

POLICY BRIEF

# Regional Seas Strategic Directions 2022-2025

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Guiding the Regional Seas  
towards global ocean-related  
goals for the period 2022-2025

May 2021

# Acknowledgements

## **Regional Seas Strategic Directions (RSSD) 2022-2025**

Policy Brief

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Sea Ice, Svalbard, 2015. Sea ice plays an important role for the climate and ecosystems. The extent and thickness of sea ice is significantly decreasing. Photo by Peter Prokosch. Courtesy GRID-Arendal. [www.grida.no/resources/3636](http://www.grida.no/resources/3636)

**UNEP's Regional Seas Programme has been in operation for almost a half a century, now covering more than 146 countries, aiming to secure ocean health and support the livelihoods of coastal inhabitants. The Regional Seas Strategic Directions 2022-2025 aims to harness progress achieved by the 18 Conventions and Action Plans through translation of activities into a coordinated global response to combat key environmental drivers towards a pollution free, resilient and diverse ocean.**

# The Role of the Regional Seas Programme

The Regional Seas Programme (RSP) was launched in 1974 in the wake of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm. It remains one of UNEP's most significant achievements and operates in 18 regions, with most regions adopting a regional action plan underpinned by a legal framework in the form of a regional convention with associated protocols on specific issues. Commonly, they are referred to as Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans (RSCAPs). UNEP provides overall coordination and facilitation and in so doing connects the programme to the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA).

RSCAPs aim to strengthen the capacity within the region to enable countries to implement the action plans and work programmes through education, training, communication and institution-building. Regional Coordination Units (RCUs), often aided by Regional Activity Centres (RACs), service and facilitate countries' implementation of agreed action under the conventions and action plans. The RSCAPs draw in partnering institutions for delivering key functions, including **knowledge management** and pollution **monitoring**. In addition to functioning as an effective mechanism for regional marine **cooperation**, testing of protocols and methodologies and setting of targets at the regional level help to inform global responses.

The RSP therefore plays an important facilitative and normative role. It is these roles that have provided the focus of the Regional Seas Strategic Directions (RSSD) 2022-2025, in particular the selection of three core goals and the development of a first set of targets and indicators to track progress across the 18 RSCAPs and the RSP as a whole.



**Figure 1.** Map of the Regional Seas Programme that covers 18 regions of the world, making it one of the most globally comprehensive initiatives for the protection of marine and coastal environments.

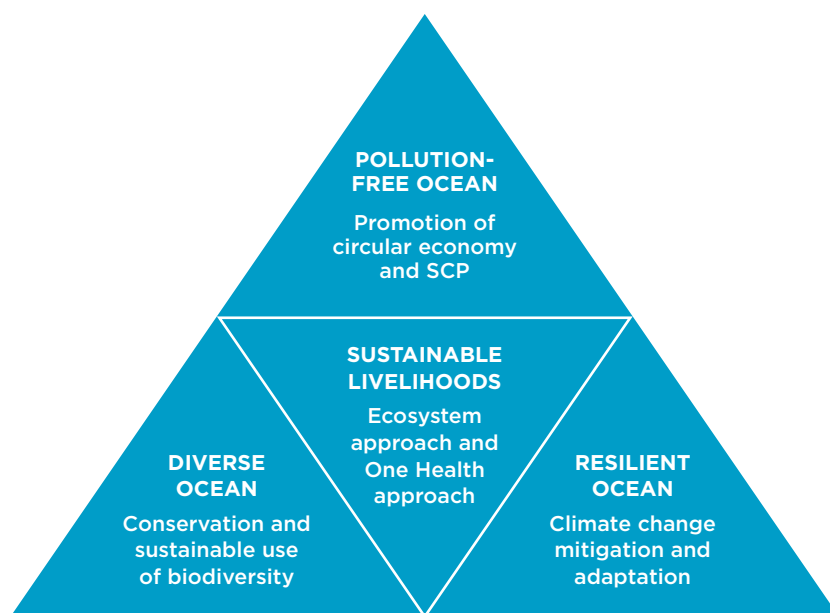
# Purpose of the Regional Seas Strategic Directions

The ocean plays a critical role in stemming biodiversity loss, increasing climate resilience and securing productive and healthy ecosystems to serve the basic needs of humanity and all existence on the planet. To deliver on this, a coordinated global approach that is able to tailor activities to regional specificities is needed.

