ECONOMIST IMPACT

Event summary

The 12th annual World Ocean Summit & Expo

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Official host

THE NIPPON FOUNDATION

Insights, initiatives, and innovation for ocean futures at the World Ocean Summit

The 2025 World Ocean Summit in Tokyo, hosted by Economist Impact, brought together some of the most influential policymakers, industry leaders, scientists, investors and NGOs from the ocean community to discuss the urgent challenges facing the world's ocean and to identify solutions that can drive meaningful change. This global gathering underscored the ocean's central role in sustaining economies, biodiversity, and climate stability, making ocean conservation not just an environmental priority but an economic and geopolitical necessity.

The nations on the front lines of climate change are acutely aware of the immediate and long-term threats posed by rising sea levels, ocean acidification, and the degradation of marine ecosystems. President Surangel Whipps Jr. of Palau and president Hilda C. Heine of Marshall Islands were among the leaders who highlighted the dangers facing island nations and how they are working to demonstrate the economic and ecological benefits of protecting marine environments. However, securing long-term funding remains a significant hurdle for organisations across the ocean community, particularly in light of recent international aid cuts that have stalled critical marine conservation initiatives. This current context underscores the need for sustained financial commitments and innovative financing mechanisms to support the blue economy.

A new approach to blue finance

The "blue economy" encompasses the broad array of economic activities associated with the ocean, including fisheries, marine biotechnology, shipping, tourism, and renewable energy. As the Earth's largest natural resource, the ocean is essential for environmental balance and global economic stability. Investing in ocean health, therefore, is not just a conservation effort but also a strategic financial decision. Yet existing economic systems do not adequately account for the value of natural capital; the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) was identified as a crucial step toward ensuring that natural assets are incorporated into financial models. The challenge, however, lies in assigning financial value to oceanic ecosystems, given their dynamic and cross-border nature, as well as ethical concerns around viewing nature as a commodity.

Additionally, funding for ocean conservation remains insufficient, particularly for small island developing states (SIDS), which manage approximately 20% of the world's ocean but often struggle to access financial resources. Private-sector investment is crucial to harnessing the potential of the sustainable blue economy. Governments can play a role in attracting investment by implementing policies that make ocean-related projects more appealing to private investors. Mechanisms such as concessional finance, blended finance, and risk-sharing frameworks can help mobilise additional capital for ocean sustainability projects. Sovereign debt swaps, where countries trade debt relief for conservation commitments, can provide developing nations with more resources for marine protection, while micro-grants between $1,000 and $15,000 can empower small-scale projects with potentially transformative impacts. Many of these mechanisms are already being piloted, demonstrating the financial viability of investing in the ocean. However, stronger regulatory frameworks and international cooperation are required for these efforts to be scaled effectively, as well as filling existing gaps in scientific knowledge and driving public engagement with ocean science.

While there are various financing methods, one panel focused on the growing potential of blue bonds: a market estimated to reach $500 billion annually, with 60% of that potential concentrated in Asia. Although they expressed optimism that the market is expanding, panelists emphasised the importance of ensuring that every investment is directed toward high-impact, high-integrity projects and avoiding greenwashing. Blue bonds have proven effective in financing sustainable shipping, marine ecotourism, and coastal infrastructure projects, but they are not always suited for conservation efforts. Instead, they should be leveraged to support sustainable transitions in industry, particularly in areas like sustainable aquaculture. The public sector can also play a role, as seen in Japan, where regional and local governments have already issued blue bonds. Initiatives like the Blue Bond Accelerator can additionally provide technical assistance to both issuers and investors, helping to scale the market responsibly.

Looking ahead, panelists stressed the need to transition from fragmented efforts to systemic economic transformation. Discussions on blue finance concluded with a call to action, urging financial institutions, policymakers, and conservation leaders to accelerate investment in the blue economy and ensure a sustainable future for ocean ecosystems.

Cross-sector collaboration

A strategy session sponsored by the Oceano Azul Foundation focused on how collaboration between diverse stakeholders can accelerate innovative solutions for ocean health. The panel underscored that ocean conservation requires strong governance, financial mobilisation, community leadership, and science-driven policies. Global conferences and treaties play an essential role in setting roadmaps for ocean targets, with summits such as the UN Ocean Conference, the Our Ocean Conference, and the World Ocean Summit providing momentum for international ocean action.

