criteria in Annex I of the BBNJ Agreement

by Guillermo Ortuño Crespo, Ocean45 project coordinator

Under Part III of the Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement), proposals for area-based management tools (ABMTs), including marine protected areas, will draw on the indicative criteria in Annex I. Article 19(4) provides for proposals to be prepared on the basis of the best available science and scientific information and, where available, relevant traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, taking into account the indicative criteria in Annex I.

The Agreement lists 22 criteria but does not prescribe one complete set of definitions, knowledge systems, indicators or assessment methods for their application. As proponents invoke the same criteria, a shared understanding of their meaning and possible uses can help make proposals easier to develop, explain and consider. It can also make room for different forms of knowledge and values to inform the identification of candidate areas.

As part of the Ocean45 project, a group of ocean experts is developing a technical Reading Guide that will examine each of the 22 criteria in the language and context of the Agreement. The aim is to encourage careful, transparent and context-sensitive interpretation in support of conservation and sustainable use whilst driving creativity and innovation in how different kinds of knowledge and values are considered in the identification of candidate ABMTs in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

The Guide is intended as a resource for the BBNJ community. It will not assign priority to particular criteria or prescribe a single route to identifying an area. It may, however, unpack how certain criteria may relate to one another and how some are more oriented towards the description of individual sites, while others may be more adequate in determining network properties.

This work is part of **Ocean45: Informing the Implementation of BBNJ Area-Based Management Tools**, an initiative led by the IUCN WCPA High Seas Specialist Group and Seascape Consultants, and supported by the Bloomberg Ocean Fund and the Joint 30x30 Funding Initiative within the Ocean Impact Partnership, a sponsored project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. The Reading Guide work is co-led by Dr Guillermo Ortuño Crespo and Dr Anna Metaxas (Deep Ocean Stewardship Inititative, DOSI), with the invaluable support of Ocean45 research analyst Dr Kirsty McQuaid.

Building the Reading Guide

The work so far has established a foundation for drafting, consultation and further review.

A preparatory review examined how earlier instruments, frameworks and bodies have defined or used concepts related to the Annex I criteria. The Reading Guide will revisit relevant precedents to help readers understand where previous practice may be informative, while attending to the distinct purpose and text of the BBNJ Agreement.

Heidi Bruce/unsplash

Above and right: Participants at the Ocean45 workshop 'From criteria to practice: Towards a harmonized Reading Guide for operationalizing Annex I of the BBNJ Agreement' held in Lisbon in July 2026. Our sincere thanks to Oceano Azul Foundation for their generous support for these events.

In July 2026, Ocean45 convened a week-long workshop to inform development of the Guide, generously hosted by the Oceano Azul Foundation at the Oceanário de Lisboa. The programme included 3 days on scientific and technical guidance, and a 2-day session specifically focused on Indigenous and local knowledge and the cultural factors criterion. Both workshops form a critical part of the Reading Guide consultation process, feeding expert opinion into developing the structure and technical content of the Guide.

More than 25 experts have been involved so far, alongside an interdisciplinary Advisory Board. We expect to broaden expert engagement across the knowledge systems relevant to the indicative criteria over the next six months. Drafting is underway across all 22 criteria, with a structure designed to help readers approach each criterion through consistent questions while allowing for different contexts and evidence bases.

Fields under consideration include the criterion text and an operational question; a working explanation and rationale; relevant spatial and temporal scales; possible indicators and analytical approaches; available datasets and gaps; uncertainty; relationships with other criteria; and potential implications for management and monitoring. The Guide may also point to relevant stakeholders, knowledge sources and references. These fields remain under development and will be adapted where a criterion calls for a different treatment.

A guide shaped for use

Further drafting and review throughout 2026 and 2027 will test how the Guide can be useful across different settings and capacities. Alongside interpretation of the individual criteria, the team is considering topics that span several criteria. These may include the choice of spatial and temporal scale; ecological connectivity and change over time; the treatment of uncertainty and uneven data availability; relationships among criteria; and how different knowledge sources and values can be considered appropriately. The final scope and treatment of these topics remain to be determined.

In 2027, we hope to complete the drafting and organize a final workshop to seek insights from experts working at the science-policy interface and from practitioners. This will provide a further opportunity to examine the Guide's clarity and practical usefulness before final review. We aim to make the Reading Guide available to the BBNJ community before the end of 2027.

The Reading Guide is intended to support a more harmonised understanding of how the Annex I indicative criteria can be understood and put into practice under Part III of the Agreement. We hope it will help those preparing and considering proposals to explain their choices clearly, explore suitable methods for particular settings, and engage constructively with the breadth of knowledge and values relevant to ABMTs.

