

Summary of the 14th Meeting of the Monaco Blue Initiative: 20 March 2023

The month of March 2023 saw several landmark developments in international Ocean governance. Most importantly, a new UN treaty on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ) finally saw the light of day after some fifteen years of discussions and five of negotiations, leaving only the administrative details to be handled in a final session. In addition, the International Seabed Authority discussed draft regulations on the exploitation of the deep seabed.

Against this backdrop, around 180 Ocean professionals and high-level officials convened in Monaco for the 14th edition of the Monaco Blue Initiative (MBI 14).

MBI 14 kicked off Monaco Ocean Week (19-25 March 2023), bringing together representatives from governments, the private sector, financial and scientific institutions, and civil society to discuss issues related to Ocean protection.

The meeting featured high-level statements, keynote presentations, panel discussions, and informal “fireside chats” between the moderator and various experts, followed by questions from the audience. Four sessions addressed the following topics:

- Sustainable fisheries: reconciling conservation and exploitation in the next decade and beyond;
- Highly protected marine protected areas (MPAs), what is at stake and what is the vision for 2030;
- The role of marine ecosystem restoration in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and
- Raising ambition and scaling solutions for a protected, resilient, and sustainable Mediterranean Sea.

Held in a spirit of celebration of recent international progress, MBI 14 was praised by many as fueling the momentum regarding Ocean governance, as well as an important catalyst in global preparations for the UN Ocean Conference, co-hosted by Costa Rica and France, which will convene in Nice, France, in 2025.

The MBI is a unique platform that brings together major players in Ocean conservation and governance in annual debates to explore solutions to challenges facing our Ocean and to promote a sustainable blue economy. Launched in 2010 by HSH Prince Albert II of Monaco, the MBI is co-organized annually by the Oceanographic Institute – Prince Albert I of Monaco Foundation and the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation. MBI 14 took place at the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco on 20 March 2023.

Opening Session

Yalda Hakim, chief presenter and international correspondent, BBC World News, moderated MBI 14. She highlighted the importance of the Ocean in addressing the climate and food, as well as other crises.

In his welcome address, HSH Prince Albert II of Monaco highlighted Monaco Ocean Week as an informal think tank that brings together experts to find solutions to Ocean-related challenges. He drew attention to the recently-agreed UN high seas treaty and the UN-endorsed aim to protect 30% of the world’s Ocean by 2030 (the “30x30” target), by creating a global network of MPAs. He urged participants to consider ways to harness new political will, set up projects, and find resources. He called for the involvement of all stakeholders in a coherent and coordinated manner to create a development paradigm that reconciles humankind with the sea.



HSH Prince Albert II of Monaco delivered a welcome address. (photo by JC Vinaj / FPA2)



Rodrigo Chaves Robles, President of Costa Rica, stressed that “vision without action is hallucination.” (photo by **JC Vinaj** / FPA2)

Rodrigo Chaves Robles, President of Costa Rica, emphasized that as the Ocean knows no borders and is an indispensable resource, it should be our joint responsibility to take care of it. He illustrated his country’s efforts to protect its fauna and flora, including designating over 30% of the country’s maritime territory as protected. He stressed that “vision without action is hallucination” and invited the involvement of the broadest set of stakeholders. On seabed mining, Chaves Robles called for science-based decision making to avoid any negative effects. Noting that less than 1% of the international seabed has been explored and understood, he urged caution. He called attention to the UN Ocean Conference, which will convene in Nice, France, in 2025, and will be co-hosted by Costa Rica and France.

Huang Runqiu, Chinese Minister of Ecology and Environment, addressed the meeting in a video message. He listed several recent Chinese developments in the area of environmental governance, including CO₂ emission reductions, improved surface water quality and pollution control, scaling up of renewable energy, and industrial restructuring. Noting that harmonization of humanity and nature is one of China’s strategies toward development, he underlined his country’s commitment to promote the overall quality and protection of the marine environment. He recalled the international targets laid down in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, recently agreed under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which he identified as an important milestone towards Ocean protection. He concluded that China is willing to work together with all other countries to defend the Ocean and care for it for future generations.

Sustainable Fisheries: Reconciling Conservation and Exploitation in the Next Decade and Beyond

Moderator Hakim had a “fireside chat” with Razan al Mubarak, President of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and UN Climate Change High-Level Champion. Al Mubarak recalled the historic agreement on Ocean protection in the CBD’s Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the UN high seas treaty. She expressed hope that this momentum would translate into further action. Among priorities, she identified defining standards for success and facilitating access to finance. Describing how her home country, the United

Arab Emirates, is juggling its environmental ambitions and its economic dependence on fossil fuels, she said responsible producers are taking the lead in moving away from fossil fuels and embracing new technologies. Highlighting the concept of nature-based solutions, Al Mubarak drew attention to the technology that nature and the Ocean provide, “at zero cost, except for their protection.”

