

Secretary's Report to LDAC Associate Members

11th Our Ocean Conference · Mombasa (Kenya) · 16–18 June 2026

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Disclaimer/methodological note: This report has been drawn up exclusively on the basis of the author's personal notes taken whilst attending some of the plenary sessions and 'side events'. It is therefore a document for internal use by the LDAC for reflection purposes and should not be regarded as a valid source of reference or an official publication, nor should it be taken to reflect in full the conclusions and agreements reached at the aforementioned meeting.

1. Introduction: background, objective and topics

The Our Ocean Conference (OOC) is an annual international forum that brings together world leaders, governments, the private sector, NGOs, scientists and civil society to promote the protection of the oceans. It was launched in 2014 on the initiative of the then US Secretary of State, John Kerry. The venue rotates, with the conference taking place each year in a different host country or continent. For example, it has been held in countries such as Malta, Chile, Panama, Greece and South Korea.

The aim of the OOC is to generate voluntary and concrete commitments to protect marine ecosystems, boost the blue economy and mobilise financial resources.

The key issues addressed to date are:

- Marine protected areas (such as the global target of protecting 30 per cent of the oceans by 2030)
- Climate change and its impact on the sea
- Marine pollution (particularly plastics)
- Sustainable fisheries and maritime safety

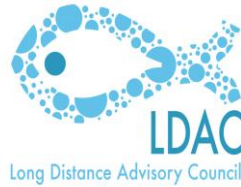
In terms of its financial impact, since its inception, the platform has mobilised billions of dollars through thousands of voluntary commitments made by various countries and organisations.

The *11th Our Ocean Conference (OOC)* was held for the first time in 2026 in Africa, in the city of Mombasa (Kenya). It provided an opportunity to place the priorities of African countries at the centre of the international debate on ocean governance, marine conservation, sustainable fisheries and the development of the blue economy.

The documented sessions highlighted a cross-cutting message: the sustainability of the oceans requires a combination of ecosystem conservation, economic viability, social justice, scientific knowledge and the participation of coastal communities.

The main topics of interest to the LDAC were: fisheries transparency, the fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, African regional cooperation and a 'level playing field' between fleets.

This report summarises the sessions I was able to attend, in particular the Scientific and Research Symposium and the side events on sustainability and the blue transition, as well as fisheries transparency, seabed mining and the fight against illegal fishing. The official report containing the full list of the conference's official recommendations can be found here: <https://wordpress.ouroceanconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/OUR-OCEAN-FINAL-COMMITMENTS-REPORT-Webcom.pdf>



2. Main thematic areas of OOC 11

2.1. Blue economy: sustainability and equity

The key idea, as expressed by speakers such as Dr Kilaparti Ramakrishna, is that the **blue economy must entail a genuine transformation of current production and economic development models**, rather than being reduced to a mere label ('bluwashing').

The profitability of economic activities must be compatible with ecological resilience and a more equitable distribution of the benefits accruing to the environment and local communities (source: CAOPA representatives).

The presentations were structured around three main themes:

1. Inclusive governance that involves coastal communities;
2. Funding mechanisms for ecosystem restoration and climate adaptation; and
3. Reliable science to assess risks and guide decision-making. It was emphasised that Africa must play an active role in shaping international rules through regional cooperation and investment in research and training.

2.2. Diversity, biodiversity and participation

Professor Christina Hicks presented **diversity as a key criterion for sustainable fisheries**: diversity of fishing gear, diversity of livelihoods, diversity in habitat protection measures, and diversity in governance mechanisms and institutions. The expert panels agreed on the importance of recognising and integrating *customary* systems into the access to and management of fishery resources, as a complement to systems imported from developed countries based on centralised models.

For the LDAC, these considerations could find a place and resonate in the debate on the new generation of Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs), as well as on the coexistence of industrial fleets (both EU and non-EU) and small-scale fleets from coastal countries, the distribution of the resulting benefits, and the participation of local communities in policy design and the identification of priorities regarding activities funded through sectoral support.

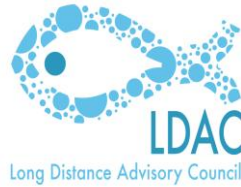
2.3. Climate, ecosystems and marine spatial planning

Contributions on the ocean–climate nexus focused primarily on global warming, ocean acidification and deoxygenation, marine pollution and IUU fishing as cumulative human pressures on the marine environment. Attention was drawn to the vulnerability of African regions to the effects of climate change, in contrast to their relatively small contribution to total global emissions (CO₂ and GHGs).

The restoration of mangroves, seagrass beds and reefs was presented as an opportunity to invest in biodiversity and resilience, with the potential to generate both environmental and economic returns and benefits. Kenya's experience with marine spatial planning (MSP), which began in 2018 (in collaboration with the FAO's EAF-Nansen Programme and Norway), highlighted challenges regarding the availability, collection, processing and analysis of georeferenced data to improve knowledge of the seabed and institutional coordination. It was proposed that we should be ambitious and move towards more dynamic planning that takes into account changes in the state of resources and ensures the fisheries sector's participation in decision-making and policy design.