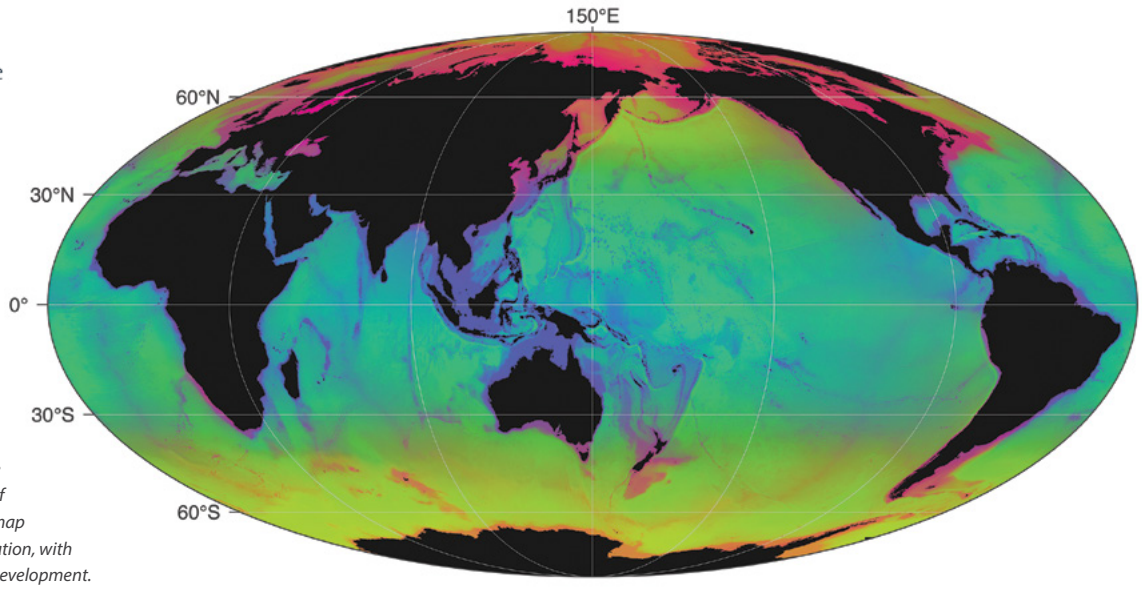


Figure 1. Preliminary global patterns of predicted pelagic species composition at 5 km resolution. Similar colours indicate broadly similar predicted assemblages; changes in colour show compositional turnover across the ocean. Colours summarise the first three principal components of the Gradient Forest outputs. The map shows continuous biological variation, with bioregion boundaries still under development.

Mapping marine bioregions to support the BBNJ Agreement

by Fabrice Stephenson, Ocean Analytics / Newcastle University

Researchers at Newcastle University and Ocean Analytics are working with international collaborators through the Ocean45 initiative to develop a global marine bioregionalisation for conservation. The work will support the design of representative marine protected area (MPA) networks in areas beyond national jurisdiction. By mapping how species composition changes across the ocean, the project will provide a consistent basis for identifying distinct biological communities and assessing how well they are represented within existing or proposed conservation networks.

The work combines marine species occurrence records with environmental information at 5 km resolution. Biological records come primarily from Ocean Biodiversity Information System (OBIS) records and have been through a rigorous quality control as part of a new Aquamaps initiative (Aqua X). Gradient Forest models estimate changes in species composition (i.e., how one group of species is different from one place to another) along environmental gradients, including temperature, depth, oxygen and seabed characteristics. These relationships are then mapped globally and used to group areas with similar predicted species composition into bioregions. Separate classifications will represent benthic and pelagic biodiversity, recognising that patterns on the seafloor and in the water column can differ.

The modelling workflow has been developed and preliminary outputs produced, including global maps of compositional turnover (Fig. 1) and associated uncertainty. An international technical working group has reviewed initial analyses and agreed core settings for the next model runs. Further technical discussions will address the classification hierarchy and whether biological and environmental data support separating out epipelagic and mesopelagic layers. Nested classifications will allow users to work at different levels of ecological detail while retaining a consistent global framework.

Communicating the limits of the evidence is central to the work. Two complementary measures will show how predictions vary across repeated model fits and how well environmental conditions are represented in the biological observations. This distinction matters because a stable model prediction can still be weakly supported in poorly sampled environments. These outputs will help users interpret the maps and identify priorities for biological sampling.

An expert workshop at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh on 11–12 November 2026 will bring together marine scientists and conservation practitioners to review the emerging classifications and their application. Discussions will consider ecological interpretation, comparisons with existing regionalisations, uncertainty, and how best to communicate the results to decision makers. Planned outputs include openly available spatial layers through UNESCO's OBIS portal and practical guidance, with a worked application in one or more case study areas. Together, these products will help scientists and policy practitioners use marine biodiversity patterns to develop and evaluate conservation proposals under the BBNJ Agreement.

A new web tool supporting conservation in the Southern Ocean

by Cassandra Brooks, University of Colorado Boulder

The Southern Ocean, representing ~20% of the world's ocean, hosts critical biodiversity and marine ecosystems. However, important areas for biodiversity are not evenly distributed, rather they are concentrated in specific areas based on environmental and ecological conditions. Expert-led approaches are revealing where these regions are across the world, including in the Southern Ocean.