In the subsequent discussion, panelists debated the reasons behind overfishing and the impacts of bottom trawling.

Ussif Rashid Sumaila, University of British Columbia, Canada, stressed that an enormous quantity of fish is taken from the Ocean compared to the number of land animals slaughtered for food. He emphasized that fishing is currently taking place at greater levels than nature can regenerate, and identified resource competition as an underlying driver.

Nina Jensen, CEO of REV Ocean, Norway, said “we are not doing what we should be doing because it all comes down to money, and somebody is making a huge profit from doing the wrong thing.” She called for economic incentives to avoid subsidizing the wrong actions; drew attention to the World Trade Organization agreement to end harmful fisheries subsidies; and noted that global agreements are of no use unless they are acted on. She further called for science to underpin actions, noting that fish stocks are often shared by nations that do not always agree on their management, citing the case of herring stocks in the North Atlantic.

Miguel Bernal, Executive Secretary, General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, Italy, noted the complexity and uniqueness of fisheries. He drew attention to fish as a source of high-quality food and the connection between SDG 14 (conserve and sustainably use the Oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development) and other SDGs, such as those that address hunger and poverty. He noted a reduction of overfishing in the Mediterranean and said that efficient management and robust rules can reverse overfishing trends.

The next intervention was from Stephen Kankam, Hen Mpoano (Our Coast), Ghana, and Edinburgh Ocean Leader, who provided an illustration of the impact of overfishing on food security for local communities. He underscored a lack of political will,



Razan Al Mubarak, IUCN President (photo by **JC Vinaj** / FPA2)

governance, and enforcement as contributing to overfishing. He called for more resources, capacity building, data collection, and transparency.

On bottom trawling, panelists discussed: the damage it leads to, including carbon emissions and impacts on the seabed; the power of lobbies and impacts of corruption; the fact that bottom trawling takes place in specific areas – for instance it is forbidden in 60% of the Mediterranean – yet happens in some protected areas; and the problems of lack of compliance, regulation, accountability, and transparency. They concluded that bottom trawling is a complex issue and solutions are not straightforward.

Interventions from the audience included one from renowned marine biologist and oceanographer Sylvia Earle, who suggested fish should be viewed as something other than just “products for humans,” just like wild mammals or birds.

Highly Protected MPAs: What Is at Stake and the Vision for 2030

Jean-François Ferrari, Minister for Fisheries and Blue Economy, Seychelles, delivered a keynote address. He said “people are difficult to satisfy,” but applauded the recent steps taken towards global Ocean governance. He described how the Seychelles is scaling up and improving its MPAs, which now cover 32% of its waters. Noting that regulations are strict but not always sufficiently enforced, Ferrari related this to a lack of political will and human and financial resources, which he identified as problems common to small island developing States.

In a “fireside chat,” Patricia Scotland KC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, said SDG 14 remains the least funded SDG, receiving only 0.1% of development finance while it represents 95% of the planet’s living space. She rejected the view that political will is lacking in the context of Ocean governance. Rather, she said governments that are falling behind on their obligations are mostly in the Global South, and are limited by a lack of financial and human resources, knowledge, and capacity. Noting the significant international achievements made in the past few months, she urged participants not to give up, saying “we have the opportunity to choose to make the difference that is needed in the world.”



Patricia Scotland KC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth (photo by JC Vinaj / FPA2)

In a panel discussion, Heather Koldewey, Zoological Society London, said “solutions are everywhere” and the necessary knowledge exists on how to establish effective MPAs. She suggested framing MPAs as “replenishment zones” in order to increase people’s understanding of their purpose.

Ferrari said MPAs only work with the full participation and engagement of local communities.

Funda Kök, Akdeniz Koruma Derneği (Mediterranean Conservation Society), Turkey, described how MPAs increase fish stocks in neighboring areas through a spill-over effect, and said connecting MPAs will help strengthen all of them.

Shirley Binder, Ministry of Environment, Panama, and Edinburgh Ocean Leader, underlined the importance of financial resources to enable effective implementation. On involving local communities, she said “we need not necessarily convince them, but rather work with them,” and they will often even ask for MPAs to be expanded.

Roland Coulon, Blue Finance, France, described examples of using financing mechanisms as leverage for MPA creation and income generation for local communities.

Panelists discussed additional ways to involve local communities, such as through the creation of aquaculture companies, management of invasive alien species, and waste removal. They underscored the destructiveness of bottom trawling and the need to transition towards a ban.

