



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
9 September 2020

Original: English

---

## Seventy-fifth session

Item 76 (a) of the provisional agenda\*

### Oceans and the law of the sea

## Oceans and the law of the sea

### Report of the Secretary-General\*\*

#### *Summary*

The present report, which covers the period from 1 September 2019 to 31 August 2020, is submitted pursuant to paragraph 364 of General Assembly resolution [74/19](#), in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to prepare a report on developments and issues relating to ocean affairs and the law of the sea, including the implementation of that resolution, for consideration at its seventy-fifth session. It is also being submitted to States parties to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, pursuant to article 319 of the Convention. The present report provides information on major recent developments relating to ocean affairs and the law of the sea, in particular, at the United Nations and its specialized agencies, funds and programmes, as well as within the bodies established by the Convention.

---

\* [A/75/150](#).

\*\* The present report contains a summary of the most significant recent developments and selected parts of contributions by relevant agencies, programmes and bodies. Owing to word limits for reports mandated by the General Assembly, an advance, unedited version of the report, with comprehensive footnotes, is available on the website of the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea at [www.un.org/depts/los/general\\_assembly/general\\_assembly\\_reports.htm](http://www.un.org/depts/los/general_assembly/general_assembly_reports.htm).



## I. Introduction

1. In the current unprecedented and challenging times of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), we are reminded of the major role of the oceans in our health and well-being and everyday life, providing most of the oxygen we breathe, essential foods and medicine, critical links for trade and transportation and a source of cultural values and heritage. The oceans are a vital part of the climate system and are essential for the regulation of air, water and temperature. Organisms discovered in the ocean depths will play a key part in the search for solutions to the current crisis facing humankind.

2. The health of the oceans, however, continues to deteriorate. Marine and coastal ecosystems continue to be negatively affected by multiple and cumulative pressures from human activities, including fishing, shipping, mining, tourism and other industries, as well as impacts linked to climate change. Pollution, ocean warming and acidification continue to have adverse effects on the functioning of marine ecosystems and biodiversity, with corresponding impacts on low-lying coastal States, small island developing States and coastal cities and communities whose daily lives are linked to the oceans.

3. COVID-19 has had devastating impacts around the world and progress in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been significantly affected, including the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 14 and its 10 targets, some of which were expected to be achieved in 2020.

4. As the international community works to end the pandemic and recover better,<sup>1</sup> it has an opportunity and responsibility to correct humankind's relationship with the natural world, including the world's seas and oceans.

5. The legal framework for all such efforts and activities remains the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the world's "constitution for the oceans".

6. The present report summarizes activities and developments relating to ocean affairs and the law of the sea, including those undertaken by entities in the United Nations system and other intergovernmental organizations in relation to General Assembly resolution 74/19. The purpose of the report is to assist the Assembly in its annual consideration and review of activities and developments relating to oceans and the law of the sea. It should be read together with other reports that are relevant to oceans and the law of the sea issued by the United Nations during the period under review. It should also be read together with the more detailed contributions provided by the United Nations specialized agencies, programmes and bodies, as well as other intergovernmental organizations.<sup>2</sup>

## II. The impact of COVID-19 on oceans issues

7. COVID-19 has had devastating health, economic and social consequences globally, including disruption of production and of global supply and value chains. Many sectors of the blue economy have been severely affected, in particular in small island developing States.

8. International shipping, which accounts for approximately 80 per cent of the volume of global trade, decreased substantially. With widespread international travel restrictions, marine and coastal tourism also declined significantly. While impacts on the fisheries sector varied across countries and regions, demand for and production

<sup>1</sup> See [www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-response](http://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-response).

<sup>2</sup> All contributions are available at [www.un.org/depts/los/general\\_assembly/contributions75.htm](http://www.un.org/depts/los/general_assembly/contributions75.htm).

and supply of fisheries products generally decreased, as did prices of marine fishery and aquaculture products. Consumer demand fell owing to restaurant and hotel closures, while flight cancellations, disrupted trade routes and potential increases in sanitary measures affected value chains. Challenges in compliance with social distancing requirements also affected the operation of vessels, in particular small-scale coastal vessels. Reliance on submarine cables, which carry approximately 99 per cent of the world's Internet traffic, intensified by approximately 25–50 per cent, as usage for communication, commerce, teleworking, telemedicine and tele-education expanded.

9. Seafarers and fishers were heavily affected. Many of the world's 9.4 million fishers, 90 per cent of whom live in developing countries, were unable to work. Impacts on the 2 million seafarers employed in the shipping sector were expected to be substantial. Health and safety concerns abounded, with port closures and travel restrictions causing difficulties for seafarers leaving ships and changing crews, seeking medical treatment ashore and being repatriated. Reductions in capacity, lockdown measures and quarantine requirements affected rescue efforts and led to delays in the disembarkation of refugees and migrants rescued at sea.

10. Reduced human activities had positive impacts on certain marine species and ecosystems; however, the relocation of persons and increasing subsistence and artisanal fishing in coastal and nearshore areas placed additional pressures on vulnerable fish stocks. Concerns were reported in relation to the negative consequences of COVID-19 on the management of fish stocks and potential increases in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing owing to reduced monitoring, control and surveillance activities. An increase in medical, hazardous and plastic waste stemming from COVID-19 and associated sanitary situations and lockdowns, together with reduced recycling, may have potential negative health and environmental impacts.

11. COVID-19 affected the implementation of ocean-related work programmes. Meetings, conferences and workshops were cancelled, postponed or held in alternative formats. The 2020 United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development was postponed, as was the fourth session of the intergovernmental conference on an international legally binding instrument under the Convention on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction and the twenty-first meeting of the United Nations Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea. The work of international tribunals involved in the settlement of maritime disputes and various capacity-building activities were also affected.

