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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The ocean should be at the center of the climate agenda



For over 30 years, Pacific island countries have issued the same warning at the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference: the warming ocean threatens not just food and energy security, but global survival itself.

And almost every year, our warning has been treated as a regional problem, a challenge confined to remote small islands and thus not warranting more than lip service from international leaders.

I wish I could say we were wrong. Instead, the climate devastation unfolding before our eyes, supercharged by an El Niño cycle and record-breaking ocean heat, proves that this crisis does not stop at the shoreline.

Rising sea levels are swallowing fertile farmland, displacing communities, and driving up insurance premiums for families.

Ocean warming threatens the energy grids and ports that power the world economy and keep global supply chains running.

In the Arctic, 60% of coastal infrastructure, much of which is used for critical security activities, has become vulnerable to erosion.

In 2024, the Mediterranean and Black Sea, major fishing and aquaculture hubs that generate $21.5 billion in direct and indirect revenue per year, experienced marine heat waves with temperatures nearly 5° Celsius above normal, raising concerns about food insecurity.

The planet's largest carbon and heat sink

Another overlooked factor is the ocean's role as the planet's largest carbon and heat sink, absorbing 30% of CO2 emissions—as much as the world's forests—and capturing 90% of the excess heat generated by those emissions.

But it pays the price: the most heat-sensitive ecosystems are underwater, and every fraction of a degree of global warming beyond the 1.5°C target set by the Paris climate agreement destroys more of them.

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By 2050, under a 2°C warming scenario, the losses caused by ocean-linked disasters could reach $56 billion, exposing the hard limits of adaptation and the urgent need to keep warming as close to 1.5°C as possible.

These are not trivial problems. They imply major global economic and security risks. And they have existential implications for Pacific island countries: staying below the 1.5°C limit is a matter of survival, which is why we fought so fiercely to secure the Paris climate agreement and, in the intervening years, to stick as closely as possible to that target.

Political support for ocean-based climate action is strong

Last year's UN Climate Change Conference in Belém, Brazil, put forests at the center of the climate agenda.

This month's UN Climate Change Conference (COP31) in Antalya, Turkey, can do the same for the ocean.

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Political support for ocean-based climate action is strong: more than 100 countries signed a letter declaring that the ocean is a core part of the Paris climate agreement and should be treated as such at COP31.

In practice, this means that negotiators should include the ocean prominently in discussions

about reducing emissions, building resilience, and climate finance.

Moreover, the latest ocean science must inform the next global stocktake, which would add a level of accountability to climate action by creating ocean-related commitments that countries must report on and standards against which they are measured.

The ocean can help accelerate the energy transition

Every country with a coastline should join the Blue NDC Challenge, a group of governments committed to meeting their national climate goals through ocean-based solutions.

The ocean can help accelerate the energy transition with the greening of ports and shipping, as well as the development of offshore renewables.



For too long, the message of Pacific island countries has fallen on deaf ears. COP31 offers a chance to change that

Of course, the blue whale in the room is the oil and gas industry. Rapidly shifting away from fossil fuels is the most effective way to reduce the pressure on coral reefs, fisheries, coastal economies, and the local communities that depend on them.

Investment flows must reflect this rising ambition. Current financing for marine protection is estimated at $1.8 billion per year, leaving a gap of approximately $14 billion.

And while many proven solutions are ready to scale, coalitions must be mobilized to ensure that marine protected areas can deliver returns through sustainable fishing and tourism revenues.

For too long, the message of Pacific island countries has fallen on deaf ears. COP31 offers a chance to change that.

The health of the ocean will shape the future for all people. Now is the time for everyone to accept that it is a shared asset—and a shared responsibility.

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