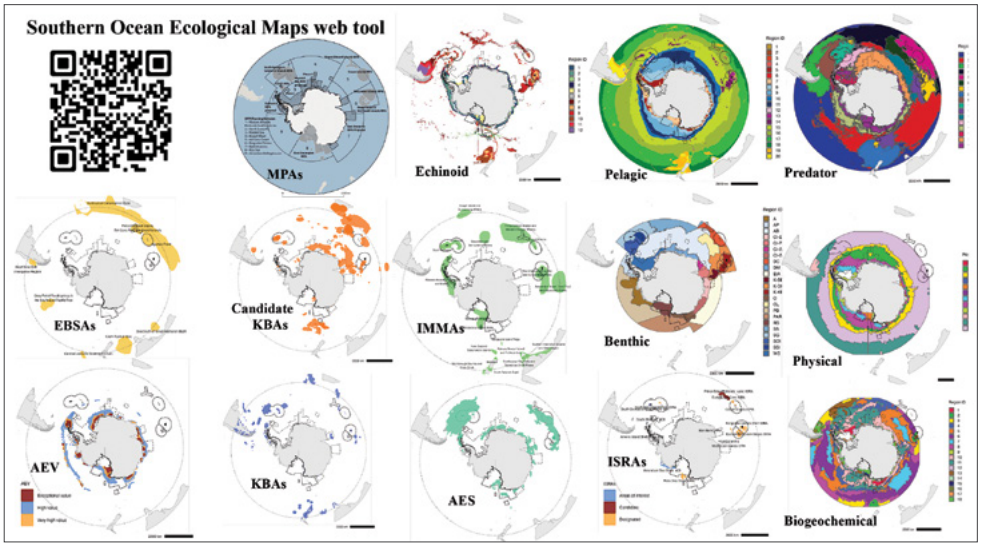
A team of researchers based at Australian and United States institutions have released a web application called "Southern Ocean Ecological Maps" which compiles and maps existing "important areas" in the Southern Ocean. This includes Ecologically and Biologically Significant Areas (EBSAs), Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs), Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs, and Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), along with circumpolar bioregionalisations to help. It also includes recently developed circumpolar ecological indices (e.g., Hindell et al. 2020, DuVivier et al. 2026). While the tool, which encompasses waters south of 40°S, was targeted towards CCAMLR (the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources) – the multi-national body that manages the Southern Ocean – it can be used by practitioners and scientists alike who work in the southern hemisphere.

CCAMLR has been working towards a representative network of Southern Ocean marine protected areas (MPAs), in line with global targets. Two MPAs have been adopted by CCAMLR (in the Ross Sea and south of the South Orkney Islands) and four additional MPAs remain under negotiation (in the western Antarctic Peninsula, East Antarctic, and the western and eastern Weddell Seas). Further, additional MPAs exist around many subantarctic islands including Heard, McDonald, Prince Edward, Kerguelen, Crozet, South Georgia and South Sandwich. CCAMLR has developed nine MPA planning domains to guide its work.

The new web tool visualises where conservation analyses overlap or align in the Southern Ocean to better understand the distribution of biodiversity in the Southern Ocean, how these areas are situated within the CCAMLR Area, including in the MPA planning domains, and how they relate to the spatial distribution of existing and proposed Southern Ocean MPAs. Thus, the tool provides a means for visualising and quantifying overlap with other biodiversity layers, and other existing or proposed MPAs, elucidating gaps in protection. Further, in the CCAMLR region specifically, the tool can be used to identify the areal extents of the different important areas and regionalizations that are covered by the current and proposed network of MPAs, including both no-take (off limits to resource extraction) and multi-use (where some extraction is allowed) zones. We hope the tool helps support conservation planning in the Southern Ocean.

The web app is publicly available at https://saef-monash.shinyapps.io/antarctic_map/. Please review the 'Data and Methods' page of the app (see lower left-hand side bar) for detailed instructions on how to use the app. We intend to continue updating the webtool as new circumpolar analyses and data layers become available.

Acknowledgements: The web app was developed under the Securing Antarctica's Environmental Future Project at Monash University; United States collaborators were supported by the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration.



Left: Example maps from the Southern Ocean Ecological Maps web tool. Access the tool through the QR code. MPAs are marine protected areas. On the left side of the graphic are "important areas" including: EBSAs, IMMAS, ISRAs, KBAs, AES and AEV. Regionalisations are on the right.

For data sources visit the 'Data and Methods' section at https://saef-monash.shinyapps.io/antarctic_map/

5th SOI Global Dialogue: international cooperation and coordination are more important than ever

by Dominic Pattinson, GOBI Coordinator

Participants at the Fifth Susutainable Ocean Initiative Global Dialogue meeting in Seoul, July 2026.

The fifth meeting of the Sustainable Ocean Initiative (SOI) Global Dialogue, kindly hosted by the Republic of Korea, took place in Seoul from 30 June to 3 July 2026. These meetings provide a unique platform to bring together Regional Seas Organisations (RSOs) and Regional Fisheries Bodies (RFBs) to build capacity, develop partnerships and learn from each other. As well as representatives from RSOs and RFBs, other global and regional organisations and initiatives, national governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector were also present at the meeting.