2.4. Blue Transformation and Aquatic Foods

At two parallel FAO events on the blue transformation and the launch of the State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture (SOFIA) 2026 report, the importance of the contribution of fisheries and aquaculture to nutrition, job creation and retention, the retention of coastal populations in their home regions, and economic development was highlighted. In contrast to extractive fisheries, which remain stable in terms of global production volume, the growth potential of aquaculture was discussed, alongside challenges relating to financing, scientific support, environmental impact, and the composition and traceability of animal-based feed. Participants emphasised the need to better translate scientific findings into the public management of natural resources and the importance of communication, linking sustainable production to economic and social opportunities.



2.5. Transparency and the fight against IUU fishing

The side event on fisheries transparency reforms, attended by the NGOs OCEANA, EJF, Global Fishing Watch and Stop Illegal Fishing, emphasised that transparency must include the publication of and public access to data, as well as a move towards more transparent political processes and accountability.

During the panel discussion, participants discussed how transparency is improved through: public registers of fishing vessels and support vessels; the processing and issuance of fishing licences; information on the beneficial owners of fishing companies and conglomerates; the publication of agreements on access to public and private fishery resources; strengthening monitoring, control and surveillance (including SLB-VMS satellite data); the regional exchange of information on operators and compliance records (for example, within RFMOs); and the effective implementation of instruments of international law.

As regards representatives of the invited government authorities: Cameroon presented the regulatory reforms and improvements planned for the registration and monitoring of foreign fishing vessels operating in its EEZs; Liberia outlined the country's progress in digitalisation, surveillance and cooperation in the fight against IUU fishing; Ghana highlighted the difficulties in identifying the beneficial owners of fishing companies and in monitoring the flow of cross-border and high-seas operations.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of shared regional registers and their suitability for preventing 'pirate' operators from exploiting legal and monitoring loopholes between national jurisdictions was discussed.

During the question-and-answer session, the LDAC representative advocated a zero-tolerance approach to IUU fishing and a level playing field for all fleets operating in the same waters or competing in the same markets. He enquired about the publication of registers, IMO numbers, licences, beneficial owners and fisheries agreements, emphasising that the rules must be verifiably enforceable.

2.6. Innovation and citizen science

Technological tools and solutions were presented, such as SurfSense, which collects oceanographic data via sensors used by surfers (using a multifunction sensor equipped with GPS that collects data whilst they practise their sport) in coastal communities and shares it on open-source scientific platforms for dissemination. These examples demonstrate the potential for collaboration between marine users and academic and scientific researchers, provided the data is validated by experts; they may also inspire participatory science initiatives and applications involving fishermen.

3. Conclusions and proposed arguments to be included in future LDAC opinions

1. *Transparency and a level playing field*

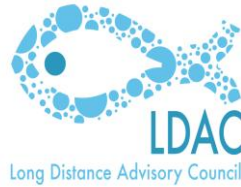
Continue to promote improvements in genuine transparency within the EU and in third countries, through instruments such as the EU's future external action strategy on fisheries, the new generation of fisheries partnership agreements (SFPAs), the SMEFF and IUU fishing regulations, or the Compliance and Control Committees of the RFMOs to which the EU is a contracting party, with regard to the publication of data on vessels, licences, beneficial owners and access agreements, alongside equivalent controls for both European and non-European operators.

2. *Regional cooperation.*

Support the exchange of information, regional vessel registers and the coordination of monitoring, control and surveillance of shared resources, including integrated policies that help to strengthen collaboration amongst developing countries, with a particular focus on the African continent, by providing them with the necessary financial and human resources.

3. *Social dimension*

Incorporate considerations relating to employment, food security, the participation of coastal communities and the distribution of benefits into fisheries sustainability policies, and recognise the sector's importance as a strategic sector within EU and international 'blue transition' policies.



4. Science and participation

Strengthen reliable data and cooperation between scientists and stakeholders in the fisheries sector; encourage the sector's participation in marine spatial planning processes (e.g. the presence of fishing activities and mapping of overlaps with commercial activities; evidence of impacts for the selection and designation of marine protected areas).

5. The African factor

Take into account the aspiration of African countries to contribute to the design — and not merely the implementation — of international standards on the blue economy and fisheries, including due respect for and integration of their traditional and customary systems of access, management and control of fishery resources in a manner compatible with the centralised macro-policies of developed countries.

4. Final assessment – relevance of the 11th OOC to the LDAC

The *'take-home'* message from the 11th OOC in Mombasa suggests that the main challenge of ocean governance lies not merely in formulating new, ambitious commitments and political declarations, but in translating these into coherent policies, sustainable investments and effective enforcement and monitoring mechanisms.

For the LDAC, the 11th OOC provided a perspective-centred view not only of the EU and other developing countries and international organisations, but also of governments and coastal communities on continents such as Africa, South America and Oceania. The complementary nature of the contributions received can serve to enrich the LDAC's perspective by incorporating elements of interest to our work on the external dimension of the Common Fisheries Policy, improving transparency, combating IUU fishing, and strategic cooperation with African partners on issues of mutual interest.

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