12. Travel restrictions and social distancing requirements disrupted data collection surveys and the provision of information to policymakers. The diversion of resources to manage and recover from COVID-19 could lead to a reduction in ocean science funding and affect future mitigation and adaptation efforts.

13. Opportunities in responding to COVID-19 were nonetheless identified, including building effective, resilient and sustainable governance frameworks going forward as an essential prerequisite for the management and sustainable development of the oceans. Increased online interactions provide opportunities, including for capacity-building and the exchange and dissemination of lessons learned and best practices.

### III. Legal and policy framework

14. The international legal regime governing all activities in the oceans and seas consists of a multifaceted range of global, regional and bilateral legal instruments, as well as national laws and regulations that have been adopted within the overarching legal framework set out in the Convention, complemented by a wide range of non-legally binding instruments, including the 2030 Agenda, and the annual resolutions of the General Assembly on oceans and the law of the sea and on sustainable fisheries, which provide internationally agreed policy guidance, commitments, goals and targets.

15. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the entry into force of the Convention was marked on 16 November 2019. The pre-eminent contribution of the Convention to the sustainable development of the oceans and seas and the strengthening of international peace, security and cooperation was recognized, alongside calls upon States that had not yet done so to ratify or accede to the Convention and for all States Parties to urgently support its full implementation.

16. Efforts to progress towards universal participation in the Convention and its implementing agreements must continue. As at 31 August 2020, the number of parties to the Convention and the Agreement relating to the Implementation of Part XI of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 remained at 168 and 150, respectively. The number of parties to the Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, adopted in 1995, increased from 90 to 91.

17. The legal framework set out in the Convention continued to be strengthened through the development of additional legal and policy instruments at the global and regional levels, although those efforts were hampered by COVID-19. While the fourth session of the intergovernmental conference on an international legally binding instrument under the Convention on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction was postponed, online intersessional work has been launched by the President of the conference.

18. Efforts towards the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 14, continued. In December 2019, the indicator for target 14.c of Goal 14 was reclassified from tier III to tier II. The methodology for the indicator consists of a self-reporting exercise in the form of a questionnaire to be completed by States, which will be circulated by the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea as the custodian agency for the indicator.

19. At the preparatory meeting for the 2020 United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14, held in February 2020, delegations considered the themes for the interactive dialogues and the elements of an intergovernmentally agreed declaration. The eight themes for the interactive dialogues were finalized, including “Enhancing the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law, as reflected in the Convention”.<sup>3</sup> Although the Conference was postponed, new dates and new deadlines for its preparatory process will be decided by the General Assembly in due course.

---

<sup>3</sup> Information on the preparatory process for the Conference is available at [www.un.org/en/conferences/ocean2020](http://www.un.org/en/conferences/ocean2020).

## IV. Maritime spaces

20. Despite the impacts of COVID-19, including postponements and operational adjustments, the bodies provided for in the Convention, namely the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, the International Seabed Authority and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, continued to contribute to the enhancement of legal certainty with respect to maritime zones and boundaries.

21. Among other activities, the Commission adopted two sets of recommendations and decided to establish one new subcommission. The Commission postponed its fifty-third session in the light of COVID-19.

22. The Authority compiled a first assessment of the performance indicators for its strategic plan for 2019 and 2020. As a priority matter, the Council of the Authority continued its consideration of the draft regulations on exploitation of mineral resources in the Area as part of the mining code, including through the establishment of three informal working groups. The second part of the twenty-sixth session of the Authority was postponed to October 2020 and will be held in a reduced format.

23. In connection with the peaceful settlement of disputes, the Tribunal constituted a special chamber to hear the *Dispute concerning delimitation of the maritime boundary between Mauritius and Maldives in the Indian Ocean (Mauritius v. Maldives)* (case No. 28). The *M/T "San Padre Pio" (No. 2) case (Switzerland v. Nigeria)* (case No. 29) was submitted to the Tribunal.

24. The International Court of Justice postponed the public hearing in *Maritime Delimitation in the Indian Ocean (Somalia v. Kenya)* at the request of Kenya and extended the time limits for the filing of pleadings in *Guatemala's Territorial, Insular and Maritime Claim (Guatemala v. Belize)*. The Court commenced its deliberations by videoconference in the *Arbitral Award of 3 October 1899 (Guyana v. Venezuela)*.

25. The Permanent Court of Arbitration administered four cases instituted under the Convention, three of which are ongoing. The *Duzgit Integrity Arbitration (Malta v. Sao Tome and Principe)* concluded on 18 December 2019 with the issuance of an award on reparation.

26. In my capacity as depositary under the Convention, I received several deposits by States parties of charts and/or lists of geographical coordinates of points concerning baselines and the outer limits of maritime zones.

## V. Importance of the human dimension

27. The health of the ocean is crucially linked to the well-being of all people. Coastal communities and populations in least developed countries and small island developing States, in particular, rely on the oceans and their resources for food security, transportation, livelihoods, recreation and economic development. The oceans are an integral part of the cultural practices and heritage, social identities, values and ways of life of many people, especially coastal communities and indigenous peoples.

28. Multiple and cumulative pressures on the oceans have disproportionately affected least developed countries and small island developing States, as well as vulnerable groups, in particular women and girls. The real human impacts have been compounded by COVID-19, which is deepening pre-existing inequalities and exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems. In addition to the public health threats posed by the crisis, wider economic and social disruptions

threaten the livelihoods, food security and welfare of millions of people, especially people working at sea and those migrating by sea.

