

EXPLAINER

Reviving Ocean Health through Regional Cooperation



Destruction of ocean ecosystems can result in less catch. Photo credit: ADB.

Regional cooperation and integration efforts on marine life conservation can be improved through strengthened governance and financial sustainability.

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Introduction

Oceans have provided food and livelihood to people in Asia and the Pacific for centuries. Coastal populations have grown and benefited from shipping, coastal and marine tourism, and natural resources. However, pollution, habitat loss, species loss, climate change, and unsustainable development have threatened ocean ecosystems. Challenges and threats to ocean health in one place can have a negative ripple effect across the region.

The rise of illegal fishing, plastic and infectious medical waste, harmful activities during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic underscores the importance of international and regional cooperation in monitoring and protecting the oceans. Addressing transboundary challenges to ocean health and productivity requires coordinated implementation of best practices, good governance, and enforcement of international agreements among countries, international organizations, and other partners in the

region.

This article is based on the chapter “Regional Cooperation and Integration for Ocean Health and a Sustainable Blue Economy” in the book *---Future of Regional Integration in Asia and the Pacific* published by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). It takes a closer look at initiatives in regional cooperation and identifies ways these can be strengthened to efficiently address current and emerging challenges to ocean ecosystems.

What benefits do the oceans provide to Asia and the Pacific?

Oceans provide vital goods and services. They produce more than half of the oxygen in the atmosphere, regulate the climate, provide energy sources, and provide pharmaceutical resources. Many people in developing countries derive their livelihood from oceans, which significantly contributes to their countries’ gross domestic product (GDP). As much as 13% of Indonesia’s and 19% of Viet Nam’s GDP come from the oceans. The tourism, fisheries, and shipping industries form the foundation of the region’s blue economy, estimated to be between \$3 trillion to \$6 trillion globally.

Shipping and other maritime transport links provide important connections between and among countries in the region, widening the markets of local producers, creating employment, and generating income. The largest shipbuilding economies in the world are in Asia: People’s Republic of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. They build 80% of the world’s ships (in terms of compensated gross tons) and dominate the global market for bulkers, tankers, and containerships.

What are the major threats and impacts facing the region’s oceans?

Marine pollution and oil spills are two of the major threats to ocean ecosystems in the region. Nonpoint source pollution, solid waste and untreated wastewater, shipping, and urban activities adversely affect ocean health. Nonpoint source pollution comes from diffuse sources, such as excess fertilizers, insecticides, oil, grease, sediment, and toxic chemicals from agricultural, urban, and residential areas. About 49% of oil spills come from operational discharges and accidental spills from ships and land-based sources, while other sources are from natural seeping and oil extraction.

Overexploitation, increasing coastal populations and developments, and climate change also threaten ocean health. The destruction of mangroves and coral reefs are endangering coastal areas, reducing fish stocks, and releasing massive amounts of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere and ocean. Increasing CO₂ and other GHG emissions from human activities have contributed to higher ocean temperatures, increased frequency, and severity of extreme weather events, and rise in sea levels. Warming waters have caused mass die-offs of marine life and shifted species distribution. The impacts of climate change threaten ocean-dependent livelihoods and communities at risk.

Other threats to ocean ecosystems are i) threat of extinction of migratory marine species; ii) alien invasive species; iii) overfishing; iv) safety and security issues in maritime shipping; and v) COVID-19.

During the pandemic, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing has risen as governments focused on the health crisis instead of enforcement. The pandemic has also affected businesses and livelihoods that depend on the oceans. These include tourism, shipping, fisheries, offshore renewables, and aquaculture. As a result, fish and seafood exports could drop by a third, while cargo trade could dip by 10%.

How does regional cooperation help improve ocean health?

Through regional cooperation and integration, countries can develop shared goals and priorities, and create clear and consistent standards and mechanisms for funding requirements. It is critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which require a multi-sector, multi-stakeholder, collaborative approach, particularly for SDG 14: Life Below Water.

Cooperation also helps the blue economy grow by building stronger institutions and closer trade integration and stronger financial links. Reducing or removing barriers at the border increases trade in goods and services, cross-border investment, labor mobility, and technology transfer to create a larger, regionally integrated market and more efficient supply chains. Regional cooperation stimulates economic growth in the shipping, fisheries, and tourism sectors; and helps effectively deal with challenges caused by increasing economic interdependence, such as the spread of contagious diseases and marine plastic pollution.

To improve regional initiatives on ocean-related transboundary issues in national and international waters, numerous intergovernmental organizations, agreements, and programs have been created. The table below shows a diverse sample of various mechanisms and governance structures, as well as selected initiatives, that are important regionally and can play an increasingly larger role in improving ocean health and the blue economy.

