



Inaugural Commonwealth Ocean Ministers Meeting (COMM)

19 April 2024

Co-Chairs' Summary Record

1. **The inaugural Commonwealth Ocean Ministers Meeting (COMM)** convened on 19 April 2024 in Cyprus, under the theme "*Our resilient common ocean: from Cyprus to Samoa.*" Hosted by the Republic of Cyprus, the meeting was attended by ministers and officials from 28 Commonwealth countries and 12 observer organisations.
2. **Co-chairs of the meeting** were Dr Maria Panagiotou, Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment, and Mrs Marina Hadjimanolis, Shipping Deputy Minister to the President of the Republic of Cyprus.
3. **The opening session** featured remarks by The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, and the Co-Chairs. The Secretary-General emphasised the importance of collective action and regional and global cooperation to address the challenges impacting our ocean and coasts, including climate change, biodiversity loss, overfishing and pollution, along with their impacts on Commonwealth communities reliant on the ocean for food security and livelihoods. The Co-Chairs reiterated the meeting's aim to establish principles, priorities, and actions for the Commonwealth Ocean Declaration (COD) and to endorse a roadmap leading to its adoption at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2024 in the Pacific Island country of Samoa.
4. **Ambassador Peter Thomson**, the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean, in his special address stressed the inter-connectedness of Commonwealth countries, all sharing a common ocean, and the need for coordinated meaningful actions. He stressed the value of ambitious ocean commitments and setting the agenda in the lead-up to the United Nations Ocean Conference in 2025.
5. **A memorandum of understanding (MoU)** between the Shipping Deputy Ministry, the Cyprus Marine and Maritime Institute and the Commonwealth Secretariat to establish a Blue Charter Centre of Excellence in Cyprus was signed by the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, the Shipping Deputy Minister to the President of the Republic of Cyprus and the Chief Executive Officer of the Cyprus Marine and Maritime Institute. The MoU agreed, *inter alia*, to provide support and expertise in creating sector-wide policies to assist Commonwealth and other island and coastal countries on a variety of topics such as the management, protection and restoration of marine and coastal ecosystems, the prevention and elimination of marine pollution, and the sustainable use of living marine resources.



6. **Ocean-related announcements** and updates were made by the following Member countries:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Australia• Bangladesh• Barbados• Canada• Cyprus• Guyana | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• India• Jamaica• Kenya• Malta• Mozambique• Seychelles | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sri Lanka• Tonga• Trinidad and Tobago• United Kingdom |
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7. **The Commonwealth Secretariat provided updates** on its ocean-related activities across the Secretariat, including the progress of the Commonwealth Blue Charter, its Action Groups, the Blue Charter Incubator, training and capacity building, as well as bilateral technical assistance programmes for sustainable ocean governance, maritime boundary delimitation and responsible management of marine natural resources. Other relevant programmes of the Secretariat were also raised, including trade work on the WTO fisheries subsidies agreement, access to climate finance for ocean-related projects through the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub, and the role of geospatial data in tackling coastal climate adaptation, building on the CommonSensing space agency partnership. The crosscutting themes of Gender and Youth were highlighted.

8. **A report from the Ocean Senior Officials Meeting (O-SOM)**, held the day before the COMM, was presented by the co-chairs of O-SOM to the COMM.

9. **Ministers discussed progress on meeting existing international ocean-related commitments**, and how Commonwealth challenges could be collectively overcome. Solutions discussed included taking a collaborative approach to ocean conservation and sustainable use through the Commonwealth Blue Charter Action groups and the Project Incubator. The value of establishing a fund to support countries, in line with the statement by Commonwealth Heads in the CHOGM 2022 Communique, was underlined. Enhanced collaboration across sectors and increased access to international funding for ocean initiatives was also emphasised. This latter theme was the topic of a breakfast event held on the same day as the ministerial, where a Commonwealth working group on sustainable ocean finance was initiated.

10. **Ministers discussed principles and priorities** for inclusion in the COD, building on the results from a pan-Commonwealth survey conducted prior to the meeting. The principles in the Charter of the Commonwealth were re-iterated, as were those in the Commonwealth Blue Charter and in other agreed texts/treaties, to be referenced in the COD.

The pre-meeting survey results identified the following Priorities to be of high importance:

- Adapting to ocean-climate impacts
- Sustainable blue economies



- Marine protection, including marine protected areas (MPAs) and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs)
- Prevention, reduction and control of pollution in the marine environment
- Sustainable fisheries
- Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fisheries
- Marine habitat restoration

Other notable priorities:

- Marine scientific research
- The Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement
- Maritime domain awareness, security, and enforcement

There was general agreement that these were a good basis from which to begin discussions.

11. After discussions on these priorities, the chairs identified the following priorities and related actions which received particular emphasis:

- **The pressing issue of sea level rise**, the need for states to finalise maritime boundary delimitations, and for maritime zones as recognised under UNCLOS to have permanence and not be reduced in the face of rising sea levels.
- **The accelerated ratification and implementation of the BBNJ Agreement**, including the provision of technical support for ratification. (The UK announced that it is supporting the Commonwealth Secretariat to provide assistance to member countries in this regard.)
- **Blue Finance** to achieve existing commitments and future actions.
- **The unique vulnerabilities of vulnerable low-lying coastal states**, in the face of ocean-related challenges, in addition to those of SIDS.

Additionally, the desirability of working collaboratively to further progress the Global Plastics Treaty and the WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreements was raised.

12. There was agreement that the **COD should focus on actions that are practical**, actionable within the next two to four years and focus on the value-add that the Commonwealth brings. It was acknowledged that the key aspects of the declaration will be the actions which will stem from the priority areas and that these need to be dynamic, forward looking, pragmatic and financed.

13. **Implementation of priority ocean actions** by Commonwealth countries would be collaborative and supportive, executed under the Commonwealth Blue Charter, *inter alia* through its Action Groups, the Blue Charter Project Incubator, bilateral technical assistance, and partnerships with non-governmental entities.

14. **A Blue Charter Ministerial Steering Committee**, will be established, as supported by the Ocean Senior Officials Meeting (O-SOM). It will provide the



high-level strategic vision and guidance for the Blue Charter, its projects and initiatives, as well as for the implementation of much of the COD.

15. **The process for drafting and finalising the COD** was further discussed; *the Pathway to Samoa - CHOGM 2024 and beyond*. It was agreed that the COD would undergo two drafting rounds, open for Member country comment, before being submitted to the Committee of the Whole (COW) in September 2024.
16. **The Commonwealth Blue Charter is an implementation vehicle**, established at CHOGM 2018, as a response to countries' recognition of the significance of international commitments and the value of working together. However, it is an implementation vehicle without defined targets or specific actions. **The COD will be a policy driver** to be used in conjunction with the Blue Charter to define priorities and actions.
17. The focus period of the COD was discussed at COMM to be the next two CHOGM cycles (around four years), with an interim review at the next CHOGM after Samoa. The timeframe will be mindful of the various internationally agreed targets due in 2030 and is framed to help advance these international commitments.
18. **In conclusion**, Ministers welcomed the development of a Commonwealth Ocean Declaration to prioritise Commonwealth action on shared ocean-related challenges, and agreed to a roadmap for the drafting, revision, and passage of the Commonwealth Ocean Declaration at CHOGM 2024. Ministers reaffirmed the importance of collaboration, far-sighted governance, and enhanced technical and financial support for ocean initiatives.

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