The Apia Commonwealth Ocean Declaration

Interim High-level Progress Report

November 2026

The Commonwealth Blue Charter

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Contents

Foreword v

Acronyms and Abbreviations vii

Executive Summary ix

Introduction 1

Strategic Focus Area 1: BBNJ Implementation and the Ocean–Climate Change Nexus 2

Strategic Focus Area 2: Marine Pollution 3

Strategic Focus Area 3: Sustainable Fisheries 5

Strategic Focus Area 4: Marine Protection and Restoration 7

Strategic Focus Area 5: Blue Economy and Blue Finance 8

Conclusion 10

Endnotes 12

Foreword



The ocean sustains us. It provides over half the oxygen we breathe, food for three billion people and livelihoods for hundreds of millions.

But the ocean is under unprecedented strain. Ocean heat content was the highest ever recorded in 2025, marine pollution is worsening and a third of fish stocks are overexploited.

The Commonwealth leaders have recognised this global ocean emergency. The Apia Commonwealth Ocean Declaration ('the Declaration'),[1] unanimously agreed to by all 56 Commonwealth countries, sounds a clarion call for the restoration, protection and sustainable use of the ocean.

This report provides a high-level overview of progress in implementing the Declaration. It highlights that there have been important advances by Commonwealth countries, including in:

- ratifying and implementing the High-Seas Treaty, and progressing work to establish marine protected areas on the high seas
- implementing national policies, regulations and laws to reduce marine plastic pollution
- protecting the ocean, with four countries – Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Seychelles – having protected more than 30 per cent of their marine waters.

Yet there have also been areas where progress has been slower than hoped. Despite the best efforts of Commonwealth countries, negotiations to conclude a Global Plastics Treaty have not yet succeeded, and raising the finance needed for ocean conservation continues to be challenging for many Commonwealth small island developing states and coastal developing states.

More work is therefore needed to implement the Declaration and arrest the decline in ocean health. And as Heads of Government meet in Antigua and Barbuda in November 2026, surrounded by the sea, I am confident that our family of nations will redouble its efforts to conserve the ocean for future generations.

The Hon. Shirley Botchwey
Secretary-General of the Commonwealth

Acronyms and Abbreviations

BBNJ Agreement	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
Declaration	Apia Commonwealth Ocean Declaration
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (of the United Nations)
IMO	International Maritime Organization
IUU	illegal, unreported and unregulated (fishing)
KMGBF	Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
MARPOL	The IMO's key convention for safeguarding seas from ship-sourced pollution
MPA	marine protected area
NDCs	Nationally Determined Contributions
PSMA	FAO Agreement on Port State Measures
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SIDS	small island developing states
SOP	Sustainable Ocean Plan
SPRFMO	South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
WCPFC	Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission
WTO	World Trade Organization
30x30	The global target is to effectively conserve and manage at least 30 per cent of the world's land, inland waters, coastal areas and oceans by 2030, as reflected in Target 3 of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Executive Summary

The Apia Commonwealth Ocean Declaration ('the Declaration') sounds a clarion call for the conservation of the ocean. This report provides an interim high-level overview of progress against the Declaration, drawing attention to examples of good practice and describing areas where achievements have been more limited. A more detailed and comprehensive progress report will be published in 2028.

The Declaration outlines policies, targets and commitments in the following five areas.

- BBNJ Agreement Implementation and the Ocean–Climate Change Nexus
- Marine Pollution
- Sustainable Fisheries
- Marine Protection and Restoration
- The Blue Economy

The advances made in each of these areas are summarised below.

BBNJ Agreement Implementation and the Ocean–Climate Change Nexus

The BBNJ Agreement came into effect in January 2026, and there has been strong progress towards its implementation across the Commonwealth. As of 29 September 2026, 38 of the 56 Commonwealth member countries (67.9 per cent) had ratified, approved, accepted or acceded to the Agreement, with a further 12 having signed it but not yet completed the process of becoming a Party. Australia and the United Kingdom have also enacted domestic legislation to implement the Agreement, and other Commonwealth countries, such as Mauritius, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Sri Lanka, have started important work in this area. As such, there has been good progress in implementing the BBNJ Agreement.

The Declaration also calls for fixed maritime zones despite climate change-related sea-level rise.[2] This is an area where there has been significant progress, with the international community increasingly recognising that maritime zones should remain fixed regardless of rising sea levels, and the International Court of Justice (2025) Advisory Opinion supporting that same position.

There is also a call in the Declaration for Commonwealth countries to integrate ocean–climate resilience and adaptation into national planning. Here there have been advances, with over half of Commonwealth countries that border the ocean including ocean-related matters in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

Marine Pollution

The Declaration recognises that pollution is a significant threat facing the ocean. Yet, this is an area where achievements have been mixed. On one hand, negotiations to conclude a Global Plastics Treaty have not yet been completed. On the other, many Commonwealth countries, including Australia, Rwanda, Kenya and the Bahamas, have introduced important national policies to reduce plastic pollution.

Sustainable Fisheries

Sustainable fisheries are recognised by the Declaration as being fundamental to food security, livelihoods, economic development and ocean health. Here, there has been significant headway, with most Commonwealth countries being Party to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies entering into force. Moreover, Commonwealth countries, including Australia, Belize, Fiji, Samoa and the United Kingdom, have introduced new measures to increase the sustainability of fisheries.