Ahead of CBD COP17 in October 2026 and the first BBNJ COP in early 2027, this year's Global Dialogue focused on progress of the implementation and monitoring of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), and cooperation and coordination in support of the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction – in addition to the usual sharing of experiences on cross-sectoral cooperation and enhancing cooperation.

The implications and opportunities provided by the BBNJ Agreement was a recurring theme throughout the week and highlighted the continuing importance of the SOI Global Dialogue. It was clear from participants that developments in relation to the BBNJ Agreement will have a significant influence on ocean governance for the years to come. In particular, the requirement for international frameworks and bodies (IFBs) to cooperate was seen as bringing much-needed focus on what has been a persistent barrier to more effective conservation in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The platform established by the Global Dialogue provides a ready-made mechanism for starting discussions on breaking down silos and building trust and understanding across institutions.

Contributions from the CBD Secretariat, DOALOS, UNEP and FAO all highlighted relevant global processes that could help strengthen global and regional cooperation. This was followed by presentations from RSOs and RFBs that provided real life examples, at a regional level, of cooperation on environment, biodiversity and fisheries issues.

The meeting also reflected on opportunities identified in previous meetings for cooperation and coordination in implementing the KMGBF and whether these had been taken up. A common challenge was national-level institutional fragmentation - particularly the lack of coordination between fisheries and environment ministries or agencies. As well as the BBNJ Agreement, other opportunities included shared thematic issues that naturally draw multiple sectors to the table (e.g., harmful algal/seaweed blooms, marine pollution, invasive species, climate change impacts) and progress towards KMGBF Target 3 and the role that other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) could play as a point of convergence.

Many participants reported that the KMGBF has served as a catalyst for cooperation. Concrete outcomes included development of practical guidance and criteria for OECMs; joint scientific workshops assessing the biodiversity effectiveness of area-based measures; capacity-building activities, and targeted scientific cooperation to address data-poor species. A recurring observation was that the work of fisheries bodies and its contribution to biodiversity outcomes often went unrecognised.

Synergies between implementation of the KMGBF and the BBNJ was another key theme. An obvious synergy is the CBD work on ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs) that could serve as a practical tool to support future ABMT proposals and provide a focus for collaboration among organisations. Participants reiterated that opportunities for cooperation extend well beyond ABMTs to other elements of the BBNJ Agreement, including the Clearing House Mechanism.

Participants also discussed possible approaches for enhancing cooperation and coordination between IFBs based on thematic areas: area-based management tools including MPAs, environmental impact assessments, and capacity building and transfer of marine technology.

Finally, the meeting looked to the future and how to enhance the impact of the SOI Global Dialogue. Reflecting on the last 10 years, the discussions centered on the strategic strengths and comparative niche of the Dialogue. Its unique value as a forum bringing together RSOs and RFBs from all regions and ocean basins was recognised, as well as the importance of the regional dimension as a key component of ocean governance, including for BBNJ Agreement implementation. Four focal areas for how to enhance the impact of the SOI Global Dialogue were considered: communication, meeting design, participation and engaging new partners, and intersessional work.

For more information on the SOI Global Dialogue please visit cbd.int/soi

Ricky Beron/Unsplash

The sharks that don’t carry passports

by Diego Bezerra and Daniel Dunn, University of Queensland

A 30-year review of tracking studies shows how far Australia’s sharks roam, and how little we know about most of them.

At least 34 sharks have swum between Australia and New Zealand in tagging studies. That is just one of the connections aggregated by Diego Bezerra from the Applied Marine Biogeography Lab at the University of Queensland, who led a new review of three decades of shark and ray tracking research with colleagues from Australia and abroad. Their question was simple: which species leave Australian waters, and where do they go?

The team focused on the 29 shark and ray species that use Australian waters and are listed under the UN Convention on Migratory Species. Five of them were documented moving between Australia and other jurisdictions: white sharks, whale sharks, shortfin makos, blue sharks and school sharks.

In total, 140 tagged animals reached seven other countries or territories, as well as the high seas, with destinations including New Zealand, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, South Africa, the Solomon Islands and Micronesia. Two corridors stood out. White sharks, makos and school sharks share a route across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand, and some continue to New Caledonia. In the north, whale sharks and tiger sharks travel from Ningaloo Reef to Indonesia across the Timor Sea.