29. The international community continued efforts to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in ocean-related sectors, as envisaged in Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) supported regional workshops and meetings that promoted gender integration and the empowerment of women in aquaculture and fisheries. FAO was developing guidance on small-scale fisheries legislation to address human rights and gender equality in efforts to align domestic legislation with the Convention. The World Maritime Day 2019 theme was “Empowering women in the maritime community”.

30. There are risks that COVID-19 will roll back gains made towards achieving gender equality, with disproportionate impacts on the economic and productive lives of women. Pre-existing gender inequalities may thus be amplified in ocean-related sectors, as elsewhere. The crisis has brought renewed awareness of the need for gender equality and the application of a “gender lens” in both emergency measures and long-term recovery efforts in order to address gender inequality and build a more equal and resilient world.

### **Labour at sea**

31. Seafarers and fishers continued to face very difficult working conditions at sea, with fishing remaining one of the most dangerous occupations in the world. The challenging labour conditions have been further exacerbated by COVID-19 and related response measures, including regarding personal safety and health, conditions of work and the ability of seafarers and fishers to join and leave vessels, in addition to other social and economic hardships arising from COVID-19.

32. Specific challenges were reported in respect of insufficient personal protective equipment and medical care on board vessels; lack of access to shoreside medical care and welfare services; and increased stress, isolation and social pressures. The inability of vessel operators to change crews as a result of COVID-19, leading to extended periods on board, was particularly problematic. Seafarers and fishers have faced unilateral or unlawful extensions of tours of duty, prolonged confinement on board ships ordered to anchorage or remote berths and unilateral termination of contracts, with some unable to leave their ships, be repatriated or seek urgent medical assistance owing to travel restrictions. Incidences of seafarer abandonment continued to occur, with some measures adopted in response to COVID-19 creating additional challenges for the resolution of abandonment cases and potentially leading to new ones.

33. Further efforts are needed to implement the obligation on every State to take such measures for ships flying its flag as are necessary to ensure safety at sea, including with regard to the crewing of ships, labour conditions and the training of crews, taking into account the applicable international instruments. In order to increase safety standards and thereby improve the working conditions, welfare and well-being of fishers, and to assist in combating illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, 48 States signed the Torremolinos Declaration on the Cape Town Agreement of 2012 on the Implementation of the Provisions of the Torremolinos Protocol of 1993 relating to the Torremolinos International Convention for the Safety of Fishing Vessels, 1977 (Cape Town Agreement).

34. The International Labour Organization, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), FAO and other United Nations specialized agencies and bodies continued to coordinate action to ensure decent work for seafarers and fishers and with other industry actors, including in response to COVID-19, resulting in the development of a wide range of guidance documents, policy briefs, recommendations and joint

statements calling attention to the particular vulnerability of seafarers and fishers and for concrete actions to mitigate those effects.

### **Migration by sea**

35. COVID-19 raised new challenges for thousands of refugees and migrants already risking their lives by taking dangerous journeys by sea in order to flee conflict, persecution and other hardships. Pandemic response measures, including strengthened border restrictions and quarantine requirements and diminished search and rescue capacities led to delays in disembarkation and denials of entry. Women, girls and individuals with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities facing heightened risks of trafficking, exploitation and abuse experienced additional challenges regarding access to information, asylum and protection.

36. Between September 2019 and June 2020, approximately 71,400 people crossed the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, with 765 people believed to have died at sea. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported large increases in departures from Libya in 2020. Concurrently, rescue capacities in the Mediterranean Sea significantly diminished owing to the grounding of humanitarian search and rescue vessels, the suspension of naval assets of the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation Sophia and impacts of COVID-19. OHCHR noted concerns over reports of failures to assist and pushbacks of vessels in distress.

37. More than 8,400 refugees and migrants were intercepted in the Mediterranean Sea and returned to Libya during the reporting period despite advice from UNHCR to the contrary owing to security risks and the likelihood of detention in unsafe conditions. Under international law, Libya does not qualify as a place of safety for the disembarkation of refugees and migrants rescued at sea. Returns may also violate the principle of non-refoulement.

38. Dangerous crossings to reach Malaysia also continued in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Around 3,300 Rohingya embarked on such journeys between January 2019 and June 2020, with at least 170 people dying or going missing since January 2020. Some vessels were intercepted or pushed back to prevent disembarkation, resulting in people being stranded at sea for months in desperate circumstances. UNHCR, together with the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), called for greater coordination among States to address movements of refugees and migrants. A meeting of the Task Force on Planning and Preparedness of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime was held, with the aim of addressing protection at sea in respect of irregular migration.

39. Despite the ongoing conflict, the humanitarian crisis and increasing risks of exploitation and abuse, refugees and migrants continued to travel to Yemen by sea. More than 27,000 people travelled from Somalia and Djibouti in the first quarter of 2020. Many Somalis also returned from Yemen owing to the situation of insecurity, but they encountered difficulties during sea crossings, including capsized vessels.

40. UNHCR advocated effective, cooperative and protection-sensitive approaches to search and rescue and disembarkation, including through engagement with coastal States, local communities and other stakeholders. Capacity-building initiatives with national coastguard agencies were conducted in Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh.

## VI. Maritime safety and security

41. Maritime safety and security continued to receive priority attention from the international community given its vital importance for life on board ships, livelihoods, international trade, energy security and the global economy. Accounting for approximately 80 per cent of global trade by volume, seaborne trade reached 11 billion tons in 2018, despite a range of downward pressures.

