



The Third UN Ocean Conference in Nice: A Global Summit to Safeguard the Ocean

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The Third UN Ocean Conference in Nice: A Global Summit to Safeguard the Ocean

By Paco Milhiet

SYNOPSIS

The third United Nations Ocean Conference, held in the French city of Nice from 9 to 12 June 2025, constitutes a significant milestone in the evolving international framework for ocean governance. Despite the adoption of several tangible commitments, the conference also exposed persistent divisions among states on key issues, reflecting the considerable challenges that remain in achieving comprehensive, effective, and sustainable protection of the ocean commons.

COMMENTARY

“Nice is to the oceans what Paris was to the climate,” [declared](#) French President Emmanuel Macron at the opening of the third United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC 3), held in the Mediterranean city of Nice from 9 to 12 June 2025.

Jointly organised by France and Costa Rica, the conference aimed to represent a significant milestone in the evolving framework of international ocean governance. [Billed](#) as the largest global event ever dedicated to the oceans, UNOC 3 convened over 10,000 participants, including 63 heads of state and government, 174 national delegations, and representatives from international organisations, non-governmental organisations, the scientific community, the private sector, indigenous groups, and civil society.

This broad-based assemblage reflects a growing global recognition of the urgent need to address the deepening [ocean crisis](#), driven, in particular, by accelerating climate change, rising sea levels, overfishing, marine pollution, and the emerging threats posed by deep-sea mining and raw material extraction.

While the UNOC 3 promoted concrete solutions and sought to strengthen long-term multilateral cooperation supporting sustainable ocean management, it also revealed structural limitations. The absence of several key geopolitical actors highlighted persistent divisions within the international community and the lack of a cohesive global vision for ocean governance. Moreover, despite firm symbolic commitments, the non-binding nature of most decisions raises critical concerns about the prospects for effective implementation.

A Critical Opportunity to Protect the Ocean

The stakes of the conference were high: Protecting the ocean is not only an environmental necessity, it is essential to the long-term survival of [life on Earth](#).

UNOC 3 is firmly anchored in key multilateral commitments, including [Sustainable Development Goal 14](#) – Life Below Water – adopted in 2015 as part of the UN's [2030 Agenda](#), and the December 2022 [Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#). Under the latter, nearly 190 countries pledged to protect at least 30 per cent of the planet's land and sea by 2030 – the widely recognised “[30x30](#)” target.

However, as of 2025, progress remains far too limited. According to a recent multi-stakeholder [report](#), only 8.6 per cent of the ocean is currently protected. Reaching the 30 per cent target in the next 15 years will require an estimated US\$15.8 billion per year, while current spending stands at just US\$1.2 billion.

In this context, UNOC 3 was a critical opportunity for the international community to close this implementation gap and move from high-level pledges to concrete, measurable results.

Concrete Commitments... Limited Effects?

Several significant announcements were made during UNOC 3, most notably the adoption of the [Nice Ocean Action Plan](#), designed to promote the protection of marine ecosystems, support sustainable ocean economies, and accelerate international cooperation on ocean governance.

President Macron also confirmed that the Biological Diversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Treaty, aka the High Seas Treaty, intended to protect approximately 65 per cent of the world's oceans, is set to [enter into force](#) on 1 January 2026, with over 60 countries committed to ratification. Meanwhile, the global coverage of protected Exclusive Economic Zones increased from 8 to 11 per cent, largely due to the designation of new [Marine Protected Areas](#) (MPAs).

UNOC 3 also provided France an opportunity to renew its call for a [moratorium](#) on deep-sea mining to safeguard abyssal ecosystems, especially in light of recent unilateral moves, notably by the United States. However, only 37 of the 169 member states of the International Seabed Authority (ISA), responsible for drafting a mining code, currently support this initiative.

The summit also saw renewed commitments to combat plastic pollution, with 96 countries endorsing the [Nice appeal](#) in support of a legally binding global treaty. These

developments come ahead of a critical negotiation round in Geneva, following the failure of previous talks held in South Korea in 2024.

While these announcements reflect strong political will and concrete intentions, UNOC is not a formal UN negotiation framework. As such, all commitments remain voluntary and non-binding. Nonetheless, this conference revealed the political objectives of various international actors regarding [environmental diplomacy](#).

A Diplomatic Arena

Building on the success of the [Paris agreement](#) in 2015 and the “[One Planet](#)” summits since 2017, France continues to strengthen its leadership role in tackling climate change and protecting biodiversity. It announced the creation of the world’s largest marine protected area in [French Polynesia](#), covering 4.5 million square kilometres.

While the previous edition of the UNOC in [Lisbon](#) attracted only 24 heads of state, the Nice conference brought together more than 60 countries’ leaders. Several prominent figures attended the event, including Chinese [Vice President Han Zheng](#) with a delegation of 150 people, [Brazilian President Lula](#), who will host COP30 in Belém later this year, and Singapore Foreign Minister [Vivian Balakrishnan](#), who delivered an intervention on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS).

However, the absence of the United States’ official delegation was strongly felt at a time when US President Donald Trump had [withdrawn](#) his country from the Paris Agreement and recently expressed his intention to [exploit](#) seabed resources. In this context, Macron reaffirmed the UNOC commitment to the protection and sovereignty of the global commons, delivering a barely veiled swipe at his American counterpart. “The abysses are not for sale, no more than Greenland,” [he declared](#).

Conclusion: From Commitments to Actions?

[Setbacks](#) on fossil fuels and disappointments over the [uneven implementation](#) of MPAs have left environmental defenders and [island state leaders](#) with a sense of unfinished business. Moreover, the UNOC summit’s non-binding nature leads some to see it as merely a symbolic platform.

Nevertheless, the conference is also an opportunity to accelerate action and mobilise all stakeholders to conserve and sustainably use the ocean, with growing involvement from the scientific community and civil society. By establishing key milestones, it helps lay the groundwork for future progress, especially ahead of potential breakthroughs on biodiversity and climate at COP30 in Brazil later this year.

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