

# A New Deal with our Ocean Planet

The creation of an inclusive, equitable and sustainable ocean economy calls for bold political and social leadership, based on a holistic relationship with our ocean planet

The ocean sustains all life on our planet. Our human relationships with the ocean are diverse, complex and evolving. They represent both a time-honoured and new plurality of values—material, monetary, emotional and spiritual—that must be respected and fostered.

These blue relationships—ocean values—are also tempered by how and where we encounter the ocean. Recognition and acknowledgement of these attributes will alone contribute to creating an inclusive, equitable and sustainable ocean economy that ensures human wellbeing for the present and into the future.

which effective protection, sustainable production and equitable prosperity go hand in hand.

## Difference in Approach

Currently, the dominant discussions about the future of the oceans is led by 'blue economy' enthusiasts who look primarily into the 'new and material' aspects of the ocean as 'resources and services'. This approach can be called the 'what more can we get or take from the ocean' perspective.

There is a strong case today to go beyond the material and take a 'what values does the ocean offer to us' perspective.

Paraphrasing anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa, just as the ocean is an open and ever-flowing reality, our effort should be to transcend all forms of insularity, to become openly searching, inventive and welcoming in our approach.

The ocean has influenced and shaped our societies. Ocean sciences today concentrate on what we are doing to the ocean—overharvesting it, polluting it, failing to govern it). Alternatively, we need to demonstrate how the coastal and oceanic parts of our history have shaped our ethical codes and moral practices. We need to stress, for example, how the oceans have nurtured our collective and cooperative instincts.

## New perspective

Adopting an integrated social wellbeing framework that considers the material, social and relational attributes of wellbeing is one way to pursue this new perspective. While the material relationships which humans have with the ocean are indispensable, there

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Consequently, the future governance of the ocean becomes a collective responsibility of humanity. All those who earn their livelihoods from it—ocean citizens—and all the others—ocean supporters—must collaborate to ensure ocean health and ocean access.

The above are the key messages contained in a recent paper titled 'The Human Relationships with our Ocean Planet', commissioned by The High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy ([www.oceanpanel.org](http://www.oceanpanel.org)). Established by 14 serving world leaders, it aims to create momentum for a sustainable ocean economy in

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is need today for mainstreaming the relational and subjective dimensions.

The relational dimension encompasses our relationship with nature and our fellow human beings, whether within families, communities, societies, nations and the world. It also includes our links to institutions and the rules, rights and responsibilities that govern the access to, and use of, our coastal and marine spaces.

The subjective dimension is about the feelings and aspirations we have towards the ocean, whether a sense of awe, adventure, joy, tranquillity, spirituality or freedom.

These relationships have played, and must continue to play, a major role in future governance of the oceans at the micro, meso and macro levels.

Such a holistic perspective is still on the periphery of policy and public concerns about the ocean. A fresh look into the history and future of human relationships with the ocean is imperative for our future.

### History, present and future

The history of civilization reveals that multicultural and multi-ethnic societies, polyglot, and with tolerant religions, started in ports and on-board ships.

The continued existence of ocean and coastal commons means that cooperative ways of working and living persist and thrive on our seacoasts—when recognized and supported. However, such systems are becoming rarer, on land, as our societies privatize public space and emphasize the individual more than the collective.

The principles and norms of free trade, neutrality, religious freedom, multiculturalism and the duty to render assistance to those in mortal danger are all maritime in origin and point toward humankind's better nature.

Currently, there are rising anxieties about increasing economic inequalities, climate-change impacts, the rise of authoritarian governance and, more positively, the worldwide reckoning with racialized and gendered injustices. This, and the moves for decolonization, of minds as well as lands and waters, point to a fervent desire to re-examine our relationships with each other and with non-human nature.

In this context, emphasis on the positive values that our long relationship with the ocean has bequeathed us is timely.

### Access: a priority

Consider our relationships with the ocean—worldwide—in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The seashore and beaches emerged as key relational spaces of vital importance to people, as evidenced by the rush to the sea all over the world as lockdowns eased. The oceans' appeal to the inner stirring of the body and soul became more



pronounced. But the inequities of access and their impacts on people's wellbeing have also been more starkly illustrated.

Our coasts have been victims of creeping privatization for numerous economic activities, leading to excess pollution of the ocean and coastal ground water, destruction of coastal vegetation, and transgressing into the common spaces of the coast and the littorals.