Marine Protection and Restoration

The Declaration reaffirms the Commonwealth's commitment to the global 30x30 target. There has been some progress in this area, with four Commonwealth countries – the United Kingdom (47 per cent), Australia (46 per cent), Seychelles (33 per cent) and New Zealand (30 per cent) – now protecting 30 per cent or more of their marine and coastal area. Yet, there is still much work to be done to achieve the 30x30 target across the Commonwealth and globally, with less than 10 per cent of the ocean currently covered by marine protected areas.

Blue Economy

The Declaration calls for the building of a sustainable blue economy and stresses the need for action to reduce emissions from shipping, develop and implement Sustainable Ocean Plans (SOPs), and support marine renewable technologies. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) Net-Zero framework for reducing emissions from shipping has not yet been agreed, but Commonwealth countries including the United Kingdom, Singapore and India have taken important measures to promote green shipping. Commonwealth countries such as Ghana, Fiji and Seychelles have implemented SOPs, and there have also been important projects and policies to promote marine renewable energy by countries including Australia, Ghana and Seychelles.

Conclusion

The Commonwealth has made substantial advances towards achieving the objectives set out within the Declaration. Significant developments include:

- many Commonwealth countries ratifying the BBNJ Agreement
- increasing global recognition of the need for fixed maritime boundaries despite sea-level rise
- Commonwealth countries supporting new international fisheries agreements, including the FAO PSMA and the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies.

There have also been important national polices and projects put in place by individual Commonwealth countries to strengthen marine protection, reduce marine pollution, promote green shipping and develop sustainable ocean economies.

However, important challenges remain. Further progress is needed to achieve the 30x30 target, negotiations on the Global Plastics Treaty have not yet been completed, and the IMO Net-Zero Framework has not yet been agreed.

Overall, the examples highlighted in this report demonstrate the value of sharing experience and good practice across the Commonwealth, while also highlighting areas where further pan-Commonwealth, global and national action is required.

Introduction

The Commonwealth is home to more than 2.7 billion people[3] and unites diverse nations around a shared commitment to a resilient, sustainable and equitable ocean future. Its 56 member countries[4] span every major ocean region, collectively stewarding over one-third of marine waters under national jurisdiction.[5] This diversity provides a unique foundation for co-operation, enabling countries to share experiences, exchange knowledge and develop solutions that respond to different ocean contexts and priorities.

The Apia Commonwealth Ocean Declaration ('the Declaration'), unanimously agreed to by the 56 Heads of Government of the Commonwealth in 2024, builds on this shared commitment and diversity to sound a clarion call for the restoration, protection and sustainable use of the ocean.

The implementation of the Declaration is supported by complementary global and pan-Commonwealth initiatives. These initiatives include the Our Oceans Conferences, the Commonwealth Ocean Ministers Roundtables and Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings, which have continued to mobilise political leadership, partnerships and financing in support of ocean conservation. These initiatives have also provided an important platform for Commonwealth countries to showcase examples of good practice and strengthen partnerships to advance the Declaration's objectives.

There is also a recognition, by the Declaration, that effective ocean governance must be participatory, equitable and inclusive. And that this can only be achieved by incorporating the knowledges and practices of Indigenous Peoples, traditional knowledge of local communities, and local knowledge systems, scientific institutions, youth and other stakeholders.

Recognising the particular vulnerabilities of small island developing states (SIDS) and developing coastal countries, the Declaration commits Commonwealth countries to strengthening co-operation, knowledge exchange and capacity development. These efforts aim to address shared challenges and enable all Commonwealth countries to participate meaningfully in emerging ocean governance frameworks.

The Declaration acknowledges and builds on existing international agreements and commitments, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement, the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) and the BBNJ Agreement.[6] It also reaffirms important global conservation goals, including the global target of effectively conserving at least 30 per cent of the world's land, inland waters, coastal areas and oceans by 2030, and a commitment to accelerate ratification of the BBNJ Agreement.

Yet, the Declaration also goes beyond existing international agreements and commitments by:

- calling for fixed maritime zones despite climate change-related sea-level rise
- explicitly supporting Indigenous ocean rights
- calling for an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution (the Global Plastic Treaty), including the marine environment, based on a comprehensive approach that addresses the full life cycle of plastics, with the ambition of concluding negotiations by 2024
- encouraging investment in alternative marine renewable energy sources
- calling for the responsible and effective management of 100 per cent of marine waters, including through Sustainable Ocean Plans
- highlighting the need to strengthen support for a sustainable blue economy.

The Declaration also outlines concrete actions to achieve these goals through five interconnected areas: BBNJ implementation and the ocean–climate nexus, marine pollution, sustainable fisheries, marine protection and restoration, and the sustainable blue economy.

This report provides an interim high-level overview of progress against those areas. It highlights advances against selected key indicators, alongside examples of good practice in ocean conservation from across the Commonwealth. Achievements

are also assessed using publicly available national, regional and international datasets and sources and information provided by Commonwealth member countries.

In doing so, this report aims to provide an overview of progress rather than a comprehensive assessment of every recent ocean conservation policy and reform in every Commonwealth country. A more detailed and comprehensive report of progress against the Declaration will be published in 2028.