Table 1. Regional Cooperation and Integration Initiatives in Asia and the Pacific

Initiative	Brief Description
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ASEAN Working Group on Coastal and Marine Environments	Aims to ensure ASEAN's coastal and marine environments are sustainably managed; its unique ecosystems, pristine areas and species are protected; economic activities are sustainably managed; and public awareness of the coastal and marine environment increased
Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Oceans and Fisheries Working Group	Established to facilitate free trade and promote aquaculture and the sustainable use of fisheries, marine ecosystem resources, and related goods and services
Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organization	Mandated to enhance cooperation among its member countries and other countries and organizations in the region and provide technical and management advisory services for sustainable coastal fisheries development and management in the Bay of Bengal region
Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area	Cooperation initiative established in 1994 to accelerate the socioeconomic development of less-developed, marginalized, and geographically-remote areas within these four countries
Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia	Intergovernmental organization that supports the development and protection of the marine environment and coastal areas of East Asian Seas
Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries, and Food Security	Formal intergovernmental partnership that aims to protect the region's valuable economic and environmental assets through regional cooperation
Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle	Sub-regional framework established to accelerate economic cooperation and integration among selected states and provinces in the three countries
Micronesia Challenge	Multi-jurisdiction commitment to preserve the natural resources that Pacific traditions, cultures and livelihoods depend on
Northwest Pacific Action Plan	Intergovernmental organization that was adopted by the People's Republic of China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the Russian Federation in 1994 to achieve the goal of wise use, development, and management of the coastal and marine environment
Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner	Established within the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat in 2014 and is the highest regional Pacific entity mandated to lead on oceans matters
Parties to the Nauru Agreement	Subregional fisheries agreement that has implemented many conservation measures that were the first of their kind, such as closing areas of the high seas to fishing
Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia	Intergovernmental organization that fosters and sustains healthy and resilient coasts and oceans, communities, and economies across the Seas of East Asia through integrated management solutions and partnerships

Regional fisheries management organizations	Made up of countries that share a practical and/or financial interest in managing and conserving fish stocks in a particular area
Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme	Regional organization with 21 Pacific island member countries and territories and five developed country members with a mandate to promote cooperation in the Pacific region for environmental protection and sustainable development
South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme	Inter-governmental organization established to promote and support protection, management, and enhancement of the environment and sustainable development of the region
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation	Intergovernmental organization dedicated to economic, technological, social, and cultural development, with an emphasis on collective self-reliance

What are the success areas of these initiatives?

A review of the selected regional organizations and programs showed similarities in their successes and lessons learned. The main recurring success areas, particularly in governance, knowledge, and capacity building, are the following:

Governance

- Established mechanisms for cooperation and collaboration between member states.
- Created synergy to improve governance and implement management programs.
- Identified common priorities and provided a regional framework for cooperation.
- Contributed to sub-regional economic integration.
- Brought together stakeholders to create dialogue around ocean issues.
- Inspired similar regional island commitments.

Knowledge and Capacity Building

- Built on lessons from related initiatives and used partnerships to bring in expertise and knowledge.
- “Oceans Champions” provided high-level advocacy and attention to priority areas, decisions, and processes, as well as, improved cooperation, coordination and collaboration.
- Facilitated information exchange, built institutional capacity, and strengthened regional policy dialogue.
- Raised awareness.
- Improved science-to-management decision-making.

What lessons can be learned to improve regional cooperation and integration initiatives?

Regional Governance

Effective regional governance requires the following: i) multiple and mutually reinforcing objectives that address environmental, economic, and social aspects of sustainability; ii) a strong secretariat to provide a central point of coordination; iii) a decentralized structure; iv) increased transparency, accountability, and public participation; v) and stakeholder engagement.

National and Local Governance

For effective national and local governance, these are needed: i) focus on addressing local and national issues, with regional collaboration as a secondary step; ii) integrate regional priorities with national priorities; iii) strengthen national government systems and ownership; iv) fill infrastructure gaps, provide an enabling policy and regulatory environment, and resolve issues such as cross-border trade; v) local government participation in regional strategy development; and vii) create a conducive business environment through incentives and information on potential regional markets.

Knowledge and Capacity Building

Essential for knowledge and capacity building are: i) sharing of knowledge and lessons learned at the national and regional levels, with solutions adapted to local conditions; ii) improved management systems; and iii) increase decision makers' understanding and motivation to act through field trips.

Finance

For finance, the need is to i) mobilize financial resources, such as donations and endowments; ii) raise awareness of politicians and citizens for them to prioritize and publicly support conservation efforts; iii) diversify financing sources to lower risk, such as tourism taxes, debt swaps, and revenues from fishing licenses; and iv) seek financing partners by encouraging contributions from major donors and governments.

How can regional efforts be strengthened?

Many regional initiatives established to address threats to marine ecosystems have been successful and impactful. However, they faced numerous challenges. Enforcing regulations across huge areas of open ocean and management of international waters can be difficult. Also, most entities struggled with regional, national, and local governance, and financial sustainability.

Recommendations to make these organizations and programs more effective and efficient are as follows:

- Promote implementation and enforcement of multilateral agreements.
- Improve institutional capacity of regional coordination entities while raising their profile and support

from key national decision-makers.

- Strengthen and institutionalize coordination mechanisms between regional cooperation and integration initiatives.
- Improve transparency and strengthen relationships with stakeholders.
- Establish inclusive and resilient value chains.
- Initiate regional dialogue among governments and the global and regional shipping industry.
- Develop and implement effective national policies and frameworks.
- Establish regional data sharing systems to track SDG progress and improve management of ocean resources.
- Raise public awareness and accelerate cooperation among ocean stakeholders.

Asia and the Pacific have greatly benefitted from regional cooperation and integration through strengthened economies, stronger country connections, and the establishment of shared goals and priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic calls for stronger cooperation and presents an opportunity for countries, regions, and sub-regions to redesign their economies for a joint recovery toward a sustainable green and blue future.

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Asian Development Bank (ADB)

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