The objective of the Regional Seas Strategic Directions 2022-2025 is to achieve a diverse, resilient and pollution-free ocean that supports equitable sustainable livelihoods. This includes climate stability, living in harmony with nature, ocean sustainability and operating within planetary boundaries.

## The RSSD 2022-2025 provides three overarching purposes:

1. Guide RSCAP activities towards achieving ocean-related components of the three primary global goals of addressing climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, as well as sustainable livelihoods, in particular by working towards achievement UNEP's Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) 2022-2025 and Programme of Work (PoW) 2022-2023), but also targeting ocean-related components of the SDGs and the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.
2. Provide an initial 3-year framework to track RSP achievements and the national and inter-regional levels, building a preliminary baseline towards a more robust and impact-oriented set of indicators, and providing comparative reporting to assist RSP reporting as a whole, but allowing for individual RSCAP achievements to be highlighted.
3. Generate information to promote improved advocacy to raise the profile of the RSP within UNEP and UNEA, particularly as an implementing framework for ocean-related goals.



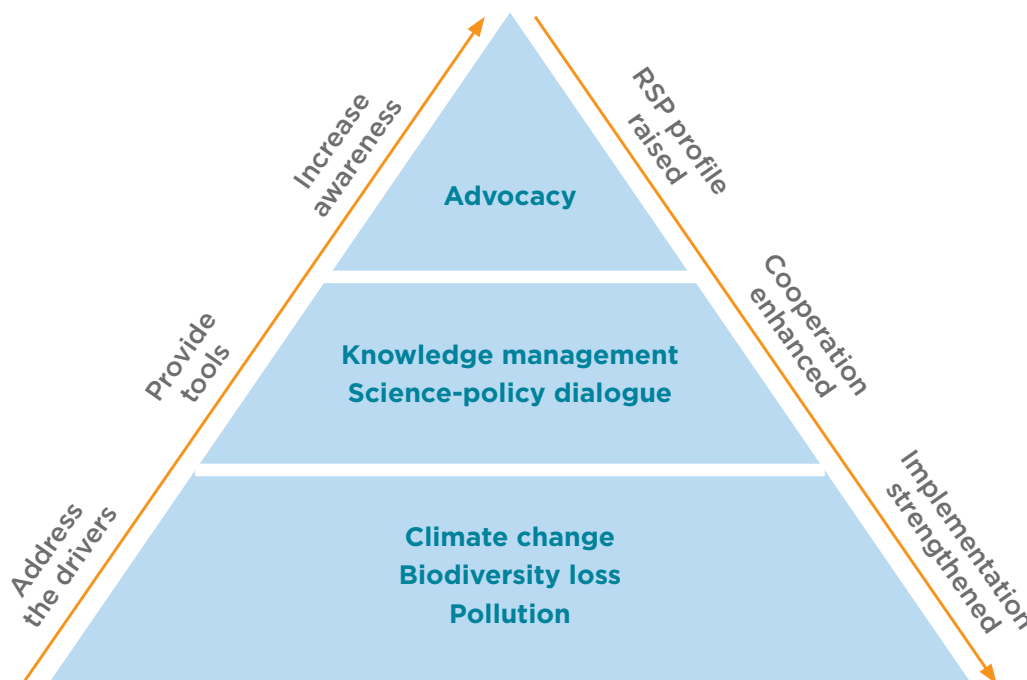
**Figure 2.** The complexities facing the marine environment require systems integration between thematic policy priorities, while ensuring the promotion of the ecosystem approach and One Health approach to anchor the RSSD 2022-2025 to the sustainable development realm.

# Three Strategic Goals to Guide Operational Measures

To achieve the objective of the RSSD 2022-2025, three strategic goals are outlined, taking into account current and emerging objectives at the international and regional level. In addition, UNEP supporting activities for achieving each goal are outlined.

- I. Secure diverse, resilient, and productive marine and coastal ecosystems.**
- II. Support assessment, information and knowledge management at all levels to strengthen science-policy dialogue on marine and coastal issues and their interactions.**
- III. Increase reach and mainstreaming of the Regional Seas Programme, including advocacy, political support and dialogue for furthering action.**

The three core goals work towards achievement of medium-term outcomes to be targeted by the end of 2025 and long-term outcomes to be achieved beyond 2025. These outcomes reflect the targets and outcomes of UNEP's MTS and PoW.