Strategic Focus Area 1: BBNJ Implementation and the Ocean–Climate Change Nexus

The Declaration prioritises accelerated ratification and implementation of the BBNJ Agreement. This is in recognition of the importance of that Agreement and its provisions relating to marine genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits; the establishment of area-based management tools (including marine protected areas (MPAs)) in the high seas; environmental impact assessments for activities affecting areas beyond national jurisdiction; and capacity building and the transfer of marine technology. The establishment of MPAs and other area-based management tools in the high seas has the potential to contribute to other important goals outlined in the Declaration, including the global commitment to effectively conserve at least 30 per cent of marine and coastal areas by 2030.

There has been strong progress in ratifying the BBNJ Agreement, which entered into force on 17 January 2026. As of 29 September 2026, 38 of the 56 Commonwealth countries (67.9 per cent) had ratified, approved, accepted or acceded to the BBNJ Agreement, with a further 12 having signed the Agreement but not yet completed the process of becoming a Party.[7] Thus, nearly 90 per cent of Commonwealth countries have ratified, approved, accepted, acceded or signed the Agreement.

The ratification of the Agreement is, however, only one important step in its implementation. Commonwealth countries generally operate dualist legal systems, whereby the provisions of the BBNJ Agreement, while binding on the state as international law, do not automatically form part of domestic law and do not directly bind companies and vessels operating on the high seas. Domestic legislation is consequently needed to give effect to the BBNJ Agreement.

Australia and the United Kingdom have enacted domestic legislation to implement the BBNJ Agreement. Australia has progressed legislative and policy measures to support implementation of the Agreement, including strengthening arrangements relating to marine biodiversity conservation, environmental impact assessments and participation in international decision-making processes.

The United Kingdom passed primary legislation, the BBNJ Act, to implement provisions of the BBNJ Agreement relating to marine genetic resources, area-based management tools and environmental impact assessments enabling it to ratify. Following two pieces of additional secondary legislation, the UK ratified the Agreement in July 2026[8].

Other Commonwealth countries, such as Mauritius, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Sri Lanka, have undertaken important work to better understand the Agreement and consider how domestic legislation could be amended to implement it. For example, Sri Lanka conducted an implementation gap analysis and established stakeholder sub-committees covering the BBNJ's Agreements key pillars, with further work identifying the necessary amendments to domestic legislation. Going forward, enacting domestic legislation to implement the BBNJ Agreement will likely be an important focus area for many Commonwealth countries as they drive to achieve the Declaration.

Commonwealth countries have also acted to establish MPAs in the high seas under the BBNJ Agreement. In Africa, The Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone have been instrumental in the Economic Community of West African States' identification of, and proposal for, a 200,000 square kilometre (km²) MPA in the Atlantic Ocean.[9]

In the North Atlantic Ocean, Bermuda and the United Kingdom have launched a consultation on the Hamilton II Declaration, which aims to protect the Sargasso Sea.[10] The United Kingdom has also commissioned research which identifies and evaluates sites for environmental protection in the high seas, including the Walvis Ridge southwest of Namibia and the Sargasso Sea northeast of Bermuda.[11]

Meanwhile, in the Pacific, Australia has financed a research symposium on protecting the South Tasman Sea and Lord Howe Rise, both identified as priority sites for MPAs in international waters.[12]

There has also been good progress on the Declaration's commitment to maintaining maritime zones, rights and entitlements despite sea-level rise.[13] This commitment was reaffirmed by Commonwealth law ministers in 2026[14] and has received important support from the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on Climate Change of 2025,[15] which found that UNCLOS does not require states to update established baselines or outer limits of maritime zones in response to climate change-related sea-level rise.

The Declaration also calls for Commonwealth countries to integrate ocean–climate resilience and adaptation strategies into national climate planning, including through NDCs and National Adaptation Plans. Commonwealth countries have undertaken much work in this area, with a recent study concluding that 59 per cent of Commonwealth countries that border the sea have included ocean-related themes in their NDCs.[16] These include actions such as conserving mangroves, protecting coral reefs, cutting emissions from shipping and exploring ocean-based renewable energy.

Strengthening ocean monitoring and observation is essential to better understand changing ocean conditions, track climate impacts, and provide the data to improve climate prediction and inform effective adaptation and resilience measures. The recently launched OceanEye International Alliance for the Global Ocean Observing System is an important programme to assist strengthen ocean monitoring, and Canada, as Co-Chair of the alliance, recently pledged 82 million Canadian dollars (C$) over five years to expand Canada's ability to observe the ocean. A total of 31 countries have joined the OceanEye International Alliance, including Cyprus, Malta, Mauritius, Namibia and the United Kingdom.[17]

Overall, there has been significant progress on the ocean–climate change nexus and implementation of the BBNJ Agreement: many Commonwealth countries have ratified, and a growing number are continuing work to implement, the Agreement; the international community increasingly recognises that maritime zones should remain fixed despite sea-level rise; and many Commonwealth countries' NDCs include ocean-related matters.

Strategic Focus Area 2: Marine Pollution

The Declaration recognises that marine pollution is a significant threat facing the ocean. In response, the Declaration calls for accelerated action to prevent, significantly reduce and control all kinds of marine pollution from both land-based and marine activities. It also recognises that this is best achieved through actions, policies and regulations that reduce pollution at source and advance a more circular and sustainable approach.