If policies are to be effective, international action must be informed by science, ensuring that targets align with the latest research on marine ecosystems. Nature-based solutions, including mangroves, seagrasses, and kelp forests, were identified as powerful tools for carbon sequestration; emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, sensor-based monitoring, and satellite imaging can further enhance conservation efforts by tracking biodiversity and enforcing marine protected areas (MPAs). However, without governmental buy-in and enforcement mechanisms, progress will be limited, making political support a key factor.

Another key takeaway from the summit was the importance of public-private partnerships. Panelists stressed that industries reliant on marine resources must be engaged with governments on conservation initiatives – one example mentioned was the Namibia Ocean Cluster, a joint effort by representatives of the Namibian seafood sector, government agencies, and civil society to prevent pollution from the fishing industry. Additionally, the discussion highlighted the need for the inclusion of local voices in conservation decision-making. Similarly, the next generation of ocean leaders are essential to driving future conservation efforts. Groups of young activists attending meetings by organisations like the International Seabed Authority are having their voices heard by heads of state, working to directly convince them to vote to protect the sea. Over 10,000 young ocean advocates from 186 countries are already engaged in ocean conservation initiatives, and intergenerational mentorship is essential to sustaining this momentum.

Opportunities in the blue economy

The ocean economy presents vast opportunities, from sustainable fisheries and aquaculture to marine biotech and nature-based solutions. Governments have the opportunity to create investment-friendly policies to attract sustainable businesses in different parts of the ocean sector. Throughout the summit, various panels explored some of these sectors in depth.

Zero-emissions shipping

A panel on zero-emissions shipping explored how the global maritime industry can transition to sustainable practices. Given that shipping accounts for a significant share of global carbon emissions, the shift to cleaner fuels such as ammonia and hydrogen is essential. However, financial and infrastructural challenges must be addressed to make alternative fuels viable, and any approach must be global due to the transboundary nature of shipping. Multiple factors must be taken into account: for instance, port authorities must be consulted because refueling infrastructure is located at ports. This will also require coordinating emissions reduction in the fuel supply chain.

Currently, alternative fuel prices remain prohibitively high – while green hydrogen can power a small passenger ferry, it is much more costly for a larger boat transporting cargo across long distances. Various policies, such as the global fuel standard being discussed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), were highlighted as potential solutions. Strong policy frameworks, including targeted incentives during the early phases of adoption, will be instrumental in securing the long-term viability of zero-emission shipping. Economic incentives for industry are also needed to create sufficient demand for alternative fuels to justify investment in their production; industry-wide initiatives such as the Zero Emissions Maritime Buyers Alliance are driving collective action toward these goals. Panelists emphasised the role of strong policy frameworks, industry incentives, and global coordination to drive the transition forward.

Sustainable fisheries

Fisheries similarly exemplify the interconnected nature of ocean issues, as highlighted by panelists in the discussion on achieving a sustainable fishing industry. The sector faces challenges due to overfishing, illegal fishing practices, and habitat destruction; government action is necessary to incentivise sustainable fishing and educate fishing communities, aligning regional fish management with bilateral approaches. Fishing governance is a complex political challenge, but international groups such as the Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing Action Alliance, led by Canada, are taking steps toward global cooperation in fisheries management. Technologies such as sensor-based monitoring and dark vessel detection radar were identified as key tools in ensuring sustainable fishing practices; panelists additionally stressed the need for a framework of legally binding international commitments and enforcement mechanisms, providing a foundation upon which countries can develop their domestic regulations.