42. COVID-19 had a significant impact on the shipping industry and on seafarers and fishers, including in the implementation of maritime safety measures, such as inspections and certifications and measures to ensure maritime security, including limiting maritime policing and enforcement. Efforts were made to address the impacts. International shipping played a critical role in the supply of essential goods, including food and medical supplies relating to COVID-19.

43. IMO continued to assess the applicability of instruments to ships with varying degrees of autonomy, including through its regulatory scoping exercise on maritime autonomous surface ships. Progress was also made in the development and application of goal-based standards in the IMO rule-making process. Revised guidelines for the verification of conformity with goal-based ship construction standards for bulk carriers and oil tankers came into effect on 1 January 2020. Work also continued on the development of measures for ships operating in polar waters. Interim safety measures were adopted for such ships that were not certified under the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea. Efforts were also made to improve the safety of domestic ferries.

44. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) continued its collaboration with IMO and the International Hydrographic Organization on coordinated and standardized meteorological and oceanographic information, forecasts and warning services. The International Hydrographic Organization continued to develop standards and guidance on hydrographic information and to support the full implementation of “e-navigation”, in association with IMO. The International Hydrographic Organization and the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization continued to implement the General Bathymetric Chart of the Ocean project and the Seabed 2030 project, which announced the inclusion of 14.5 million square km of new bathymetric data in the latest Chart grid.

45. Piracy and armed robbery against ships remained a major threat to maritime security. While there was an approximate 13.5 per cent reduction in reported actual and attempted acts worldwide in 2019 as compared to 2018, the first half of 2020 witnessed an approximate 20 per cent increase in incidents as compared to the same period in 2019, with an almost twofold increase in Asia, which may be attributed partly to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Globally, the areas most affected by piracy and armed robbery against ships were West Africa (67 incidents), the Straits of Malacca and Singapore (45 incidents) and the South China Sea (34 incidents). While no incidents of piracy or armed robbery against ships were reported in waters around the Somali coastline, Somalia-based pirates continued to present a potential threat to international shipping.

46. Of particular concern was the continued personal risk to seafarers in 2019, with 134 persons kidnapped and 59 persons taken hostage. In the first half of 2020, 54 persons were kidnapped and 23 persons were taken hostage. Approximately 90 per cent of the kidnapping incidents occurred in the Gulf of Guinea.

47. International cooperation to address piracy continued, including through the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia, the Information Sharing Centre of

the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia and the Group of Friends of the Gulf of Guinea. The Security Council adopted resolution 2500 (2019) on piracy and armed robbery at sea off the coast of Somalia. IMO, UNODC and the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea continued their work on the issue.

48. Efforts continued to counter other criminal or illegal activities at sea, including terrorism, illicit traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, illicit trafficking of nuclear materials and firearms, intentional and unlawful damage to the marine environment, human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants, and illegal activities in the fisheries sector. Enhancing the capacity of States to prevent and respond to such activities, including through technical assistance and other programmes, remained a particular focus. The Global Maritime Crime Programme of UNODC launched the third edition of *Maritime Crime: A Manual for Criminal Justice Practitioners* in July 2020.

## VII. Climate change

49. The ocean takes up more than 90 per cent of the climate system's excess heat and has warmed unabated since 1970, with the rate of warming more than doubling since 1993, according to the *Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2019. In the first quarter of 2020, ocean heat was at its second warmest level on record. Beyond being the principal cause of global warming, carbon dioxide emissions from human activities are also absorbed by the ocean, increasing acidification and causing deoxygenation.

50. Global mean sea level is now at its highest since high-precision altimetry records began. With increasing rates of continental ice mass loss and ocean thermal expansion, sea level rise is expected to continue at an accelerated rate. Further increases in temperatures and acidification are virtually certain, with rates and magnitudes of change depending on future greenhouse gas emissions scenarios.

51. Coastal ecosystems are threatened to varying degrees by ocean warming, acidification, deoxygenation, sea level rise and extreme weather events, as well as human pressures. Some of those impacts have already caused the loss of nearly half of coastal wetlands in the past 100 years and worldwide reef degradation.

52. Ocean warming, sea ice loss and biogeochemical changes are also changing species composition and abundance and affecting ecosystem services and biomass production. Declines in fish and shellfish stocks owing to global warming and biogeochemical changes have already contributed to reduced fisheries catches, with potential implications for food security. Rising mean and extreme sea levels are projected to exacerbate risks for human communities in low-lying coastal areas. Warming and extreme weather events are also linked to an increased risk of certain human diseases caused by vibrio bacteria, including cholera.

53. In terms of ocean science, efforts to monitor greenhouse gas emissions have continued and expanded, including through the WMO Global Atmosphere Watch and Integrated Global Greenhouse Gas Information System and the Working Group on Integrated Ocean Carbon Research of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. The Commission collected new data relevant to the Goal 14.3.1 indicator on ocean acidification. Increasing the scientific understanding of the ocean-atmosphere interface will remain a priority, including in the context of the United

Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development<sup>4</sup> and the Regular Process for Global Reporting and Assessment of the State of the Marine Environment, including Socioeconomic Aspects.<sup>5</sup>

54. Mitigation efforts also continued. Progress was made towards reaching ambitious targets to urgently decarbonize international shipping. The Getting to Zero Coalition, which is committed to having commercially viable deep sea zero-emission vessels in operation by 2030, was launched at the 2019 Climate Action Summit. Work also continued on blue carbon ecosystems, providing nature-based solutions to mitigate climate change and carbon dioxide removal through marine geoengineering. The inclusion of coastal ecosystem management plans in national ocean policies promised to provide benefits for both mitigation and adaptation activities. As important carbon sinks, further conservation efforts are necessary for such marine ecosystems as mangroves, seagrass beds and salt marshes.