The harm to the ocean from plastic pollution is also highlighted, with the Declaration committing the Commonwealth to act to advance solutions across the full life cycle of plastics, strengthen knowledge exchange, strengthen scientific and technical co-operation, and support evidence-based approaches to pollution prevention, monitoring and management.

The need for both multilateral and national measures to reduce plastic pollution is also recognised. Regarding multilateral measures, the Declaration calls for an effective and ambitious international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, based on a comprehensive approach that addresses the full life cycle of plastics. The ambition was to conclude negotiations by the end of 2024, as envisaged by UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) Resolution 5/14.

Despite considerable efforts by Commonwealth countries to advance the negotiations, progress towards this legally binding instrument has been slow. As of September 2026, no instrument had yet been agreed, despite the initial ambition. Outstanding issues include whether the treaty should include legally binding measures to support sustainable production and consumption of plastics, including measures across the full life cycle; the definition and inclusion of chemicals and polymers of concern; global measures to phase out problematic or avoidable plastic products; and the importance of financial resource mobilisation to address the scale of the issue, including financial support to recipient countries.

Despite the delays, there remains broad support from Commonwealth countries for concluding a treaty to address plastic pollution across the full life cycle of plastics. In addition, many Commonwealth small island developing states (SIDS) have been among the strongest supporters of an ambitious Global Plastics Treaty,[18] not least because of the disproportionate impacts of plastic pollution on marine ecosystems, fisheries, tourism and coastal communities.

Commonwealth countries have also made headway in introducing national policies and regulations to reduce marine plastic pollution. Rwanda,[19] Kenya[20] and The Bahamas[21] have, for example, implemented some of the world's most comprehensive bans on plastic bags and other single-use plastic products. In Asia, Sri Lanka has strengthened its National Action Plan on Plastic Waste Management,[22] while India has implemented nationwide restrictions on a range of identified single-use plastic items and has expanded its extended producer responsibility scheme for plastic packaging.

Australia has also taken action to reduce plastic pollution. Developed by the Australian Packaging Covenant Organisation in partnership with governments and industry, the National Packaging Targets[23] aim for 100 per cent of packaging to be reusable, recyclable or compostable. There are also further targets, namely for 70 per cent of plastic packaging to be recycled or composted, an average of 50 per cent recycled content to be incorporated into packaging, and the phase-out of problematic and unnecessary single-use plastics. Rather than focusing solely on end-of-life waste management, these targets promote a whole-of-life approach by encouraging better product design, reducing the use of virgin materials and creating stronger markets for recycled plastics. This transition to a circular economy should help minimise the amount of packaging waste that is lost to the environment and ultimately reaches rivers, coastlines and the ocean. These targets have all been complemented in Australia by a suite of national and state-level measures to improve resource recovery and reduce litter. Container deposit schemes now operate across many states and territories, providing financial incentives for consumers to return beverage containers for recycling and significantly increasing recovery rates, while reducing container litter in public spaces and waterways. Investments in advanced recycling infrastructure, harmonised kerbside recycling systems, extended producer responsibility schemes and the 2021 National Plastics Plan further support the collection and reuse of plastic materials. This integrated approach demonstrates how circular economy policies can reduce marine litter by preventing waste generation, increasing recycling, improving material recovery and encouraging businesses to design packaging that remains in productive use for longer rather than becoming pollution.[24]

Canada has also taken important action to address marine litter, such as abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear (also known as 'ghost gear'). The Canada Ghost Gear Program works to retrieve and responsibly dispose of such gear, prevent its occurrence through the application of sustainable fishing practices, and support innovative solutions to mitigate its impact on marine environments, thereby safeguarding marine biodiversity and supporting coastal communities. This programme also works to advance preventative and mitigative technology and management practices that support seafood market viability, ensuring Canadian fisheries meet emerging market and trade requirements.[25]

In addition, Canada has established the Ghost Gear Fund. This third-party funding programme supports communities, Indigenous organisations, fish harvesters and non-governmental organisations in preventing and mitigating ghost fishing, addressing abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear, and advancing sustainable fishing practices both domestically and internationally. From 2020 to 2026, the fund has invested C$58.4 million in 144 projects, with an additional C$15 million allocated for three years from 2026 to 2029.[26]

Beyond plastic pollution, Commonwealth countries have also acted to reduce other forms of marine pollution. The IMO regulatory framework, including the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL), provides important measures to prevent pollution from oil, noxious liquid substances, sewage, garbage and air emissions from ships. MARPOL, which Commonwealth countries have played an important role in implementing, has contributed to a significant reduction in ship-source pollution, including through measures to prevent oil discharges and accidental spills. Commonwealth countries have also been involved in efforts to implement the International Convention for

the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments, which aims to prevent the introduction and spread of harmful aquatic organisms and pathogens through ships' ballast water. These measures are particularly relevant to Commonwealth coastal and island states, where shipping is an important part of trade and connectivity and where marine ecosystems and coastal economies can be particularly vulnerable to pollution.

In conclusion, progress on implementing measures to reduce marine plastic pollution have been mixed. On the one hand, the ambition of concluding negotiations for a Global Plastics Treaty by the end of 2024 was not met; on the other, many Commonwealth countries have implemented national policies and regulations to reduce marine plastic pollution. Countries have also taken important measures, including through implementing MARPOL, to reduce pollution from ships.

