The world’s oceans – their temperature, chemistry, currents and life – drive global systems that make the Earth habitable for humankind. Our rainwater, drinking water, weather, climate, coastlines, much of our food, and even the oxygen in the air we breathe, are all ultimately provided and regulated by the sea. Throughout history, oceans and seas have been vital conduits for trade and transportation.

Careful management of this essential global resource is a key feature of a sustainable future. However, at the current time, there is a continuous deterioration of coastal waters owing to pollution and ocean acidification is having an adversarial effect on the functioning of ecosystems and biodiversity. This is also negatively impacting small scale fisheries.

Marine protected areas need to be effectively managed and well-resourced and regulations need to be put in place to reduce overfishing, marine pollution and ocean acidification.

Oceans cover three quarters of the Earth’s surface, contain 97 per cent of the Earth’s water, and represent 99 per cent of the living space on the planet by volume.

Over three billion people depend on marine and coastal biodiversity for their livelihoods.

Globally, the market value of marine and coastal resources and industries is estimated at $3 trillion per year or about 5 per cent of global GDP.

Oceans contain nearly 200,000 identified species, but actual numbers may lie in the millions.

Oceans absorb about 30 per cent of carbon dioxide produced by humans, buffering the impacts of global warming.

Oceans serve as the world’s largest source of protein, with more than 3 billion people depending on the oceans as their primary source of protein

Marine fisheries directly or indirectly employ over 200 million people.

Subsidies for fishing are contributing to the rapid depletion of many fish species and are preventing efforts to save and restore global fisheries and related jobs, causing ocean fisheries to generate US$50 billion less per year than they could.

Open Ocean sites show current levels of acidity have increased by 26 per cent since the start of the Industrial Revolution.

Coastal waters are deteriorating due to pollution and eutrophication. Without concerted efforts, coastal eutrophication is expected to increase in 20 percent of large marine ecosystems by 2050.

By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution

By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans

Minimize and address the impacts of ocean acidification, including through enhanced scientific cooperation at all levels

 By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics

By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information

By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation

By 2030, increase the economic benefits to Small Island developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism

Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology, taking into account the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology, in order to improve ocean health and to enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular small island developing States and least developed countries

Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets

Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in UNCLOS, which provides the legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources, as recalled in paragraph 158 of The Future We Want

The expansion of protected areas for marine biodiversity and existing policies and treaties that encourage responsible use of ocean resources are still insufficient to combat the adverse effects of overfishing, growing ocean acidification due to climate change and worsening coastal eutrophication. As billions of people depend on oceans for their livelihood and food source and on the transboundary nature of oceans, increased efforts and interventions are needed to conserve and sustainably use ocean resources at all levels.

Ocean acidification is caused by the uptake of atmospheric CO2 by the ocean, which changes the chemical composition of the seawater. Long-term observations of ocean acidification over the past 30 years have shown an average increase of acidity of 26 per cent since pre-industrial times, and at this rate, an increase of 100 to 150 per cent is predicted by the end of the century, with serious consequences for marine life.

To achieve sustainable development of fisheries, fish stocks must be maintained at a biologically sustainable level. Analyses reveal that the fraction of world marine fish stocks that are within biologically sustainable levels declined from 90 per cent in 1974 to 66.9 per cent in 2015.

As of December 2018, over 24 million km2 (17.2 per cent) of waters under national jurisdiction (0–200 nautical miles from a national border) were covered by protected areas, a significant increase from 12 per cent in 2015 and more than double the extent covered in 2010. The global mean percentage of each marine key biodiversity area covered by protected areas increased from 31.2 per cent in 2000 to 44.7 per cent in 2015 and to 45.7 per cent in 2018.

Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing remains one of the greatest threats to sustainable fisheries, the livelihoods of those who depend upon them and marine ecosystems. A framework of international instruments has been developed that addresses different aspects of fisheries management. Most countries have taken measures to combat such fishing and have adopted an increasing number of fisheries management instruments in the past decade. For example, the Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing, the first international binding agreement to combat such fishing, entered into force in June 2016. The number of parties to the Agreement has rapidly increased and stood at 58 as of February 2019.

Small-scale fisheries are present in almost all countries, accounting for more than half of total production on average, in terms of both quantity and value. To promote small-scale fishers’ access to productive resources, services and markets, most countries have developed targeted regulatory and institutional frameworks. However, more than 20 per cent of countries have a low to medium level of implementation of such frameworks, particularly in Oceania and Central and South Asia.