In the ensuing discussion, participants addressed: MPAs in the Southern Ocean and the protection of Antarctica; a 2030 vision for the high seas and a need to ratify the high seas treaty, which will enter into force upon reaching 60 ratifications; and the need to translate this treaty into action on the ground. One participant noted the power of storytelling to engage the public and influence decisions.

The Role of Marine Ecosystem Restoration in Achieving the SDGs

In a keynote speech, Kate Guy, Senior Adviser, US Department of State, underscored actions needed to overcome the challenges facing the Ocean and the triple planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. She described US investments and actions, including the Green Shipping Challenge, which encourages commitments to spur the transition to green shipping, and called for solutions to be scaled up. Noting the new high seas treaty as a powerful tool, she drew attention to illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and to plastic pollution.

In the subsequent panel discussion, Leticia Carvalho, UN Environment Programme, described restoration projects and their role in achieving the SDGs. She noted the need to shift current economic systems and fast-track ecosystems that are less visible than others, such as marine and freshwater systems.

Marco Lambertini, Special Envoy, WWF International, noted that restoration work should not overshadow the need to protect habitats that have not deteriorated. He underscored that the “30x30” target is critical but the other 70% are extremely important too, and initiatives should protect and restore in parallel.

Jean-Pierre Gattuso, CNRS-Sorbonne Université, and Institut du Développement Durable et des Relations Internationales (IDDRI), France, explained the difficulties and costs related to

restoring damaged ecosystems. He drew attention to success stories such as the restoration of mangroves in the Mekong Delta, and to challenges such as restoring slow-growing seagrass in the Mediterranean.

Peter Manyara, IUCN Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office, and Edinburgh Ocean Leader, discussed mangrove ecosystems in southeastern Africa, their importance to local communities and their economies, and the threats they face such as overharvesting for fuel and furniture. He drew attention to the recent cyclone Freddy, one of the longest-lasting tropical cyclones ever recorded, and the subsequent devastation to communities and damage to mangroves.

Panelists also discussed: funding streams for restoration; the need for restoration projects to integrate socio-economic factors and bring local benefits; the “triple win” of environmental, social, and economic advantages; job generation through restoration activities; measuring success; blue carbon and the difficulty of calculating how much carbon has been stored; and carbon offsetting as the last measure rather than a “green pass” to emitters. The panel also discussed assisted evolution, with Lambertini and Gattuso suggesting the focus should be on the root causes. They said assisted evolution cannot be relied on to halt biodiversity decline.

In closing, panelists debated the possibility of meeting the 2030 deadline, with Lambertini concluding that “the situation is tragic; the data terrifying; time is running out; and we need to focus on what is necessary.”

Questions from the floor pertained to: smaller projects accessing funding geared toward big initiatives; the need to present a solid business case to invest in nature; options to redirect incentives and mainstream finance to transition to a nature-positive future; the transformation of carbon and the risk of double counting; the requirements of restoration in the high seas for instance in the case of deep seabed mining; and the current price of carbon on the market being too low to provide an incentive for companies to invest in carbon removal.

Raising Ambition and Scaling Solutions for a Protected, Resilient and Sustainable Mediterranean Sea

In a keynote video message, Teresa Ribera Rodriguez, Third Vice-President of the Government of Spain and Minister for Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge, noted the importance of the Ocean and the threats it faces, such as warming and acidification. She described negative effects on marine ecosystems such as: coral bleaching; pollution in the high seas and the difficulty in finding the perpetrators; widespread plastic pollution; and the threat of invasive alien species. Conversely, she highlighted the benefits of a healthy marine system, including economic benefits, and described efforts to harness renewable energy from the Ocean, develop green shipping, and use international instruments to protect marine areas. She described national efforts in Spain and in the Mediterranean. She called for the involvement of all stakeholders in measures to protect and restore marine environments. She also explained that caution and the precautionary principle should be applied to new activities such as those on the seabed.

Another keynote address was delivered by Renaud Muselier, President of the Regional Council of Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, France. He discussed how his region reconciles various challenges and ambitions, including through co-investments between governments and the private sector, and said Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur is a pilot region for sustainable development. Muselier also addressed cooperation and activities undertaken jointly with other Mediterranean countries, and the ambition to link water and development issues and waste recycling in the entire Mediterranean region. He expressed confidence that this region has the capacity to strike a balance between environment and economy. In conclusion, he warned “there is no future if we don’t take care of the environment.”

In a “fireside chat,” Nasser Kamel, Secretary General, Union for the Mediterranean, said the Mediterranean region is warming 20% faster than the global average, which is already translating into water shortages. Calling for mitigation as well as adaptation, he said “we are living the emergency and we need to act.” Kamel stated that investing in renewables is already profitable, noting that financial support is not a question of giveaways, but rather of co-investment and profiting together, while weaning ourselves from fossil fuels and developing sustainable energies.