Strategic Focus Area 3: Sustainable Fisheries

The Declaration recognises that sustainable fisheries are fundamental to food security, livelihoods, economic development and ocean health. It also committed the Commonwealth to strengthening sustainable fisheries governance through science-based fisheries management, combating illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and enhancing regional and international co-operation to ensure the sustainable use of marine living resources.

The Declaration also makes specific commitments that support the implementation of key international fisheries instruments and reforms, including the FAO Agreement on Port State Measures (PSMA), the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement, and the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies. These commitments recognise that overfishing, harmful subsidies, inadequate monitoring and enforcement, and the impacts of climate change continue to threaten fish stocks and marine ecosystems globally.

The Declaration further emphasises improving transparency and traceability in seafood supply chains, strengthening fisheries monitoring, strengthening monitoring, control and surveillance systems, protecting the interests and livelihoods of small-scale fishers, and supporting sustainable fisheries that contribute to economic resilience, food security and ocean health. Together, these commitments aim to align fisheries policy and management with the broader objectives of sustainable development, climate resilience and responsible ocean stewardship across the Commonwealth.

There has been considerable progress in Commonwealth countries supporting international fisheries agreements and reforms. As of September 2026, 32 of the 56 Commonwealth countries are Parties to the FAO PSMA,[27] representing more than half of Commonwealth membership. The PSMA is a key instrument for preventing, deterring and eliminating IUU fishing by preventing vessels engaged in such fishing from using ports and landing their catches.

Advances have also been made in the acceptance of the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies. As of 1 October 2026, 32 Commonwealth countries had deposited instruments of acceptance, compared with 20 when the Declaration was agreed, representing an increase of 60 per cent.[28] Commonwealth countries depositing instruments of acceptance contributed to the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies entering into force on 15 September 2025, which marked an important milestone in international efforts to eliminate subsidies that contribute to IUU fishing and overfishing.

There are also examples of good practice at the national and regional levels to improve the sustainability of fisheries. The United Kingdom has, for example, continued implementation and expansion of Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs). These plans are designed to provide long-term, evidence-based strategies for managing commercially important fish stocks and supporting stock recovery where needed. As of 2026, 11 FMPs have been published, covering a range of fisheries.[29] By integrating ecological, economic and social considerations into fisheries management, the United Kingdom is advancing a more precautionary and ecosystem-based approach consistent with the Declaration's principles.

The Government of Belize has continued to strengthen sustainable fisheries management through its network of marine reserves and by tightening controls on commercial fishing activities, including through licensing requirements, seasonal

closures, catch limits and restrictions on fishing gear. These measures are intended to protect critical fish habitats, support the recovery and replenishment of fish populations, and enhance the resilience of marine ecosystems.[30]

In the Pacific, Commonwealth countries have played a leading role in regional fisheries management organisations, helping to advance the adoption of science-based conservation measures. The Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, which includes 12 Commonwealth countries as members,[31] has strengthened harvest strategies and management measures for key tuna stocks, which are among the world's most economically significant fisheries. These measures aim to ensure that highly migratory species such as skipjack, yellowfin, bigeye and albacore tuna remain biologically sustainable while supporting economic opportunities for Pacific Island nations.[32]

Since the adoption of the Declaration, Commonwealth countries have also strengthened efforts to combat IUU fishing. Fiji[33] and Samoa[34] have, for example, enhanced monitoring and surveillance measures to improve fisheries management and combat IUU fishing. Their efforts have been supported through Operation Kurukuru, a long-standing regional surveillance initiative co-ordinated by the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency. Covering more than 30 million km² of ocean, the operation brings together countries from across the region to conduct joint maritime surveillance, inspections, intelligence sharing and enforcement activities. In 2025, this operation involved the inspection of 126 vessels and identification of 11 vessels of interest.[35] The initiative demonstrates the value of collective action in addressing fisheries crime across vast ocean spaces where national enforcement capacity can be limited.

Australia has similarly expanded investments in fisheries compliance systems and electronic monitoring technologies, which are increasingly recognised as cost-effective tools for improving transparency, enhancing data quality, supporting stock assessments and detecting non-compliance. The adoption of these technologies represents a significant step towards more transparent and accountable fisheries management.[36]

New Zealand has also invested in electronic monitoring through the deployment of on-board camera systems on fishing vessels. This programme is the next step towards a more data-driven and responsive fisheries management system, and a key part of ensuring the long-term health and resilience of marine ecosystems. The independent information these cameras provide support the reputation of the industry, the sustainability of fisheries and more confident management decisions.[37]

IUU fishing has been linked to poor labour conditions and exploitation of crew. It is, therefore, important to incorporate crew welfare into responsible fisheries governance and policies to improve the sustainability of fisheries. This is an area where, across the Pacific, New Zealand has played an important role by strengthening labour protections for fishing crews.[38]

In the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, New Zealand has co-led work with Indonesia to develop the first binding Conservation and Management Measure on crew labour standards. Adopted in 2024, the measure establishes a minimum standard for crew on fishing vessels and procedures for if a crew member dies, is injured or goes missing, or is subject to forced labour and exploitation. The measure will enter into force in 2028, providing members with time to incorporate it into national laws and licensing, train vessel operators, and establish monitoring and enforcement processes.[39]

New Zealand is also working to establish a similar measure in the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO). New Zealand and the United States have advanced a proposal for binding minimum labour standards for vessels operating in the SPRFMO Convention Area. While consensus was not reached in 2026, members made progress on the proposed rules, building on an earlier SPRFMO resolution promoting minimum labour standards.[40]

There have, overall, been significant advances in Commonwealth countries implementing measures to strengthen the sustainability of fisheries. Most Commonwealth countries being Party to the FAO PSMA and the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies entering into force, are important steps forward. In addition, there are many examples of good practice from Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Belize, Fiji, New Zealand, Samoa and the United Kingdom, whose governments have introduced new measures to increase the sustainability of fisheries.