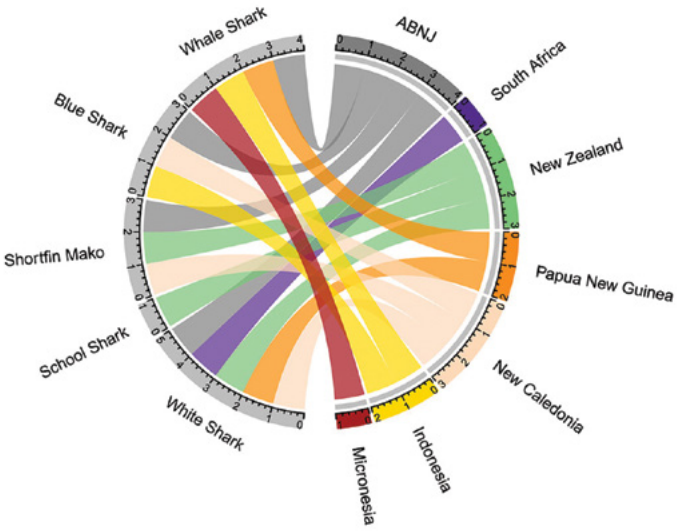
The blank spaces on the map are just as striking. For 18 of the 29 species, the team found no published movement data at all, and roughly two thirds of the endangered or critically endangered species had none either. The three threatened sawfish species had just three studies between them, while white sharks and whale sharks had 38. Research, it seems, follows the charismatic species in wealthy countries.

Whale shark at the Ningaloo Reef, Western Australia. Image courtesy Emilie Ledwidge / Ocean Image Bank

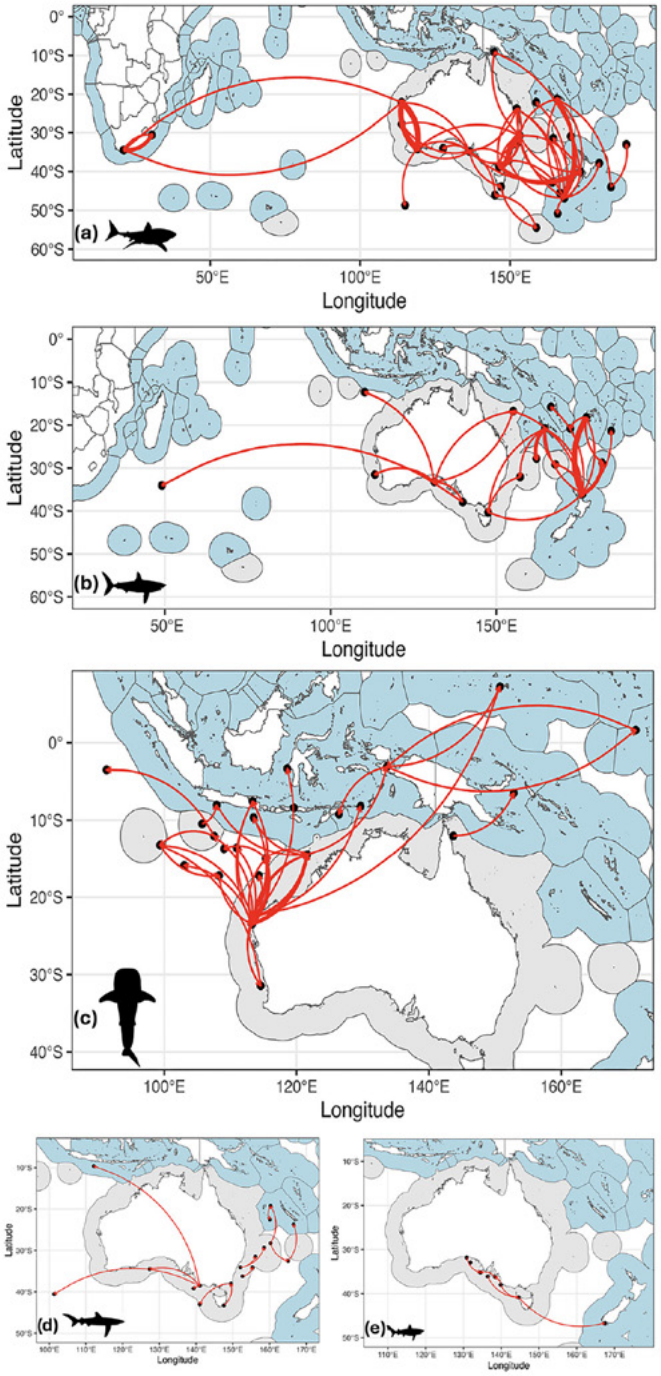
Understanding these migratory connections matters because protection that stops at the shoreline can't follow an animal that doesn't. Four of the countries linked to Australia by these movements (Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Micronesia and the Solomon Islands) aren't signatories to the Migratory Species Convention or its Shark MoU. The authors say joining would build political momentum for cooperation and for research, and the evidence they gathered also strengthens the case for listing tiger sharks under the Convention. The researchers also suggest a curtain of acoustic receivers across the shallow Torres Strait, focus on understudied species (particularly the sawfish), and support for neighbouring countries with fewer research resources. They stress that their picture is a minimum, since unpublished tracking data weren't counted.

Read the full paper:

Bezerra et al. (2026) Integrating migratory connectivity data into the conservation of Australian sharks and rays. Conservation Biology. doi.org/10.1111/cobi.70383



Above: Species with known transboundary movements between the Australian EEZ and other jurisdictions (including areas beyond national jurisdiction; ABNJ). Diagram generated using R package circlize (Gu et al., 2014).