Offshore renewable energy

Another area of focus was the potential for offshore renewable energy to drive investment in the ocean economy, meeting global energy demands while supporting decarbonisation efforts. Scaling up projects requires stronger political commitment, improved infrastructure, and international collaboration. Both bottom-fixed and floating offshore wind farms have immense potential to generate clean energy – with the share of floating farms expected to increase significantly, eventually making up 80% of wind power – but they must be carefully planned to minimise disruptions to marine ecosystems, fishing industries, and maritime transport. Innovative approaches can be integrated into these plans: one research initiative in France is seeking to redesign wind farms so ships can pass through them. Additionally, comprehensive environmental impact assessments are crucial to balancing energy production with ecological and economic considerations. To unlock the full potential of offshore renewable energy, governments must actively support its expansion and build the necessary infrastructure. Panelists pointed to Korea's special bill to centralise offshore wind development as a promising example. Such long-term national commitments to building infrastructure and sustaining supply chains for the energy transition are needed to accelerate progress.

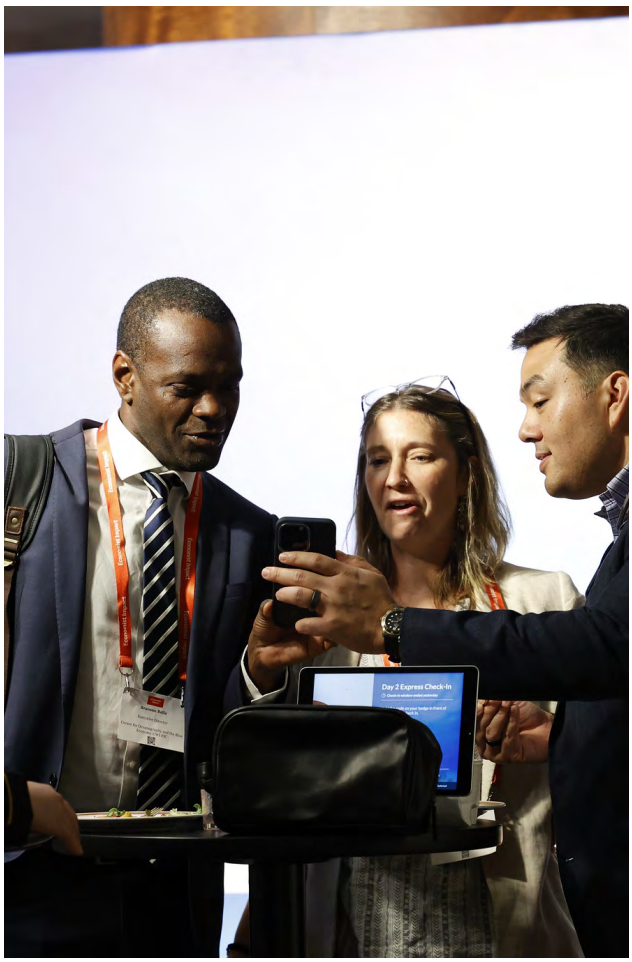
Putting an end to pollution

The Back to Blue initiative, a collaboration between The Nippon Foundation and Economist Impact, is driving global action toward a future free from ocean pollution. The panels supported by Back to Blue brought together experts and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds to share insights on addressing marine pollution through scientific knowledge, policy frameworks, and cross-sectoral collaboration. Ocean pollution encompasses plastics, chemicals, wastewater, agricultural and industrial runoff, and other sources of contamination, and research in the field requires collaboration across marine science, ecosystem health, human health, and industry. The fight against ocean pollution requires collective action, knowledge-sharing, and innovative strategies, as the panel discussions showed.

The panel discussion on achieving a zero-pollution ocean underscored the critical role of financial institutions, regulatory frameworks, and data-driven decision-making in tackling ocean pollution. There is growing regulatory traction, particularly in the EU, where restrictions on ship emissions in the Mediterranean are strengthening. But more needs to be done. Businesses must recognise that tackling pollution is both a risk management solution and an investment opportunity. However, lack of data remains a major barrier to informed decision-making. Back to Blue's research highlights the urgent need for better data integration to support financial sector engagement. The focus must shift from short-term regulatory cycles to systemic financial strategies that integrate ocean health into long-term investment and risk management decisions. Clear definitions of responsibilities between businesses, financial institutions, and states are needed to move beyond voluntary commitments. While systemic approaches and policy frameworks are essential, effective communication is equally important. Many businesses are willing to take action but need clear, compelling reasons to prioritise ocean health; scientists, policymakers, and financial institutions must collaborate to ensure that pollution data is framed in ways that resonate with business leaders.

