



Integrating Ocean and Climate Diplomacy

A Next Step Forward in the Global Climate Effort

By Gwynne Taraska | December 19, 2018

The global climate effort historically has overlooked the ocean-climate nexus. Despite the destructive effects of climate change on ocean ecosystems—and the role that the ocean can play in mitigating and adapting to climate change—ocean-based climate strategies are not yet mainstream topics in international climate forums.¹ Although a majority of countries reference the ocean or coast in their national climate goals under the Paris Agreement, a minority discuss ocean actions as climate solutions. Just 19 percent of countries with coastal “blue carbon” ecosystems, for example, discuss the role of these ecosystems as carbon sinks, absorbing and storing carbon dioxide.² Meanwhile, a number of major coastal economies—including Australia, Brazil, the European Union, New Zealand, Norway, Russia, and the United States—do not reference the ocean at all.

There is a growing movement, however, to better integrate ocean and climate action, as well as ocean and climate diplomacy. Recent international climate summits have notably advanced the effort, including both the Global Climate Action Summit (GCAS) in September 2018 and the 24th Conference of the Parties (COP24) to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 2018. As 2020 approaches, there will be further opportunities to integrate ocean issues into the global fight against climate change—which could become one of the key developments in the climate effort since the adoption of the Paris Agreement.

Recent progress

A number of national and subnational leaders—including progressive U.S. states—have recently elevated ocean issues in climate action and diplomacy.

Subnational ocean-climate leadership

U.S. subnational governments—which have played an expanded role in climate diplomacy since the Trump administration announced its intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement—have increasingly focused on the ocean in their interna-

tional climate initiatives.³ California, for example, made ocean stewardship a central theme when it hosted GCAS.⁴ It also released an Ocean-Climate Action Agenda with a set of global goals, such as increasing the area of wetlands, reducing emissions from ocean industries, and mobilizing international ocean-climate finance.⁵ Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, then-president of the U.N. climate negotiations, announced the agenda at GCAS and supported its implementation.⁶ In advance of COP24, California submitted the agenda in its input to the Talanoa Dialogue, which was the first assessment of how much progress countries collectively have made—and have yet to make—under the Paris Agreement.⁷

California subsequently shared an “ocean-climate contribution” to support the goals of the Paris Agreement during COP24.⁸ This contribution—which includes actions from reducing shipping emissions to investing in offshore renewable energy research—could set a precedent for other subnational governments.⁹ It also could help countries as they consider how to strengthen their national climate goals—called nationally determined contributions (NDCs)—under the Paris Agreement. The agreement gives countries an opportunity to submit enhanced NDCs by 2020 and calls for new NDCs every five years thereafter.¹⁰ It also invites countries to submit “adaptation communications” about their resilience goals and needs, which subnational ocean-climate contributions could likewise inform.¹¹

U.S. states are focusing on ocean action in their collective climate efforts as well. When North American climate cooperation disintegrated after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the U.S. Climate Alliance—a bipartisan coalition of 16 states and Puerto Rico—joined Mexico and Canada to maintain continentwide progress on clean electricity and transportation. During GCAS, this North American coalition added ocean issues to its climate commitments. The alliance is now working with Canada and Mexico to increase the climate resilience of ocean ecosystems and coastal communities through coordination on marine protected areas, among other projects.¹² They will report on progress during the U.N. secretary-general’s Climate Summit in September 2019.¹³

Meanwhile, the International Alliance to Combat Ocean Acidification (OA Alliance)—a network that Washington, Oregon, and California launched in partnership with British Columbia in 2016—announced new members during both GCAS and COP24.¹⁴ The collapse of oyster production in the Pacific Northwest in 2005—and the economic consequences—was an early catalyst of this growing effort.¹⁵ The OA Alliance now includes more than 25 national and subnational governments, including U.S. states and tribes, such as Hawaii, Virginia, and the Quinault Indian Nation. Canada is the latest national participant.¹⁶ Members of the OA Alliance are currently implementing region-specific ocean acidification action plans to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and protect ecosystems, communities, and livelihoods in the face of changing ocean chemistry.

National ocean-climate leadership

A number of countries are similarly working to include ocean issues in the international climate regime and their individual climate plans. Fiji, for example, ensured that the “Talanoa Call for Action”—which the presidencies of COP23 and COP24 delivered at the close of the Talanoa Dialogue during COP24—included a guiding vision not just of carbon neutrality but also of “healthy lands, forests, and oceans” and “an end to ecosystem degradation.”¹⁷ The country previously partnered with Sweden to launch The Ocean Pathway, which aims to embed ocean issues throughout the meetings and processes of the UNFCCC.¹⁸

Chile, for its part, has encouraged countries to enhance their NDCs by incorporating ocean-climate actions, recently hosting a workshop on the topic for Latin American countries.¹⁹ The country previously partnered with France on the 2015 and 2016 “Because the Ocean” declarations, which encourage countries to incorporate ocean issues in the climate effort, including in the recurring assessments of progress known as “global stocktakes” under the Paris Agreement.²⁰

Working toward an Ocean COP

With the recent rise of ocean-climate diplomacy, a growing number of diplomats believe that ocean-climate action could become a main theme of COP25. Over the coming year, there are several opportunities for countries and subnational leaders to further integrate ocean issues into the international climate effort—and to work toward an “Ocean COP.”