Right: Network connectivity models showing the transboundary movements of five shark species: (a) white shark, (b) shortfin mako, (c) whale shark, (d) blue shark, and (e) school shark. These models depict connectivity across Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and into adjacent international waters. Maps were generated using additional data from rnaturalearth (Massicotte & South, 2023) and EEZ boundaries from Flanders Marine Institute (2023).

References:

Gu et al. (2014) doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/btu393
Massicotte & South (2023) https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=rnaturalearth

Tiger shark in Coral Bay, Western Australia.
Image courtesy Emilie Ledwidge / Ocean Image Bank

GOBI
Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative

CBD SBSTTA28 side event

EBSAs in ABNJ: Opportunities to inform and support the conservation of biodiversity in the high seas

by Dominic Pattinson, GOBI Coordinator

A key challenge for Parties seeking to develop area-based management tools (ABMTs), including marine protected areas (MPAs), in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ) is building a strong scientific evidence base. This was the focus of a GOBI side event, organised with BMUKN (the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety) and the CBD Secretariat at the 28th meeting of the CBD Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA28) in July. Held at UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, the event explored how ecologically or biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs) can support protection and management in ABNJ, the gaps that remain in the EBSA portfolio, and how the EBSA process can continue to provide a valuable source of scientific information for ocean management.

Reinforcing the value and utility of EBSAs in ABNJ

The event began with a presentation from Prof. David Johnson highlighting the value and utility of work that has already gone into identifying EBSAs, including the 38 that are located wholly in ABNJ. Detailed scientific information is available on the ecosystems that those 38 EBSAs describe, including deep sea hydrothermal vents, seabird foraging sites, high productivity zones, deep-sea coral and sponge communities – offering a uniquely valuable resource of knowledge for the conservation and sustainable use of these special places in the ocean. Importantly, the CBD process for the description and recognition of EBSAs is an existing part of the United Nations global ocean governance framework recognised by CBD State parties.

A key message is that we are not starting from scratch. A huge amount of effort and resources has gone into the EBSA process that is of relevance to the BBNJ Agreement. Going forward, it is important to build on this foundation, recognising that science evolves and that understanding a changing ocean is vital for informing management measures. To achieve 30x30, action will be needed in ABNJ and this can be done by aligning EBSAs (CBD) with ABMTs, including MPAs (BBNJ)

Opportunities to address gaps and update the EBSA portfolio in ABNJ

Jessie Cleary from the Marine Geospatial Ecology Lab at Duke University, highlighted the opportunity that increased political and scientific attention generated by the BBNJ Agreement has provided for addressing gaps in the EBSA portfolio. With a high level of compatibility between the EBSA criteria and the BBNJ Annex I indicative criteria, EBSAs provide a rich ground for initial scanning for sites with potential for protection and management. However, with many EBSAs described 10 or more years ago there is a need to update them as new data becomes available. New data sources, such as those gathered under the various taxa-specific important area initiatives, innovative modelling approaches and methodologies harnessing AI, could all be used to support, update and enhance the EBSA knowledge base. In addition, new scientific information generated in response to the BBNJ Agreement may reveal some important areas and features in ABNJ that meet the EBSA criteria but have not yet been described as such.

Building on success: using EBSAs as a basis for BBNJ ABMTs

The final presentation, by GOBI Coordinator Dominic Pattinson, described the synergies between the EBSA process and the arrangements set out under the BBNJ Agreement for submitting ABMT/MPA proposals in ABNJ. The case for taking action is clear: the latest assessments, including the Third World Ocean Assessment and the draft Kunming Montreal

Global Biodiversity Framework progress report, highlight that more action is needed if we are to address the triple planetary crises of biodiversity loss, climate change and pollution. The BBNJ Agreement has given a welcome boost to protection of the high seas and has galvanised action by countries, with several potential sites in the high seas already being championed as possible ABMTs.

The Living High Seas Partnership, a global project led by GIZ in partnership with IUCN and GOBI, was highlighted as a pioneering effort to co-develop proposals for ABMTs in ABNJ, using 5 EBSAs across three ocean basins as initial scoping areas: the Salas y Gomez and Nazca Ridges EBSA, the Atlantic Equatorial Fracture Zone and high productivity system EBSA, the Central Indian Ocean Basin EBSA, the South of Java Island EBSA and the Remetau Group EBSA. Initiatives like Living High Seas, and the many others that are responding to the BBNJ Agreement, provide hope that action is being taken to protect the high seas.

The very well attended event (standing room only!) concluded with discussion with expert panellists Joe Appiot (CBD Secretariat), Daniela Diz (Heriot-Watt University), Melissa Abderrahim (IUCN) and Amy McDougal (BirdLife International). A big thank you goes to Cecilia Fischer (BfN) for chairing the side event and to all the State party representatives, NGOs and others who attended the event.

Coming up at CBD COP17 in October 2026...