In tropical regions, ocean infrastructure has resulted in untold erosion of sandy coasts.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have also witnessed the important contribution that small-scale fisheries and local value chains play in our fish-food systems. When global value chains faltered, retailers and consumers turned to the local small-scale fleets

and supply chains. These value chains are more gendered and relational and were once dismissed as inefficient and unsuited to modernity. They have now come to our rescue.

These new ocean values must be fostered, sustained and allowed to evolve in order to maintain people's access to the ocean.

What is the use of conserving or sustaining the ocean ecosystems, on the one hand, while emptying it of the people who brought us these values, on the other hand? Will this not leave humanity poorer in more than the material sense?

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Ocean supporters who are concerned about what the ocean portends for humanity's future must keep their eyes, minds and hearts open to perspectives that embrace a more holistic understanding of the various strands of human relationships with the ocean. They must perceive how these strands can be woven together to create a reciprocal relationship with the ocean and a collective responsibility for its future.

To achieve a broader societal reflection on 'building forward better' here are some points of action.

#### **Humanize the ocean narrative**

Narratives motivate and inform political action. Stress more on narratives that celebrate the rich diversity of human social, cultural, cognitive and emotional relationships with the ocean. Emphasising more on the relationship between human wellbeing and ocean ecosystem flourishing will broaden the political consensus around a sustainable ocean planet.

We should reinstate the original idea of the blue economy that was propounded by the small island states and based on the tenets of equity and environmental sustainability.

The economic concept of 'ecosystem services' needs to be replaced by the more socially appropriate 'nature's contribution to people' concept.

There is need to highlight that the oceans contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) goes far beyond just SDG 14.

Efforts must be undertaken to restore a broader knowledge base in ocean dialogues which considers indigenous knowledge and other systems of knowledge such as history, anthropology, culture, arts, heritage and traditional ecological knowledge.

#### **Wider constituencies, new vision**

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerabilities in the 40 years of consensus on globalized and liberalized economies. Rising inequalities and inadequate action on climate change are leading to radical calls for transformative economic and social policy. Even on the blue economy discussions, there is a call for blue justice and blue degrowth.

These voices of dissent must be heard as they come from those whose lives and livelihoods depend on the oceans. This will prevent a repeat of the polarising and exclusionary processes witnessed in the industrial and agrarian revolutions.

Small-scale fishers, the largest segment of the ocean citizens, need support and involvement as allies for ocean stewardship. Greater priority must go to the democratic and human-rights-based FAO/UN Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication.

There is a need to mainstream the concerns and actions of port cities and coastal towns as they spearhead the concerns on climate change and sustainable tourism, stressing local governance in the context of national planning.

More support is needed for policies and finance that prioritize participatory and inclusive ocean-society relationships. We need to invest in socially, culturally embedded meso-level institutions of community governance that are between the national and individual levels. The non-monetary human relationships to



Fishers are waiting at Mbour beach in the early hours to buy freshly caught fish, Senegal. The seashore and beaches emerged as key relational spaces of vital importance to people, as evidenced by the rush to the sea all over the world as lockdowns eased

the ocean are most evident and valued at this level.

The historical rights and responsibilities of these communities in the ocean need to be retained and expanded where appropriate. Inclusive governance is best supported by participatory democracy, which requires an active and capable civil society.

It is imperative to establish long-term public funding for repositories that preserve, enlighten and enthuse us about community memories of events, for example, natural disasters, toxic exposures, development projects. Such initiatives will even out information asymmetries, facilitate intergenerational memory and create a more level playing field for communities negotiating with external interests.

This must be accompanied with the rise of public-interest litigation bodies that ocean citizen communities can approach when their 'social license to operate' is threatened by corporate development interests. These bodies must be fluent in, and supportive of, the priorities and cultural worldviews

of the communities they represent. At the same time there must be investment in post-COVID-19 initiatives that direct funding towards social wellbeing, creating more resilient economies and food systems. This should be supported by the inclusion of ocean citizen communities in recovery planning in other sectors, principally transportation, tourism and fisheries.

This call for harmonized ocean governance comes at a time of resurgent nationalism. This is the time to stress greater multilateralism to bring order to the governance architecture of the ocean, ensuring a delicate balance between local and national priorities as well as the common good of humanity.

As we prepare for the UN Decade for Ocean Sciences for Sustainable Development, due to run from 2021-2030, only bold political and social leadership will make such a future an emerging reality. Herein lies the challenge of envisioning and working towards a sustainable ocean, based on a holistic relationship with our ocean planet. ♣

#### For more



**The High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy (Ocean Panel)**

<https://www.oceanpanel.org/>

**The Human Relationships with our Ocean Planet**

<https://bit.ly/3ajSWZj>