**Figure 3.** Illustrative hierarchy of the three RSSD 2022-2025 strategic goals.



Bird's eye view of Kenya's mangrove forest, 2017. Taken during a site visit for the GEF Blue Forest project. Photo by Rob Barnes. Courtesy GRID-Arendal. [www.grida.no/resources/11079](http://www.grida.no/resources/11079)

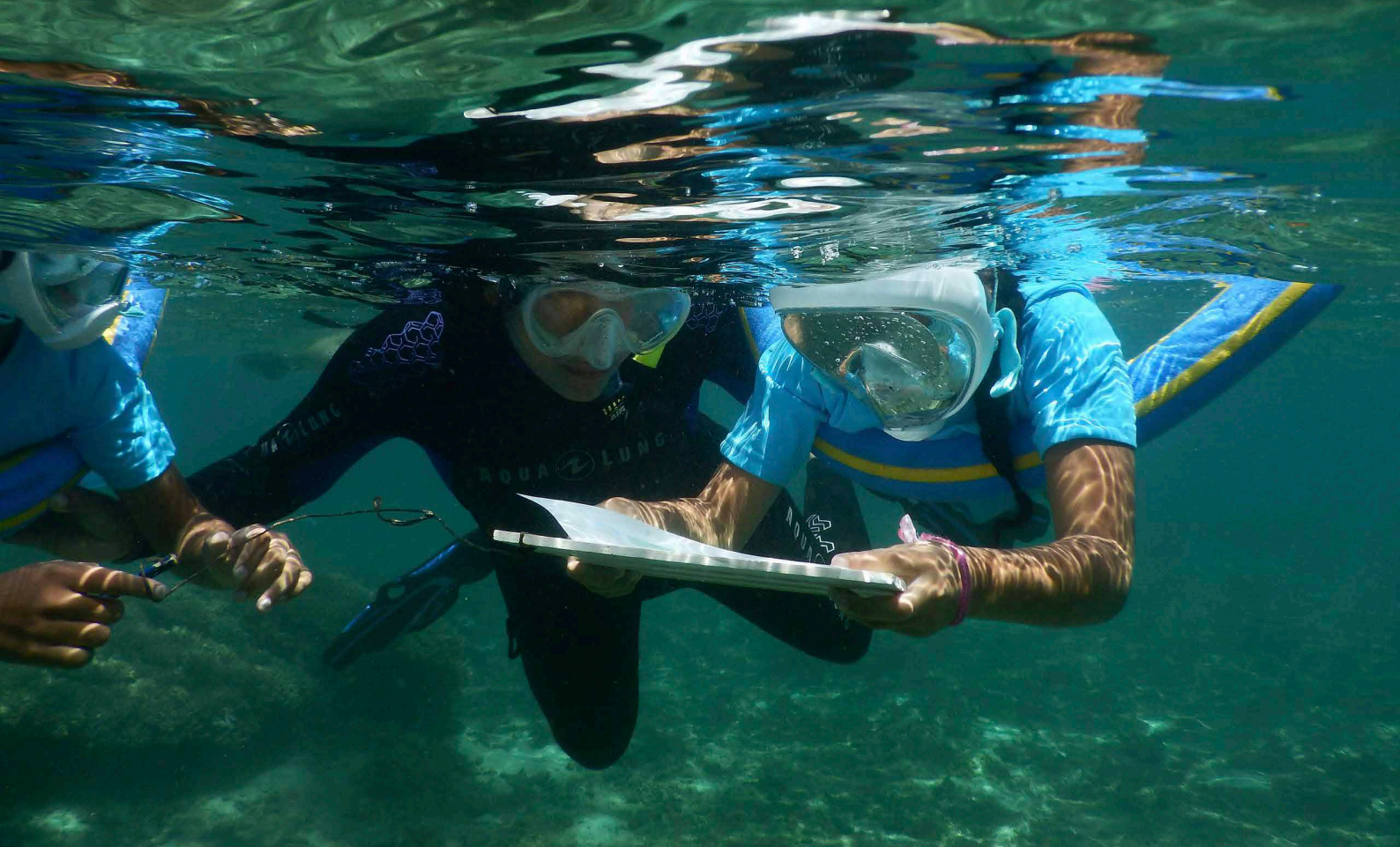
# Targets to Achieve the Three Strategic Goals

