

# KEEPING ASIA-PACIFIC AFLOAT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: UNO and its various Agencies

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For generations, the Asia-Pacific region has thrived on our seas. The seas provide food, livelihoods and a sense of identity, especially for coastal communities in the Pacific island states. Sadly, escalating strains on the marine environment are threatening to drown progress and our way of life. In less than a century, climate change and unsustainable resource management have degraded ecosystems and diminished biodiversity.

Levels of overfishing have exponentially increased, leaving fish stocks and food systems vulnerable. Marine plastic pollution coursing through the region's rivers has contributed to most of the debris flooding the ocean. While the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has temporarily reduced pollution, this should not be a moment of reprieve. Rather, recovery efforts need to build a new reality, embedded in sustainability.

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Despite a seascape celebrated in our collective imaginations, research shows that our picture of the ocean is remarkably shallow. Insights from 'Changing Sails: Accelerating Regional Actions for Sustainable Oceans in Asia and the Pacific', the theme study of this year's Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), reveal that without data, we are swimming in the dark. Data are available for only two out of ten targets for the Sustainable Development Goal 14, 'Life Below Water'. Due to limitations in methodology and national statistical systems, information gaps have persisted at uneven levels across countries.

While there is much we cannot see, images of plastic pollution have become commonplace. Asia and the Pacific produces nearly half of global plastic by volume, of which it consumes 38%. Plastics represent a double burden for the ocean: their production generates CO2 absorbed by the ocean, and as a final product enters the ocean as pollution. Beating this challenge will hinge upon effective national policies and re-thinking production cycles.

Environmental decline is also affecting fish stocks. Our region's position as the world's largest producer of fish has come at the cost of over-exploitation. The percentage of stocks fished at unsustainable levels has increased threefold from 10% in 1974 to 33% in 2015. Generating complete data on fish stocks, fighting illicit fishing activity and conserving marine areas must remain a priority.

While the most connected shipping economies are in Asia, the small island developing States of the Pacific experience much lower levels of connectivity, leaving them relatively isolated from the global economy. Closing the maritime connectivity gap must be placed at the centre of regional transport cooperation efforts. We must also work with the shipping community to navigate toward green shipping. Enforcing sustainable shipping policies is essential.

The magnitude of our ocean and its challenges represent how extensive and collaborative our solutions must be. Trans-boundary ocean management and linking ocean data call for close cooperation among countries in the region. Harnessing ocean statistics through strong national statistical systems will serve as a compass guiding countries to monitor trends, devise timely responses and clear blind spots. Through the Ocean Accounts Partnership, ESCAP is working with countries to harmonise ocean data and provide a space for regular dialogue.

Translating international agreements and standards into national action is also key. We must fully equip countries and all ocean custodians to localise global agreements into tangible results. ESCAP is working with member states to implement International Maritime Organization (IMO) requirements. Keeping the ocean plastic-free will depend on policies that promote a circular economy approach. This minimises resource use and will require economic incentives and disincentives.

Our oceans keep our economy and our lives above the waves. In the post-COVID-19 era, we must use the years ahead to steer our collective fleets toward sustainable oceans.

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