Strategic Focus Area 4: Marine Protection and Restoration

The Declaration reaffirms Commonwealth countries' commitment to the goals of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF). This includes global commitments to effectively conserve and manage at least 30 per cent of the world's land, inland waters, coastal areas and oceans by 2030, and to restoring at least 30 per cent of degraded marine and coastal ecosystems by 2030.

Commonwealth countries have, through the Declaration, committed to a broad range of activities relating to marine protection and restoration. These activities include assessing the condition of their marine and coastal ecosystems, developing governance approaches, promoting public participation and implementing marine spatial planning.

There is also a strong recognition and affirmation under the Declaration that effective marine protection and restoration must be based on partnerships with civil society, the private sector, Indigenous Peoples, as well as local communities, and a recognition that collaborative governance and the integration of traditional and local knowledge are essential for effective and equitable ocean conservation.

There is significant evidence of progress on marine protection. The United Kingdom (47 per cent), Australia (46 per cent), Seychelles (33 per cent) and New Zealand (30 per cent) have already protected more than 30 per cent of their marine and coastal area. Meanwhile, a further five Commonwealth countries – Belize (20 per cent), South Africa (15 per cent), Kiribati (12 per cent), Canada (11 per cent) and Cameroon (11 per cent) – have protected more than 10 per cent of their marine and coastal area.[41] These examples are demonstrative of the growing Commonwealth leadership in marine protection.[42]

Overall, however, while progress has been made towards the 30x30 target, much work remains to be done. Globally only 10 per cent of marine areas are protected.[43] In addition, advances towards the 30x30 target cannot be assessed from percentage coverage alone. A robust assessment must also consider whether areas are effectively conserved and managed, ecologically representative, well connected, equitably governed, and reported using a consistent geographic scope. Here, there is evidence that as little as 3 per cent of the ocean is fully or highly protected.[44] Thus, achieving the 30x30 target and effectively protecting the ocean will require both the creation of new, and a strengthening of the protection provided by existing, MPAs both globally and across the Commonwealth.

Measuring progress in the Commonwealth against the global target of having at least 30 per cent of degraded marine and coastal ecosystems under effective restoration by 2030 remains challenging, owing to gaps in data, baselines and the consistent application of definitions and monitoring approaches. Countries face common challenges, including incomplete or outdated assessments of degradation and restoration, limited co-ordination between institutions, and data that are collected for different purposes and are not readily combined for national reporting. Work is nevertheless underway to strengthen monitoring and reporting. The FAO of the United Nations, as custodian of the headline indicator for Target 2 of the KMGBF, is leading the development of methodologies and monitoring guidance, including through a dedicated marine and coastal sub-working group under the Target 2 Road Map.[45]

There are also examples from throughout the Commonwealth of new policies and regulations to protect the ocean. Canada has, for example, developed a binding MPA Protection Standard.[46] This standard is widely regarded as international best practice because it:

- establishes clear, science-based minimum protection requirements that ensure MPAs deliver genuine conservation outcomes
- creates nationally consistent rules, increasing transparency and aligning management with ecological objectives
- prohibits activities that are incompatible with biodiversity conservation.

The implementation of this standard has substantially strengthened the credibility and effectiveness of Canada's MPA network and provided a robust model for countries seeking to implement area-based conservation measures to emulate.

Grenada is a further example of a country that has enacted legislation to protect the ocean. More specifically, its Integrated Coastal Zone Management Act of 2019 establishes a comprehensive legal framework for the sustainable planning, management and protection of the coastal and marine environment. The Act requires the development of a National Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan, establishes institutional arrangements to co-ordinate decision-making across government agencies, and promotes stakeholder participation in coastal governance. It also integrates biodiversity conservation, climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction and sustainable coastal development within a single framework, recognising the interdependence of coastal ecosystems and the communities that rely on them. This law is, overall, an important part of a robust governance framework that supports the long-term conservation of coastal and marine ecosystems.[47]

Belize has also made significant progress in this area. The Government of Belize has advanced the development of an updated Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan (2025–2030) and the Belize Sustainable Ocean Plan, which is the country's Marine Spatial Plan. Together, these provide an increasingly comprehensive framework for integrated coastal and ocean management, supporting the co-ordination of activities across sectors, sustainable use of marine space, and the long-term protection and resilience of Belize's marine ecosystems.[48]

Trinidad and Tobago has introduced new policies to better manage and conserve coastal zones. In 2023, the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago approved the National Integrated Coastal Zone Management Policy and appointed an inter-ministerial committee to lead implementation of this policy. Integrated coastal zone management legislation is currently being drafted and a marine spatial plan for the Gulf of Paria is being developed.[49] The government has also commenced work on larval-based coral reef and seagrass restoration.