55. Commitments, including financial pledges, were made and initiatives were launched in adaptation, resilience and disaster prevention at the Climate Action Summit. Actions were also taken to close knowledge gaps on oceans to assist in scaling up adaptation under the Nairobi work programme on impacts, vulnerability and adaptation to climate change of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development continued its work on adaptation and resilience-building for key coastal transport infrastructure, in particular in small island developing States. Actions to improve responses to climate change-related natural disasters were ongoing, including through risk and warning systems, technical support and capacity-building.

56. The mainstreaming of issues related to the ocean and climate nexus into the relevant multilateral ocean and climate change processes was accelerated, highlighted by the focus on oceans at the twenty-fifth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The Conference of the Parties requested the convening of a dialogue on oceans and climate change and the strengthening of mitigation and adaptation action. The topic of sea level rise will be considered at the twenty-first meeting of the United Nations Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea. It was also considered by the Co-Chairs of the Study Group on sea-level rise in relation to international law of the International Law Commission in a first issues paper (A/CN.4/740).

## **VIII. Balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social development for a sustainable ocean-based economy and to build resilience**

57. Pursuing a sustainable ocean-based economy (sometimes referred to as the “blue economy”) remained central to the sustainable development of States as they sought to harness the potential of marine and coastal resources and industries to ensure economic growth and provide improved livelihoods, while protecting ocean health and productivity. In that regard, the market value of the global ocean-based economic sector, including shipping, fisheries, tourism and renewable energy, was estimated to be 5 per cent of global gross domestic product, equivalent to the world’s seventh largest economy.

58. While efforts continued at the national, regional and global levels to further advance sustainable ocean-based economies in all three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental), including through the

<sup>4</sup> See [www.oceandecade.org](http://www.oceandecade.org).

<sup>5</sup> See [www.un.org/regulprocess/content/second-cycle-regular-process](http://www.un.org/regulprocess/content/second-cycle-regular-process).

development of innovative technologies, regulations and financial strategies, COVID-19 significantly affected progress, underscoring the importance of building resilience in sustainable ocean-based economies, in particular for least developed countries and small island developing States.

59. COVID-19 also had a significant impact on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, including ocean-related goals and targets. It was recognized at the Sustainable Development Goals Summit, held in September 2019, that the world was not on track to deliver its commitments. The Secretary-General subsequently launched a decade of action and delivery for sustainable development, urging all actors to dramatically increase the pace and scale of implementation efforts. Of the four ocean-related targets maturing in 2020, only one, regarding coverage of protected areas (target 14.5), seemed within reach. Insufficient progress on other targets was also reported. For example, while significant progress towards achieving Aichi Biodiversity Target 18 of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020 has been made, it is unlikely that all aspects of the target will be met.

60. Accelerated actions on all targets will be crucial to advance sustainable ocean-based economies, increase scientific knowledge and understanding of the ocean, promote marine science and technology and support the conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources, as well as the protection and preservation of the marine environment and the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity. International and cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination will be required to achieve Goal 14, including in the context of the implementation of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development and the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

61. Sustainable ocean-based economies will continue to play a crucial role in COVID-19 recovery. Maritime sectors provided links to essential services and basic needs, such as medical supplies, food and energy security. The use of deep-sea microbes in medical test kits highlighted the potential of the ocean with respect to human health, as well as the economic and social importance of marine biodiversity and ecosystem integrity for long-term human well-being. At the same time, economic stimulus and recovery efforts offered a chance to recover better, focusing on the special case of small island developing States for sustainable development, by implementing effective ocean governance frameworks and incorporating ecosystem-based approaches, integrated coastal zone management, marine spatial planning and mainstream biodiversity conservation.

#### **A. Increasing knowledge and understanding and promoting marine science and technology**

62. To improve understanding of the oceans and generate solutions to address ocean challenges, greater efforts are needed at all levels to increase marine scientific research activities in accordance with the Convention and to promote and strengthen related capacity-building activities, including through the voluntary transfer of technology.

63. Advances made in marine scientific research and in the research capacity of States, including in observations, data generation and information flows, contributed to increasing the scientific knowledge of marine living resources, the Area and the ocean-atmosphere interface, including meteorological hazards and changes in sea ice, ocean acidification, marine radioactivity, bathymetry, and human impacts on marine ecosystems and biodiversity. They also contributed to improving the provision of ocean forecasts and related services.

64. The OceanObs'19 conference was a major milestone in the future development of the Global Ocean Observing System. A road map to support the implementation of the Global Ocean Observing System 2030 Strategy was also published. Implementation of the Ocean InfoHub Project began, which will contribute to the transfer of marine technology through a clearing house mechanism, and progress was made in the development of the Ocean Data and Information System Catalogue of Sources.

65. Significant progress was made in developing the methodology for Sustainable Development Goal indicators 14.3.1 and 14.a.1. Mechanisms for reporting on indicators included the newly established ocean acidification data portal and the second edition of the *Global Ocean Science Report*, which was nearing completion. Actions were taken to advance the development of an index for coastal eutrophication under Sustainable Development Goal indicator 14.1.1. Efforts also continued to address vandalism on ocean data buoys.

66. Significant knowledge and capacity gaps remained owing to challenges from inadequate science-policy dialogue, a lack of data and the need for co-production of knowledge, sustainable funding and the coherent implementation of the legal regime set out in the Convention. COVID-19 had a significant impact, causing the cancellation or postponement of research activities, drops in data flow and potential reductions in funding. The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission may conduct a complementary assessment to the second edition of the *Global Ocean Science Report* to evaluate the short-term impacts of COVID-19 on ocean science and a fuller assessment of the long-term impacts in the third edition of the report.

