

A Call to Action

The third UN Ocean Conference (UNOC3) will be held in Nice, France, on June 9-13, 2025. In the run up to it, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean, Ambassador Peter Thomson, reiterates that small-scale fisheries is at the heart of ocean conservation

Considering the future of humanity's relationship with the ocean, it is with a sense of apprehension that I write these words today. The ocean covers over 70 per cent of our planet; it is the source of life and livelihood for billions of people; and it plays a pivotal role in sustaining biodiversity and regulating

and nutrition for millions of people around the globe, particularly in the coastal regions of low-income countries. Their contribution to local economies, food systems and cultural heritage is immeasurable.

I come from Fiji and have spent a good part of my life working with the coastal communities of our rural districts and islands. As a result, I've experienced from a young age how closely ocean health is tied to human well-being, especially for small-scale fishers. Given the challenging times in which we live, their deep knowledge of marine ecosystems, migratory patterns of fish and sustainable fishing practices—passed down through generations—is invaluable. Yet, for reasons beyond their control, they are among the people most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, habitat degradation, overfishing, pollution and the increasing pressures of industrial activities.

Despite their great significance as food providers and the disproportionate vulnerability to which they are being subjected, small-scale fishers are often sidelined in decision-making processes, particularly at the level of international ocean governance. The insights of small-scale fishers are too often overlooked in favour of industrialized interests, a process that marginalizes them and weakens our efforts to address ocean challenges in the comprehensive and inclusive manner. If we are to navigate our way to sustainable solutions for what ails the ocean, I believe we are going to have to elevate the voices and knowledge of small-scale fishers in global ocean governance.

The Sustainable Development Goal 14 (SDG14), universally agreed to

the Earth's climate. The ocean has been a constant in human history, shaping civilizations, cultures and economies. But we are putting its well-being under immense pressure with overfishing, pollution and the accelerating impacts of the anthropogenic-induced climate crisis.

In my capacity as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean, I engage with diverse ocean stakeholders around the world: policymakers, scientists, environmentalists, businesses and communities directly dependant on the ocean for their livelihoods, namely, small-scale fishers. We are preparing for the third UN Ocean Conference (UNOC3) to be held in Nice, France, on June 9-13, 2025. We must ensure that the voices of small-scale fishers are heard and that they are actively involved in shaping the outcomes of the conference.

The conference needs to recognize that small-scale fisheries (SSF) play a crucial role in ensuring food security

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by all nations back in 2015, sets out to conserve and sustainably use the ocean's resources. One of SDG14's targets specifically calls for small-scale fishers to be provided with access to marine resources and markets. This fact alone gives the justification for small-scale fisheries to have a strategic place at the main table of UNOC3.

In April this year, I attended the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) meeting in Rome, where I heard a clear call for equity from small-scale fishers including youth, women and indigenous fishworkers. Their message was an urgent one: they require fair access to ocean resources and opportunities in the changing conditions being experienced around the planet. And so, looking ahead to UNOC3, national delegations should arrive in Nice with mandates to address the demands of SSF. Ideally they should be able to demonstrate national policies that:

1. Create meaningful platforms:

Ensure that small-scale fishers can engage with policymakers and stakeholders on equal terms, with the allocation of resources, support and platforms necessary to make this meaningfully so. Demonstrate that financial and institutional constraints have been addressed so that small-scale fishers can actively participate in international dialogues.

2. Recognize and value traditional knowledge:

Besides scientific and technological solutions, traditional knowledge of small-scale fishers must be fully integrated into national marine considerations, with their lived experience integrated rationally with scientific data to develop more effective, holistic strategies for ocean governance.

3. Secure tenure rights: As industrial fleets and large-scale aquaculture encroach on traditional fishing grounds, necessary measures are in place to secure the legal and customary rights of small-scale fishers through provision of preferential access areas in the territorial waters. The SSF Guidelines offer a clear framework

for securing tenure rights for small-scale fishers; these must be fully implemented at national levels to safeguard these communities.

It is gratifying that a large section of civil society is in support of such policies. By way of example, the RISE UP's Blue Call to Action, signed by over 650 organizations worldwide, calls for a human rights-based approach to be at the heart of all sustainable ocean initiatives. It calls for upholding the rights of small-scale fishing communities to tenure, resources and meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and for the global community to actively support the resilience of small-scale fishers in the face of climate change and industrial threats, such as overfishing and marine pollution.

It is painfully apparent that without urgent reforms and a political commitment to protect these communities, we risk losing not just their livelihoods but also a crucial pillar of ocean conservation. The voyage to sustainable ocean governance requires collaboration, solidarity and a deep commitment to inclusivity, for the ocean is a shared resource and its well-being is a responsibility we hold in common. Small-scale fishers may not have the economic power or political influence of industrial fleets, but they hold the key to many of the solutions to the problems the ocean faces.

Inclusive, equitable

Building on the principles of the SSF Guidelines, UNOC3 must ensure that ocean governance is inclusive, equitable and grounded in the realities of those who depend on the ocean the most. It must take an ecosystem-based approach to ocean health, one that prioritizes the long-term health of marine environments and ensures that small-scale fishers can continue to thrive. I encourage all readers, whether they be policymakers or come from civil society or the business sector, to support the inclusion of small-scale fishers in all efforts to protect and sustain the ocean's well-being. 🍷

For more



Third UN Ocean Conference (UNOC3), Nice, 9-13 June 2025

<https://sdgs.un.org/conferences/ocean2025>

2025 United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (A/RES/78/128)

<https://sdgs.un.org/documents/ares78128-2025-united-nations-conference-support-implementation-sustainable-development>

2025 United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (A/RES/77/242)

<https://sdgs.un.org/documents/ares77242-2025-united-nations-conference-support-implementation-sustainable-development>