Cyprus has also undertaken important work to better monitor and protect marine biodiversity and ocean health. More specifically, Cyprus has implemented an integrated marine monitoring framework under the European Union (EU) Marine Strategy Framework Directive, co-ordinated by the Department of Fisheries and Marine Research. Monitoring and assessment cover biodiversity, non-Indigenous species, commercial fish stocks, food webs, seafloor integrity, hydrographical conditions, contaminants, marine litter and underwater noise, supporting evidence-based adaptive marine management. Further, Cyprus is strengthening climate-resilient conservation of marine turtles and the endangered Mediterranean monk seal through research, monitoring and targeted conservation measures. Current actions include satellite tracking of marine turtles to identify key foraging areas and establishment of a Mediterranean Monk Seal Rescue Centre, linking scientific evidence with practical species conservation and climate adaptation.[50]

In conclusion, the Declaration reaffirms the commitment of Commonwealth countries to the principal goals of KMGBF. There have been advances towards the global 30x30 target, with four Commonwealth countries now protecting more than 30 per cent of their marine and coastal areas. However, further progress is still needed to meet this global target, while measuring movement towards restoring at least 30 per cent of degraded marine and coastal ecosystems is challenging due to a lack of data. There are also good examples from many Commonwealth countries, including Canada, Grenada and Belize, of governments implementing policies and legislation to better protect and restore the ocean.

Strategic Focus Area 5: Blue Economy and Blue Finance

The Declaration recognises the importance of building a sustainable blue economy. It calls for a transition towards a sustainable, resilient and regenerative blue economy and highlights the importance of supporting the development of blue economies in SIDS and other countries that are vulnerable to the social and economic impacts of ocean degradation.

The critical role that maritime transport plays in the global economy is acknowledged by the Declaration. It also makes an ambitious call for action, considering the IMO's 2023 Strategy for the Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Ships, complemented by the voluntary National Action Plans, to ensure a just and equitable transition to sustainable shipping and port development, including for workers.

The IMO 2023 Strategy for the Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Ships provides a high-level policy framework, vision and targets for reducing shipping emissions. These targets were to be achieved through the IMO Net-Zero Framework, which proposed legally binding amendments to MARPOL Annex VI to progressively reduce the greenhouse gas intensity of marine fuels, along with an economic mechanism that prices greenhouse gas emissions and incentivises lower-emission shipping. The draft amendments to MARPOL Annex VI were scheduled for formal adoption in October 2025, but member countries were unable to reach agreement, and the session was adjourned for a year.

Commonwealth member countries have undertaken important work to reduce emissions from shipping since the Declaration was agreed. Singapore, for example, established new Green and Digital Shipping Corridors with India[51] and the Republic of Korea, bringing the total number of such corridors to nine. It has also expanded its alternative-fuel infrastructure, by issuing three methanol bunkering licenses in 2025, beginning work on ammonia power-generation and bunkering infrastructure, and developing standards for ammonia bunkering.[52]

Canada has also established an important Green Shipping Corridor Program. This programme provides financial support for clean-port and clean-vessel technologies and projects to demonstrate and scale zero and near-zero emission technologies and low-carbon fuels.[53]

Since the Declaration was agreed, India has also scaled up its Green Shipping Programme. More specifically, the government has established the Green and Digital Shipping Corridor with Singapore referred to above and started construction of its first all-electric green tug, while Kandla port has undertaken a shore-to-ship methanol bunkering trial and is working towards supplying renewable e-methanol for vessels.[54]

The Declaration also encourages the development and implementation of national Sustainable Ocean Plans (SOPs). These comprehensive, country-driven plans aim to unify fragmented policies in areas such as shipping, offshore energy and ocean data into a unified strategy that balances ecological health and long-term socio-economic development.

There have been significant advances in the development and implementation of these plans in Commonwealth countries. The Ocean Panel Progress Report 2026[55] reports that the United Kingdom and Jamaica are setting the scope for, and preparing, their SOPs; that plans are being developed by Canada, Kenya and Namibia; and that Ghana, Fiji and Seychelles have already implemented these plans.

The vast potential of marine renewable energy to support a just and equitable energy transition is also recognised in the Declaration. This includes recognition of technologies including wave, tidal and ocean thermal energy, and the need to support such technologies by expanding research and development and implementing new strategies.

Since the Declaration was agreed, several Commonwealth countries have developed public policies to support marine renewable energy. For example, the United Kingdom's 2025 National Policy Statement for Renewable Energy Infrastructure provides updated guidance for tidal-stream developments. This policy statement acknowledges the technology is still at an early stage of commercial development, with uncertainties about possible impacts on the ecosystem, and sets out how those uncertainties should be addressed in project assessments and monitoring.[56]

In King Island, Tasmania, Australia, the UniWave200 project was completed in late 2024 after more than two years of operation. This 200-kilowatt (kW) wave-energy device was designed to test whether wave power could contribute to a remote island microgrid. The project tested the full project life cycle, including design, construction, deployment, operation and decommissioning, and captured 18 months of operational data, allowing the developer to improve its modelling and prediction of energy outputs.[57]

There are also good examples of Commonwealth SIDS and developing coastal states recognising the potential of marine renewable energy. The Mauritius Energy Roadmap envisages ocean renewables contributing to the energy mix by 2030 and includes a target of 20-megawatt (MW) of wave and tidal generation by 2030.[58] Ghana's Sustainable Ocean Plan 2025–2030 identifies marine-based renewable energy as having the potential to diversify the energy mix and reduce emissions. This plan

identifies significant offshore-wind potential, with two preliminary sites estimated to have combined potential of up to 2,500 MW.[59]