National action and forums

Countries can enhance their NDCs by 2020 by setting and implementing ocean-climate goals. For example, they can create goals to reverse the loss of blue carbon ecosystems—such as mangrove forests, salt marshes, and seagrass meadows—which are efficient carbon sinks.²¹ Countries can also create specific goals to reduce carbon dioxide emissions as a complement to their general goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, given that carbon dioxide emissions drive ocean acidity.²² Other ocean-based climate mitigation goals, such as developing offshore wind energy and reducing emissions from shipping and fisheries, are possible as well.

Similarly, countries that submit adaptation communications under the Paris Agreement can include ocean-climate needs and goals.²³ These could include the creation of well-enforced marine protected areas to aid the recovery of exploited species that are also subject to climate stressors, for example, and the protection and restoration of coral reefs and seagrass beds to defend coastal communities from flooding. Integration of ocean issues into the NDCs and adaptation communications of developing countries would create a visible demand for ocean-climate finance that would increase the likelihood of support.²⁴

Countries can also work to advance ocean-climate issues in international forums that complement the UNFCCC, including forums for economic governance such as the Group of Seven (G-7) and Group of 20 (G-20). Traditional climate issues can be politically problematic: The U.S. decision to opt out of statements supporting climate action during recent G-20 and G-7 summits is a case in point.²⁵ Ocean-framed issues, however, may gain traction even among countries, such as Australia, Japan, and the United States, that have a complicated history with climate change. It is notable that Canada made ocean issues a central theme of the G-7 summit in Charlevoix, Quebec.²⁶

Subnational action and forums

As California demonstrated during COP24, U.S. states and other subnational governments can create ocean-climate contributions with a set of region-specific actions and goals to support the Paris Agreement. These would be diverse, reflecting the challenges and opportunities of each region. The contribution from California, however, outlines a number of categories—from adaptation to sea level rise to the restoration of coastal ecosystems—that could inform other governments as they expand and integrate their ocean and climate activities.²⁷ Subnational governments—and, of course, national governments—can also join the OA Alliance. And subnational coalitions, such as the U.S. Climate Alliance, can include ocean-climate issues among their core themes and continue to incorporate them among their international climate dialogues and commitments.

Expanded leadership

There are a number of opportunities for expanded leadership of the ocean-climate movement. Under Gov. Edmund Brown Jr. (D), for example, California helped introduce ocean stewardship to the international climate agenda; Gov.-elect Gavin Newsom (D), who served in the California Ocean Protection Council as lieutenant governor and chair of the State Lands Commission, could now advance international ocean-climate action and diplomacy as signature issues.²⁸ Mexico, as another example, played a key role in the international climate negotiations in advance of the Paris summit; President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, whose campaign platform included improving coastal wetland conservation, could now lead the integration of ocean issues into the Paris process.²⁹ It is also notable that Brazil decided not to host COP 25 under President-elect Jair Bolsonaro, who notoriously selected a climate denier to serve as the nation's foreign minister.³⁰ This creates an opening for Chile and Costa Rica—which are now hosting COP25 and the pre-COP meeting, respectively—to influence the priorities of the UNFCCC over the coming year and to adopt ocean-climate action as a theme.³¹

Communications and framing

Improved communications could raise the profile of ocean-climate action. The Fourth National Climate Assessment from the U.S. Global Change Research Program and the Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) focused significant main-

stream media attention on the effects of climate change.³² Similarly, the forthcoming IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate could serve as a moment to educate the press and public about the effects of climate change on ocean and coastal ecosystems and the role of the ocean in mitigating and adapting to climate change.³³

At the same time, improved framing could attract a new set of leaders to the effort. Underlining that ocean-climate action is not an additional obligation but a means to advance existing climate goals could help draw governments that are wary of adopting an ocean focus when they are struggling to meet their current emissions reduction targets. And underlining the intrinsic value of the ocean—and its aesthetic, cultural, moral, and emotional significance—could help draw a range of stakeholders that are committed to conservation. Not all potential ocean-climate champions share the climate community’s sometimes monomaniacal focus on economic rationalization.

Ocean-climate advocates could seek better coordination with the forestry and land use community as well. Despite the long-standing focus on forests in the UNFCCC, forestry experts consider it a forgotten climate solution due to its relative lack of press attention. Creating a bloc that supports nature-based climate solutions could be more effective for both forests and the ocean than competing to be at the fringes of the climate conversation.

Conclusion

With the recent growth of ocean-climate diplomacy, countries and subnational governments could make the ocean a mainstream issue within the international climate conversation in the run-up to 2020. This would be valuable both as an end in itself and as a means to increase climate ambition at a key moment in the evolution of the Paris Agreement.

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Endnotes

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