67. Going forward, the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development will provide a convening framework for actions to address challenges and enhance marine science and technology under the vision “science we need for the ocean we want”. The implementation plan for the Decade, prepared with broad stakeholder involvement, including through UN-Oceans, will be presented to the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session. The 2020 United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14, which was postponed owing to COVID-19, will also provide an opportunity to scale up actions to promote marine science and technology, in accordance with the theme of the Conference.

68. The Decade will provide for diverse stakeholders to jointly design and deliver solution-oriented research, which is needed for a well-functioning ocean in support of the 2030 Agenda. It will facilitate the joint development of services and tools for decision makers, policy developers, innovators and managers at all scales and stimulate innovation, as well as increasing access to technology, including data and knowledge platforms. The implementation plan includes expected outcomes, a series of challenges to unite partners around immediate priorities and a series of objectives to frame actions, while promoting the emergence of an extensive stakeholder engagement network.

69. Efforts were made at all levels to strengthen the science-policy interface, including by conducting assessments. As the major global effort in that regard, the Regular Process was completing its second world ocean assessment, which has gone through peer review and review by States and will be finalized for consideration by the Ad Hoc Working Group of the Whole. Following the launch of the third cycle (2021–2025) of the Regular Process, a draft programme of work and resource requirements were developed, taking into account lessons learned from the second cycle and on the basis of the possible outcomes and building blocks of the third cycle, which had been endorsed by the Ad Hoc Working Group at its twelfth meeting. The draft will be considered by the Ad Hoc Working Group.

## **B. Conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources**

70. Total global capture fisheries production reached the highest level ever recorded in 2018, with the increase mostly driven by marine capture fisheries. The percentage of fish stocks that were within biologically sustainable levels decreased from 90 per cent in 1974 to 65.8 per cent in 2017. Although 78.7 per cent of all landings of marine fisheries came from biologically sustainable stocks, the unequal progress in fisheries management highlighted the urgent need for further measures.

71. Actions taken at the global, regional and national levels helped to strengthen the conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources. FAO undertook capacity-building and other activities, including in relation to harmonization of national legislation with the Convention, application of FAO instruments, small-scale fisheries, gender and fisheries, fisheries statistics, safety at sea of fishing vessels and promotion of decent working conditions, as well as reporting against the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda.

72. To improve the safety of fishing vessels and help combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, 48 States signed the Torremolinos Declaration on the Cape Town Agreement of 2012. Guidance was also recommended to assist competent authorities in the implementation of the Agreement.

73. COVID-19 had varying impacts on the conservation and sustainable use of living marine resources between regions and countries, including from cancelled or postponed fisheries-related meetings and activities. Despite efforts to conduct meetings remotely, such disruptions may have negative consequences on the conservation and management of many fish stocks globally, including on monitoring, control and surveillance and fisheries research, as well as socioeconomic impacts.

74. While some regions reported an increase in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, other regions noted a drop in demand for fisheries products owing to reduced tourism. The situation is constantly evolving and further regional and country-level assessments will be required to understand the full impact of COVID-19 on fisheries and aquaculture.

## **C. Protection and preservation of the marine environment and conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity**

75. With land-based activities representing about 80 per cent of the sources of marine pollution, cooperation continued to prevent, reduce and control such pollution, in particular marine debris, plastics and microplastics, including through the implementation of the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities. Amendments to the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal entered into force, clarifying the scope of covered plastic wastes. The Basel Convention Partnership on Plastic Waste was also launched. While initiatives at the global level continued to address marine debris, plastics and microplastics, additional efforts were needed, including to address the impacts of COVID-19.

76. Particular efforts were made to address nutrient pollution causing eutrophication and the spread of hypoxic dead zones and harmful algal blooms. The United Nations Global Campaign on Sustainable Nitrogen Management was launched, together with adoption of the Colombo Declaration on Sustainable Nitrogen Management, which provided a road map for action on sustainable nitrogen management, including an ambition to halve nitrogen waste by 2030.

77. Measures were also taken to prevent, reduce and control pollution by hazardous chemicals and wastes, including mercury and radioactive substances. The Ban Amendment to the Basel Convention entered into force on 5 December 2019, providing for the prohibition of the transboundary movement of hazardous wastes from parties in annex VII to the Convention.

78. Cooperation also continued to address pressures on the marine environment and marine biodiversity from shipping, including with regard to the dumping and management of wastes, the sustainable recycling of ships, air pollution from ships, ballast water management and biofouling.

79. Measures were taken at the intergovernmental level to address the impacts of other activities on the marine environment, including offshore oil and gas activities and marine renewable energy development, as well as specific threats from oil spills, invasive alien species, underwater noise, artificial light pollution, ship strikes, by-catch and underwater munitions.

80. The Authority continued to develop the mining code for the Area and progress was also made on the implementation and standardization of regional environment management plans. An environmental impact statement was under review relating to proposed technical trials of a pre-prototype nodule collector, scheduled to take place in 2021.

81. In terms of the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity, including in areas beyond national jurisdiction, efforts were made to identify ocean-related elements to inform the negotiations on the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework. Actions also focused on marine migratory species, coral reefs, mangroves, seagrasses, cold water areas and deep-sea ecosystems, as well as marine ecosystem restoration, with a view to informing the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

82. A number of resolutions and related decisions on marine issues were adopted by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals at its thirteenth meeting, including on the strengthening of measures to protect migratory chondrichthyan species against processes that pose threats, such as habitat loss and destruction and unsustainable fisheries. Artificial light pollution guidelines and protection measures for marine turtles and eels were also adopted. Several marine species were added to appendices I and II of the Convention.