The Declaration recognises the need to scale up blue finance. This is an area where Commonwealth countries – including Australia, Canada, Fiji, New Zealand and the United Kingdom – are demonstrating leadership by supporting multilateral initiatives, including the Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance (ORRAA), the Global Fund for Coral Reefs, the World Bank's PROBLUE programme, and the Global Plastic Action Partnership. Through financial contributions, governance roles and strategic engagement, these countries are helping to address long-standing gaps in ocean finance, capacity and implementation. These partnerships support practical action on interconnected challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss and marine pollution, while promoting sustainable livelihoods and ocean-based economic opportunities for SIDS and other coastal states.[60]

Further increases in blue finance may be needed to fully achieve the Declaration's goals. Commonwealth SIDS have highlighted the need for greater access to finance to support sustainable ocean management and blue economy development. For example, Vanuatu[61] has identified the expansion of blue finance as important to financing sustainable and resilient ocean development, including through its Blue and Green Bond Framework launched in 2025. Jamacia[62] has called for increased financing, alongside technology transfer, capacity building and technical support, to strengthen ocean governance and advance sustainable blue economies. Solomon Islands[63] has similarly called for increased access to grant and concessional finance for ocean conservation, sustainable fisheries and the blue economy.

This point is also supported by analytical studies: the *Ocean Protection Gap Report (2026)*[64] estimates that delivering marine 30x30 requires approximately US$16 billion in annual investment, compared with current spending of around US$1.8 billion per year. It therefore estimates that funding would need to increase by approximately nine to ten times to align available resources with the scale of global ambition. These figures highlight the scale of the financing challenge and the need to mobilise additional public, private and blended sources of finance to support implementation.

In sum, the Declaration recognises the need to build a sustainable blue economy and highlights the need for concrete action in three areas: reducing emissions from shipping, developing and implementing Sustainable Ocean Plans, and supporting marine renewable technologies. The IMO Net-Zero framework for reducing emissions for shipping has not yet been agreed, but Commonwealth countries – including the United Kingdom, Singapore and India – have taken important steps to promote green shipping. Commonwealth countries such as Ghana, Fiji and Seychelles have implemented SOPs, while there have also been important projects and policies to promote marine renewable energy in countries including Australia, Ghana and Seychelles.

Conclusion

The Commonwealth has made important strides towards implementing the Apia Commonwealth Ocean Declaration. Since its adoption, Commonwealth countries have introduced policies, legislation and programmes to strengthen marine conservation, reduce pollution, improve fisheries management, support sustainable blue economies and advance the transition towards greener shipping. There has also been important Commonwealth engagement and action on international ocean governance, including through the entry into force and implementation of the BBNJ Agreement, the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies and the FAO Agreement on Port State Measures. These developments demonstrate the value of collective action, while the many important national ocean conservation measures introduced by Commonwealth countries are also making an important contribution to achieving the goals of the Declaration.

However, as this report highlights, significant challenges remain. Further progress is needed to achieve 30x30; negotiations on the Global Plastics Treaty remain ongoing; and additional action is needed to support the transition towards sustainable shipping and blue economies.

The Declaration provides a strong framework for collective action, but its impact will ultimately depend on countries being able to translate its commitments into policies, legislation, investment and effective implementation. Stronger co-ordination between national governments, regional organisations and international partners

can help to identify common challenges, avoid duplication and accelerate the adoption of approaches that have demonstrated value elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

Scaling up blue finance will be particularly important. The financing gap for ocean conservation and sustainable development remains substantial, particularly for SIDS and developing coastal countries. A combination of approaches, including blue bonds, blended finance, debt-for-nature swaps and grant financing, can help mobilise additional resources and connect finance more effectively to national and regional priorities. Access to finance should be complemented by continued support for capacity development, technology transfer and marine scientific expertise.

The Commonwealth can also strengthen implementation by expanding technical co-operation, knowledge exchange and peer learning. Sharing national and regional experience can help countries adapt successful approaches to their own circumstances, including in areas such as implementation of the BBNJ Agreement, sustainable fisheries, marine protection and restoration, and blue economy development. Attention will be needed to strengthen institutional capacity in SIDS and developing coastal countries, where limited technical and financial resources can constrain implementation.

Going forward, stronger ocean planning, science and inclusive governance will be essential. Marine spatial planning and Sustainable Ocean Plans can provide practical frameworks for co-ordinating activities across sectors, reducing conflicts between ocean users and supporting sustainable economic development. Greater investment in ocean observation, marine science, digital technologies, data systems and knowledge sharing will strengthen the evidence base for decision-making and enable countries to monitor change and adapt policies over time. These efforts should be underpinned by inclusive partnerships involving governments, regional organisations, academia, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, civil society and the private sector, recognising the different knowledge, experience and capacities that each can contribute.

In conclusion, there has been significant progress towards implementing the Declaration. And going forward continued political leadership, stronger partnerships, increased investment and practical co-operation can drive full implementation of the Declaration and lasting benefits for ocean health.

Endnotes

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Commonwealth Secretariat
Marlborough House, Pall Mall
London SW1Y 5HX
United Kingdom

thecommonwealth.org

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