

# Blue Economy: Because protecting our planet requires a sea change

The decision by the United Nations to dedicate the decade 2021-2030 to protecting the oceans reflects an unavoidable reality: that ocean and maritime pollution is a top priority challenge from an environmental, social and economic point of view.



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## Oceans, an essential but fragile element of life on earth

Supported by the United Nations, the fifth edition of the One Planet Summit in Brest, France, in February of this year was devoted entirely to the oceans. A choice of subject that sent a strong signal, it came as little surprise to experts in the field. In 2015, the UN had set the preservation of “oceans, seas and marine resources” as its 14th Sustainable Development Goal and awareness of their importance has been growing ever since. Determined to make protecting them a priority, the UN has declared the period from 2021-2030 “a decade of ocean science for sustainable development.” Clearly, the sound of alarm bells ringing has become ever louder over time. Since the start of the Industrial Revolution, water pollution has led to a three-fold increase in the acidity of the world’s oceans, a life-changing phenomenon for many marine ecosystems.

Meanwhile, after a record year for rising ocean temperatures in 2021, a combination of the glacial melt occurring from Greenland to the Antarctic and the thermal expansion of seawater has led to a constant rise in sea levels.

## A vital organ for planet earth

The challenge is literally one of life or death. Source of life on Earth, the oceans also provide more than half of the oxygen we breathe.

The oceans are also one of our main allies for combating climate change, as they absorb close to 30% of our CO2 emissions, along with 90% of the atmospheric warming caused by greenhouse gases. As they become warmer, saltier and more acidic, they also lose their ability to absorb CO2. The melting of glaciers is an additional major source of concern, as their ability to reflect sunlight is another vital factor for our climate.

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## A crucial role in human life and the global economy

Human beings are directly affected by all these dangers. Currently, half of the world’s population live within 100 kilometres of a coastline. The IPCC report of September 2019 indicates that sea levels could rise by 1.1 to 2 metres in the coming decades - and that’s without including another phenomenon linked to global warming: the predicted increase in both the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, storms and tsunamis.

Another issue is over-fishing. In 2018, world consumption of fish reached 20.5 kilos per person per year, according to the annual report

of the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization. In 1960, the world’s population, 3 billion at the time, consumed less than 10 kilos a year per head. Intensive fishing upsets the balance of ecosystems and degrades the seabed, while the exhaustion of such resources could have major repercussions for the global economy.

Fishing, aquaculture, coastal and marine tourism, research activities... around 350 million jobs worldwide are dependent on the so-called blue economy. In 2016, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimated that it contributed \$1.5 trillion to the global economy – a figure that is expected to double by 2030. It is also worth remembering that 90% of global trade is carried out by sea and that a cargo ship emits 100 times fewer greenhouse gases than a plane.

Seen from an ever-broader economic perspective, by combining areas such as fishing, transport and tourism, the world’s seas and oceans contain resources worth \$24 trillion, creating \$2.5 trillion in value a year: 32% through indirect production (tourism, coastal activities), 29% in direct production (fish, algae, coral reefs, deep sea/sea bed activities and mangrove swamps), 22% in maritime transport and 17% through their ecological impact (source: OECD).

Lastly, a final key element in all this brings several different issues together: the oceans are also a source of energy, which is destined for exponential growth over the coming decades. The potential of offshore windfarms is far greater than those onshore. A report in 2019 by the International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates the offshore potential to

be 420,000 TWh a year – a figure 18 times bigger than global demand for electricity. Yet the energy potential of oceans goes far beyond wind power.

Many technologies are currently being developed to provide sustainable energy, using different aspects of oceans (such as waves, tides, currents, and salt levels). Hydraulic turbines, barrages, wave installations and tidal power plants are all opportunities with real promise. As victims of climate change and, at the same time, a source of solutions to the problem, oceans are increasingly at the heart of the environmental challenge.

The ocean-based economic ecosystem often referred to as the “blue economy”, is in this sense deep, diverse, dynamic and changing. It represents an annual GDP of \$2 500 billion. If our oceans were a country, they would make up the world’s 7th biggest superpower, just behind the UK and ahead of Brazil and Italy.

And they offer considerable growth prospects. The OECD estimates that the blue economy could account for 5% of global GDP by 2030 and sees the number of related jobs increasing by +130% between 2010 and 2030.

We are facing an alignment of interests where global awareness, regulation, incentive policies... mean that whatever the motivations - ecological, financial or social - all reasons are good to invest in sustainable exploitation and conservation of the oceans!



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