83. Work continued on supporting the application of cross-sectoral and integrated approaches to address the cumulative effects of human activities on coastal and marine ecosystems, including integrated coastal zone management, marine spatial planning and ecosystem approaches.

84. The identification and application of area-based management tools, including the designation of marine protected areas, continued to receive focused attention. As of December 2019, 17 per cent of marine areas under national jurisdiction were covered by protected areas, more than doubling in extent since 2010. Only about 7.4 per cent of the world's oceans were covered by protected areas. Many marine key biodiversity areas had only partial or no protected area coverage. Some marine protected areas also faced implementation challenges after their designation.

## **IX. Strengthening implementation through integrated and cross-sectoral approaches**

85. During the reporting period, COVID-19 and its associated risks and potential long-term impacts highlighted the urgency of prioritizing cross-sectoral partnerships and identifying avenues at the global, regional and national levels for information-sharing, the development of adaptive ocean management strategies and the fostering of multi-stakeholder approaches and coordinated action in dealing with ocean-related issues.

### **A. Strengthening international cooperation and coordination**

86. A number of important milestones relevant to international cooperation and coordination on ocean issues were reached during the reporting period, including the adoption of the political declaration of the high-level meeting to review progress made in addressing the priorities of small island developing States through the implementation of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway and of the political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly.

87. In spite of the postponement or cancellation of multilateral ocean-related events and meetings owing to COVID-19, progress continued as States, intergovernmental organizations and other stakeholders harnessed the potential of technology, creative contingency solutions and enhanced multisectoral collaboration, including in online formats.

88. The first-ever online celebration of World Oceans Day, held in 2020,<sup>6</sup> and the Online High-level Meeting on Sustainable Ocean Business, organized by the United Nations Global Compact, provided opportunities for multi-stakeholder dialogue. Participants emphasized the fact that segmented sectoral approaches were ill equipped to deal with ocean challenges.

89. The need to raise ambition and ensure continuous action on the maturing Sustainable Development Goal targets was highlighted at the high-level political forum on sustainable development under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, which focused on accelerated action and transformative pathways, as well as realizing the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development.

90. UN-Oceans held teleconferences to enhance the coordination, coherence and effectiveness of competent United Nations system organizations and the Authority. UN-Oceans members highlighted activities, such as meetings, workshops and trainings, some of which had shifted to online platforms. Through the Contact Group for the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, UN-Oceans members contributed to the development of the implementation plan.

91. Members of UN-Oceans continued to implement its voluntary commitment, made at the 2017 United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14, including by organizing a side event at the twenty-fifth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to raise awareness of relevant regulatory and policy frameworks and activities. In other follow-up activities, the Convention on Biological Diversity, in its capacity as coordinator of the Community of Ocean Action on Marine and Coastal Ecosystems Management, and in collaboration with the Communities of Ocean Action on Mangroves and on Coral Reefs, convened a meeting to advance

---

<sup>6</sup> See [www.unworldoceansday.org/2020](http://www.unworldoceansday.org/2020).

ocean action towards achieving Goal 14, with a focus on leveraging synergies for marine and coastal ecosystems, mangroves and coral reefs.

92. In addition to their collaboration through UN-Oceans, organizations reported separately on their activities at the global, regional and national levels to foster cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination in respect of coastal and ocean issues. The Regional Seas Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme continued to provide a framework for ongoing regional efforts to conserve and sustainably manage marine and coastal ecosystems. The recent organizational reform at WMO paved the way for closer collaboration on ocean issues. The restructuring of its partnership with the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission on ocean observation resulted in the establishment of the WMO-IOC Joint Collaborative Board. Reports were also received on collaborative initiatives in fisheries, underwater noise, trade-related aspects of Goal 14, space technologies, marine plastics and microplastics, renewable energy, disaster management and the human dimension, among others.

## **B. Building the capacity of States to implement the legal and policy framework for the oceans and seas**

93. Many intergovernmental organizations undertook capacity-building initiatives to assist developing States in sustainably managing ocean spaces, resources and activities, including through the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and related instruments. While many activities were affected by COVID-19, the pandemic also demonstrated the fundamental importance of capacity, including for recovery and beyond, in building resilience.

94. The Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea provided information, advice and assistance to States and intergovernmental organizations and other stakeholders through its capacity-building programmes, including technical assistance projects and fellowships and participation in conferences, meetings, workshops and training events.<sup>7</sup> Within the context of COVID-19, the Division adapted its capacity-building activities to ensure continued delivery of needs-based and effective assistance to Member States, in particular least developed countries and small island developing States.

95. The Division administered nine voluntary trust funds to assist developing States in the implementation of the Convention and its implementing agreements, participation in ocean-related meetings and intergovernmental processes, and the settlement of disputes through the Tribunal.<sup>8</sup>

### **Technical assistance to States**

96. Together with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the Division implemented a project funded through the United Nations Development Account to assist Barbados, Belize and Costa Rica in developing evidence-based and policy-coherent oceans economy and trade strategies and in realizing economic benefits from the sustainable use of marine resources. Project activities were adapted to assist the beneficiary countries in responding to the impacts of COVID-19,

---

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see “Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea list of activities from 1 September 2019 to 31 August 2020”, available at [www.un.org/Depts/los/general\\_assembly/general\\_assembly\\_reports.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/los/general_assembly/general_assembly_reports.htm).

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see “Status of voluntary trust funds administered by the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea (1 August 2019–31 July 2020)”, available at [www.un.org/Depts/los/general\\_assembly/general\\_assembly\\_reports.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/los/general_assembly/general_assembly_reports.htm).

facilitating the recovery of ocean-based value chains, reinforcing ocean governance frameworks and developing resilience against future disruptions.