Wastewater management, ocean pollution, and drinking water quality are deeply interconnected, impacting public health, ecosystems, and economies. The panelists sought to illuminate the interconnections between these issues and how to balance ecosystem health with pollution control, with nature-based solutions emerging as a key strategy.

Ocean acidification driven by the absorption of CO2 poses a serious threat to marine ecosystems, threatening biodiversity as well as coastal communities and industries like fisheries. Panelists emphasised how investing in ocean acidification research and mitigation strategies will bring long-term financial benefits to communities. International efforts must focus on assessing climate risk and vulnerability, enhancing marine management tools, effectively deploying blue carbon ecosystems, reducing land-based pollution, and evaluating marine carbon dioxide removal strategies. Data collection is a significant challenge, as evidence is needed for science-based policy development. While large-scale solutions require government action, environmental stewardship at the local level can help mitigate the effects of acidification. By bridging the gap between science and policy, the international ocean community can ensure that decisions are effective, science-driven, and based on the best available knowledge.



Science-based frameworks for success

One panel discussion sponsored by Blancpain, centred on the ambitious 30x30 target – protecting 30% of the ocean by 2030 – set under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Experts explored the challenges, governance mechanisms, and financial strategies needed to achieve this goal. With only 3% of the ocean currently fully protected, the panel emphasised the urgency of science-based conservation, highlighting the critical role of the BBNJ Treaty in enabling high seas MPAs. Equity and financing emerged as key issues, particularly for SIDS reliant on ocean resources. The discussion underscored the importance of prioritising biologically significant areas, enforcing MPAs effectively, and ensuring transparency in monitoring conservation efforts. The expansion of the MPA in the Azores was presented as a successful model of collaboration. Partnerships and stakeholder participation, across 43 meetings with stakeholders including representatives of the fishing industry and fishing communities and informed by research by local scientists, enabled the expanded protection of the largest MPA in the North Atlantic. Ultimately, the 30x30 target is achievable with strong political will, global cooperation, and innovative financial solutions, with the upcoming UN Ocean Conference in Nice seen as a crucial opportunity to advance commitments.

Throughout the sessions, the lens of the triple planetary crisis – climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss – was a key framework for addressing ocean challenges.

Panelists emphasised the need for decisive action on climate change, particularly in response to sea level rise, displacement, and climate migration, stressing that international law must evolve to meet these challenges and that nations must show strong leadership. Innovative interdisciplinary frameworks are required to ensure the ethical and effective use of emerging technologies—such as drones and underwater vehicles—especially in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Non-state actors, including industry, NGOs, and stakeholders like the Sargasso Sea Commission, also play a crucial role. Their expertise is vital in advancing MPAs, conservation initiatives, and technological solutions, and connecting governments and scientific experts. To meet 2030 ocean protection targets, panelists called for the establishment of at least 300 large-scale MPAs and thousands of smaller ones, requiring strong national commitments, the ratification of the BBNJ Agreement, and adherence to existing frameworks such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Law of the Sea Convention. Additionally, better data and monitoring are needed to inform decision-making, while a unified global message must drive collective action.

Conclusion

The insightful discussions held at the 2025 World Ocean Summit underscored the urgent need for collaborative, science-driven, and financially innovative approaches to ocean conservation. As panelists from numerous industries agreed, protecting marine ecosystems is both an environmental imperative and a strategic economic asset. From sustainable fisheries to zero-emission shipping, nature-based solutions, and blue bonds, the summit showcased a wide range of solutions that can be implemented together to drive systemic change. Ultimately, achieving the 30x30 target, mitigating pollution, and transitioning to a sustainable blue economy require immediate and coordinated action from governments, financial institutions, industries, and civil society. With the upcoming UN Ocean Conference and other international initiatives on the horizon, the momentum generated by the World Ocean Summit must translate into concrete commitments and scalable solutions. The ocean's health is closely linked to the planet's future, and there is no time to waste in ensuring its protection for generations to come.