In a panel discussion, Karim Amellal, French Ambassador for the Mediterranean, drew attention to the 2025 UN Ocean Conference in Nice. He identified this meeting as an important milestone, noting that while state action is not always fast, consensus is necessary to make progress and is visibly growing.

Muselier called for optimism, stating the importance of recognizing that significant progress has already been made. He said we should not blame past generations for the current environmental crisis, but rather we should recognize that they laid the foundation for solutions and our current prosperity as well.

Bernard Fautrier, Minister Plenipotentiary, Special Advisor to HSH Prince Albert II for Environment, and General Secretary of The Medfund, discussed how The Medfund is contributing to the establishment and management of MPAs in the Mediterranean through financial support on the ground.



(L-R): **Bernard Fautrier**, Special Advisor of HSH Prince Albert II for Environment, and General Secretary, The Medfund; moderator **Yalda Hakim**, BBC World News; **Renaud Muselier**, President, Regional Council of Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, France; **Efstathia Liarou**, Mayor of Elafonisos, Greece; and **Federico Cardona Pons**, Iberostar Group, Spain. Delivering a video message is **Karim Amellal**, French Ambassador for the Mediterranean. (photo by **JC Vinaj** / FPA2)

Efstathia Liarou, Mayor of Elafonisos, Greece, addressed the challenges facing the small island of Elafonisos, which measures 22 square kilometres and has 700 inhabitants. She described the important ecological and archeological value of the island and activities undertaken to ensure its conservation.

Federico Cardona Pons, Iberostar Group, Spain, addressed the role of the private sector. He underlined the need for scientific data and a clear identification of the problems. He advocated collaboration agreements between the private sector and knowledge institutions. He said businesses should take their responsibility seriously in reducing waste, including though the concept of circularity, and promote nature-based solutions, for instance in the context of protecting and restoring coastal ecosystems.

In the ensuing discussion, participants drew attention to the needs of southern Mediterranean countries. Nasser highlighted the Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership, an EU initiative that supports the southern Mediterranean in particular. He said a similar initiative in the Baltic region has led to a 60% reduction in marine pollution. He gave examples of concrete actions, including training of local authorities to recognize hotspots for pollution, enforce the law, and clean the coast, and noted that these measures are relatively simple and non-expensive. Nasser explained that financial institutions, the European Commission, and private-sector actors are involved on both sides of the Mediterranean. He concluded that “the Mediterranean is not as divided as you think it is.”

Laurent Stefanini, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of France in Monaco, concluded the session with a keynote address, on behalf of Hervé Berville, French Secretary of State for the Sea. He praised the Monaco Blue Initiative as “a declaration of love to the Ocean.” He said Monaco is one of France’s strongest allies on environmental issues, and that the two countries share a common vision on the Ocean and on mobilizing all stakeholders. Among recent achievements, he highlighted the UN high seas treaty, commending the fact that it obliges states to conduct environmental impact assessments for any activities at

sea, that decisions will be made by majority, and that the treaty offers a chance to achieve the “30x30” target. Stefanini also drew attention to the Pelagos Sanctuary for Mediterranean Marine Mammals, a trilateral MPA shared between Monaco, France, and Italy, and the first MPA that partly covers the high seas.

Closing Session

In a closing statement, Robert Calcagno, CEO of the Oceanographic Institute, Prince Albert I of Monaco Foundation, said the MBI has delivered on its promise of convening key Ocean stakeholders in a spirit of cooperation. He recalled major progress over the past 15 years, noting that the Ocean has become much more prominent in environmental negotiations. Calcagno felt that working with civil society remains crucial, but that private sector’s role is becoming increasingly important as well.

Olivier Wenden, Vice-President and CEO of the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation, called for actions to be scaled up and for a holistic approach to solving the world’s Ocean-related challenges. Advocating for transparent sharing of data and expertise, he highlighted the role of the MBI as a forum to reconcile Ocean protection and a sustainable blue economy. He said he looked forward to fruitful international cooperation towards the 2025 UN Ocean Conference in Nice.

Moderator Hakim closed the meeting at 6:15 pm.



Olivier Wenden, Vice-President and CEO of the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation (photo by **JC Vinaj** / FPA2)



Robert Calcagno, CEO, Oceanographic Institute, Prince Albert I of Monaco Foundation (photo by **JC Vinaj** / FPA2)

Glossary

- “30x30”target A target of 30% protection of the Ocean through a network of MPAs and other effective area-based conservation measures by 2030
- CBD UN Convention on Biological Diversity
- IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature
- MBI Monaco Blue Initiative
- MPAs Marine protected areas
- SDGs Sustainable Development Goals