97. The Division provided assistance to Somalia through a project funded by the trust fund to support initiatives of States countering piracy off the coast of Somalia, which reinforced the capacity of Somalia to address capacity needs for the sustainable development of its maritime sectors and its marine resources. Travel restrictions delayed delivery of the planned activities; however, elements of the activities will be delivered online.

98. The Division commenced implementation of a project financed by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation to assist selected countries in implementing the Convention and its implementing agreements and promoting strengthened, sustainable and inclusive ocean economies, including by taking into account constraints posed by COVID-19. A second project, financed through an existing project between the United Nations Development Programme and the General Commission for Survey of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, will aim to build the capacity of the Commission on ocean affairs and the law of the sea, with a focus on maritime boundaries.

### **Fellowships**

99. Since 2004, 165 United Nations-Nippon Foundation of Japan Special Strategic Fellowship Awards in Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea have been made to nationals of 78 countries, including 11 awards in 2020. An alumni meeting was held in parallel with the Climate Action Summit, held in September 2019. Under the United Nations-Nippon Foundation Sustainable Ocean Programme, 13 Critical Needs Fellowships have been awarded since 2018, including to five individuals in 2020, and 3 Strategic Fellowships were awarded between 2015 and 2017. Thirty-five Thematic Fellowships have been awarded since 2018, including 12 in 2020. A training related to the intergovernmental conference on an international legally binding instrument under the Convention on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction was delivered to 21 representatives of States in December 2019 and to 21 representatives of States in March 2020. Since 1986, 35 Hamilton Shirley Amerasinghe Memorial Fellowships on the Law of the Sea have been awarded, including 1 in 2020.

100. Although 2020 United Nations-Nippon Foundation and Hamilton Shirley Amerasinghe fellowship awards have been made, implementation of fellowship programmes was disrupted by COVID-19 and associated widespread travel restrictions. All in-person programmes, including those of the United Nations-Nippon Foundation, Hamilton Shirley Amerasinghe, Critical Needs and Thematic Fellowships, were postponed until 2021. A United Nations-Nippon Foundation alumni meeting, which was scheduled to coincide with the 2020 United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14, was also postponed. A rich programme of online training sessions, open to all alumni and fellows, was developed and implemented by the Division under the auspices of the United Nations-Nippon Foundation Programmes in 2020. A number of the activities were also opened to a broader audience of ocean professionals.

## **X. Conclusions**

101. COVID-19 has had a severe impact on ocean-based economic sectors. Additional resulting pressures on marine species, disruptions in management and data collection and increases in waste may result in further negative health and environmental impacts.

102. For people who depend on the ocean and its resources, COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities and brought new hardships, including food insecurity, personal health and safety risks, unemployment and wider social and economic disruption. The effects of COVID-19 and related response measures have been especially severe for seafarers, as well as people migrating by sea, many of whom are already in deeply precarious situations, in particular women and girls.

103. The need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic has provided the international community with an opportunity to rebuild in a more resilient and sustainable manner. The response needs to address acute needs but should also herald a transition towards a human-centred, gender-responsive, inclusive and sustainable future. Fostering sustainable ocean-based economies offers significant opportunities to advance the sustainable development of States, in particular for least developed countries and small island developing States, in conjunction with the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

104. The Convention reflects the three dimensions of sustainable development by striking a careful balance between the equitable and efficient utilization of ocean resources, the conservation of marine living resources and the protection and preservation of the marine environment. Its full and effective implementation, together with the implementation of other legal and policy instruments relating to oceans, will be crucial and will play a key part in wider efforts to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources and a sustainable future for all.

105. Continued enhanced international cooperation and coordination will also be vital, especially in helping least developed countries, small island developing States and coastal communities rebuild and recover from the impacts of COVID-19. Progress in the implementation of the Samoa Pathway will need to be built upon, including in the context of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. Also, enhanced capacity-building initiatives and the transfer of marine technology will be essential in recovery efforts and for building resilience, in particular in small island developing States and other low-lying coastal developing States and communities.

106. A coordinated and integrated approach to all ocean-related issues, addressing the decline of the health of the oceans, will continue to be imperative. Now more than ever, urgent action is needed. The pandemic has highlighted the need to explore creative and innovative solutions that deploy the full potential of multisectoral collaborative action to improve ocean governance and establish the management frameworks needed for the sustainable development of the oceans and their resources.

107. The devastating actual and anticipated impacts of global warming, ocean acidification, deoxygenation, sea level rise and extreme weather events on coastal communities and marine and coastal ecosystems, which are outlined in the 2019 *Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, highlighted the need for urgent action to mitigate and adapt to climate change. The scale and immediacy of the threat requires greatly expanded and sustained action by the international community, including in the context of the COVID-19 recovery.

108. While a wide range of actions were taken at the national, regional and global levels to protect and preserve the marine environment, urgent efforts are still needed to address multiple and cumulative pressures on the marine environment and marine biodiversity, including by strengthening regulatory frameworks, implementing existing obligations and commitments and enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation.

109. All available resources must be harnessed to restore and protect the health, resilience and productivity of the oceans. Among other challenges, the continued decline in the percentage of the world's sustainably fished fish stocks demonstrates the need for concerted efforts, including to strengthen fisheries management, restore depleted stocks and combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing if the target of eliminating overfishing is to be met.

110. To support recovery and efforts to achieve a sustainable ocean-based economy, the international community must scale up actions to promote marine science and technology and strengthen the science-policy interface, including through the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development and the third cycle of the Regular Process.

---