Coral reefs of the world: global status and trends 2025

by the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network

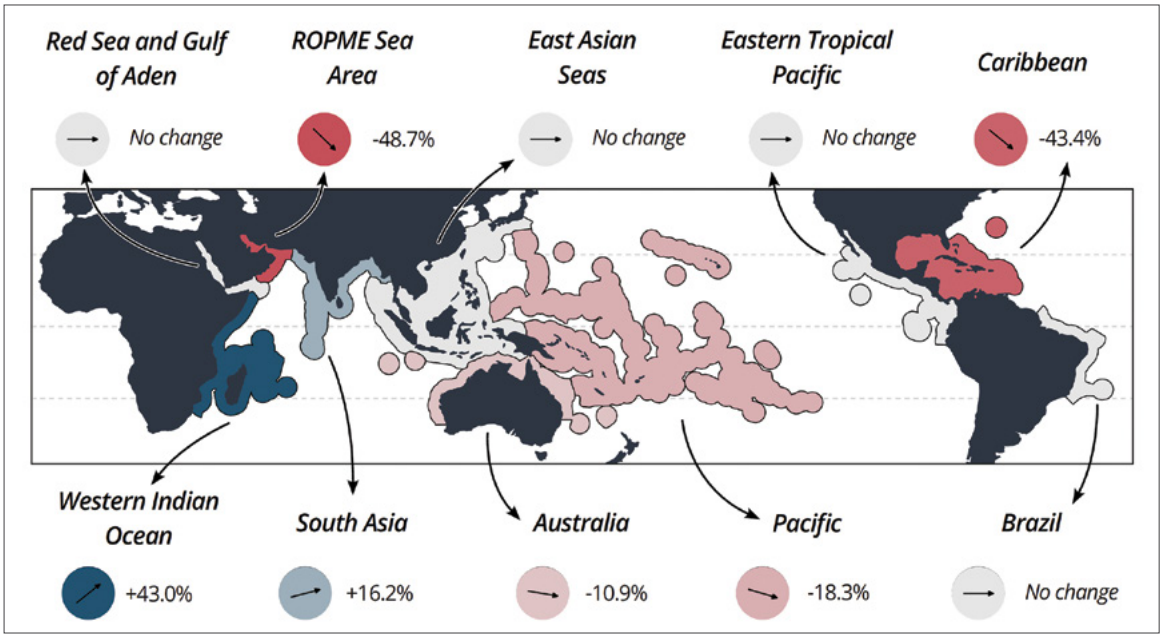
Coral reefs support more than 25% of all marine species yet only cover 0.2% of the ocean floor. This concentration of marine biodiversity highlights the importance of understanding the status of coral reefs, the pressures impacting on their health and the actions that can be taken to ensure their survival.

Status of Coral Reefs of the World: 2025 released by the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network (GCRMN), during the 55th Pacific Island Forum Leaders Meeting in Palau on 31 August 2026, provides the latest and most comprehensive assessment to date of the status and trends of coral reefs from 1980 to 2024. The report covers regional breakdowns of the status and trends of coral reefs and drivers of change to enable governments to identify and prioritise conservation measures.

It draws on more than 40 years of global data from 21.1 million observations, 87,299 surveys, representing 36,886 sites across 124 countries, territories and economies, making it the most comprehensive assessment of coral reef status ever undertaken. It provides the clearest picture yet of how climate change and local pressures are reshaping coral reefs worldwide, and how action today can strengthen resilience for the future.

The report provides the scientific evidence base to underpin policy, management, and conservation decisions, equipping governments, policymakers, and practitioners with the knowledge needed to act. This report specifically seeks to:

1. Provide an updated global assessment of the status of the world's coral reefs following the previous report (Status of Coral Reefs of the World: 2020);
2. Use regionally consistent methodologies to present temporal trends and spatial differences in the status of coral reefs and identify drivers of change to enable governments to benchmark status and prioritise conservation measures;
3. Interpret observed patterns in relation to heat stress, cyclones, and other environmental and anthropogenic disturbances at regional and global scales;
4. Provide greater granularity in reporting on algal cover trends, including macroalgal and turf algal cover;
5. Promote an inclusive and collaborative reporting process for the world's coral reefs that appropriately recognises and acknowledges contributors;
6. Support reporting and benchmarking against international biodiversity and climate frameworks, including the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the Paris Agreement, and Sustainable Development Goal 14: Life Below Water.



Left: Comparison of relative changes in hard coral cover between 1980-2009 to 2020-2024 across the ten GCRMN regions. Image courtesy GCRMN.

Coral reefs are running out of recovery time

The report shows that since 1998, every major global bleaching event has reduced global hard coral cover, with reefs only partially recovering before the next marine heatwave strikes. Estimated global loss in hard coral cover following each global bleaching event:

- First Global Coral Bleaching Event (1998–1999): ~6.5% decline
- Second Global Coral Bleaching Event (2010–2011): ~9.9% decline
- Third Global Coral Bleaching Event (2016–2017): ~6.6% decline
- Fourth Global Coral Bleaching Event (2023–2024): ~8.9% decline

Reefs can still recover when given the chance

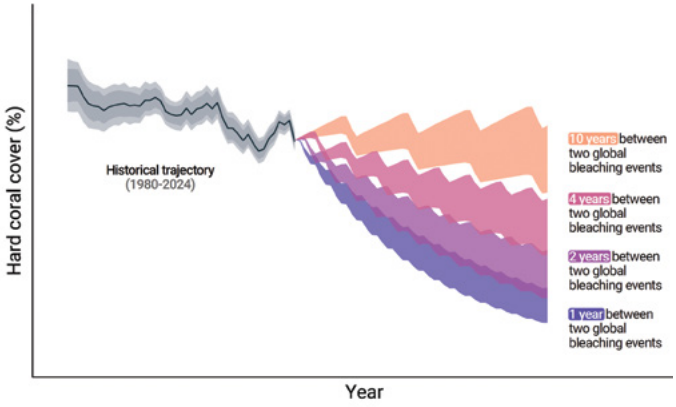
Despite this long-term global decline, the report also shows that coral reefs have the potential to recover when given the opportunity. Following the third global coral bleaching event, global hard coral cover saw a relative increase of approximately 6% between 2017 and 2019, demonstrating that reefs have maintained their natural capacity to regain hard coral cover when disturbances are reduced and sufficient recovery time is available. That recovery matters because the benefits coral reefs provide extend far beyond the reef itself. Healthy, thriving coral reefs provide a home to a huge range of marine species which in turn underpin food security, livelihoods, coastal protection, tourism and cultural heritage.

Different futures are still possible

From 1980 to 2024, global hard coral cover has declined from an average of 30.2% (between 1980 and 2009) to 27.3% (2020-2024), a relative decline of approximately 9.5%. The report identifies climate change-induced heat stress as the primary driver of this decline. Today, around 104 million people live within five kilometres of a coral reef. This is a 46% increase over the past two decades, highlighting the increasing pressure on reef systems.

The report also explores how coral reef futures could unfold under different scenarios by simulating different recovery times between global bleaching events over the century.

It finds that, under the current frequency of global bleaching events (every 5-6 years), coral reefs are expected to continue on a trajectory of decline. By contrast, ambitious emission reductions combined with effective management of local pressures - overfishing, coastal development, poor water quality - offer the strongest pathway to maintain hard coral cover.



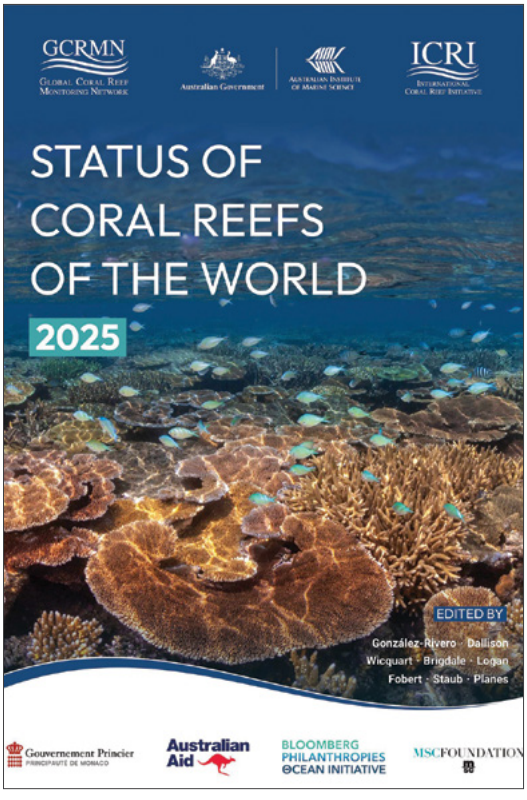
Above: Possible future trajectories of global hard coral cover based on historical trend. Image courtesy GCRMN.

Science to action

The central question is no longer whether coral reefs are changing, but whether policies, investments and conservation efforts can keep pace with the scale and speed of that change.

The new science highlighted in the report provides the knowledge needed to act. This needs to be combined with accelerated policy implementation, increased financing, strengthened protection and ensuring decision making is based on scientific evidence.

Access the full report at gcrmn.net



Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative

Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative

Providing the scientific basis for conserving biological diversity in the global ocean

The Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative is an international partnership of organisations committed to advancing the scientific basis for conserving biological diversity in the marine environment. In particular, GOBI contributes expertise, knowledge and data to support the Convention on Biological Diversity's efforts to identify ecologically and biologically significant marine areas (EBSAs) by assisting a range of intergovernmental, regional and national organisations to use and develop data, tools and methodologies.

GOBI also undertakes research to generate new science that will enhance the value of EBSAs and their utility for promoting environmental protection and management for specific areas of the world's oceans. The intention is ultimately to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss through the application of ecosystem approaches to the management of human activities, and to support the establishment of networks of representative marine protected areas in national and international waters.

The GOBI partnership and activities are coordinated by a Secretariat team, provided by Seascape Consultants Ltd. GOBI is supported by funding from the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMUKN).

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On behalf of:

Federal Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety

of the Federal Republic of Germany

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