## **GOAL I: Secure diverse, resilient, and productive marine and coastal ecosystems**

The focus of Goal I is to progress towards a holistic and integrated response by addressing the drivers of ocean health degradation resulting from climate change, loss of marine and coastal biodiversity and all forms of marine pollution, taking better advantage of innovative solutions that merge thematic policy responses. This requires integration of nature-based solutions that help to simultaneously protect critical ocean ecosystems and the services they provide and achieve climate goals, including absorbing atmospheric carbon and protecting coastal communities from extreme weather impacts. Similarly, strengthening the focus on moving towards a circular economy and sustainable consumption and production patterns will assist in targeting upstream activities, including greening the supply chain from use of substances of concern, while also tackling downstream activities, to limit both land- and sea-based sources, providing a pathway to good environmental status for marine and coastal ecosystems.



- 1.1 Resilience increased through nature-based solutions:**
- Protection, sustainable management and restoration of marine and coastal carbon sinks and reservoirs and other critical ecosystems supported, including mangroves, corals, seagrasses and salt marshes.
  - Ecosystem-based adaptation promoted to enhance adaptive capacity and resilience, as well as reduced vulnerability to climate change.
- 1.2 Sustainable and equitable management, use and trade of marine and coastal biological resources strengthened** in cooperation with relevant multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) and other stakeholders:
- The biodiversity-pollution-fisheries nexus applied for delivering co-benefits.
- 1.3 Marine protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) promoted** towards the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework targets:
- Marine protected areas designated, effectively managed and ecological connectivity strengthened.
  - Sea areas under spatial planning increased.
  - Degraded marine ecosystems restored.
  - Cooperation and integration of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) and Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) strengthened between different RSCAPs and various sectoral organizations (e.g., fisheries and biodiversity organisations).
- 1.4 Threatened species protected and prevented from extinction:**
- Invasive alien species effectively controlled in marine and coastal areas.
- 1.5 Sustainable consumption and production patterns promoted** as a means to achieve a circular economy and towards expediting achievement of relevant international agreements and SDG13 targets where unsustainable patterns relate to impacts on ocean health and adaptation, and where these reduce effectiveness of ecosystem-based mitigation:
- Nutrient runoff prevented.
  - Wastewater management enhanced.
  - Marine plastic pollution reduced.
- 1.6 Pollution affecting marine and coastal areas prevented** towards the achievement of the Beyond-2020 Framework for sound management of chemicals and waste:
- Synergies with the work of ocean-related measures of chemicals and waste MEAs contributed to and maximised.
  - Conventions and Protocols effectively implemented within the mandate of RSCAPs and where relevant to regional issues and priorities, for both land- and sea-based sources of marine pollution.



Underwater coral reef monitoring trip. Saint-Leu marine educational area. Photo by Bruce Cauvin, Réserve Naturelle Marine de la Réunion. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Exploration\\_du\\_r%C3%A9cif\\_coralien\\_de\\_l%27Aire\\_marine\\_%C3%A9ducative\\_de\\_Saint-Leu.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Exploration_du_r%C3%A9cif_coralien_de_l%27Aire_marine_%C3%A9ducative_de_Saint-Leu.jpg)

## **GOAL II: Support assessment, information and knowledge management and science-policy dialogue on marine and coastal issues**

The focus of Goal II is to support harmonized data collection, monitoring and reporting, enhancing dialogue with global science-policy bodies and platforms and providing early warning, including on cumulative impact analysis, enabling RSCAPs to inform other fora of emerging issues. International ocean action is most effective when underpinned by information that enables tracking of progress, recognizes emerging threats and identifies new solutions. In addition, maintaining two-way science-policy dialogue on marine issues is critical for enhancing evidence-based decision-making and providing concrete examples of best practices. The Regional Seas Programme plays an important role in supporting assessment, information and knowledge management and science-policy dialogue on marine issues, including through peer learning and experience sharing in regional multi-stakeholder fora, as well as to fulfill growing needs and expectations from the 2030 Agenda, and other relevant MEAs and processes.

## Knowledge management

### 2.1 Regionally harmonized data collection, assessment and monitoring of relevant indicators supported:

- SDG indicators 14.1.1, 14.2.1 and 14.5.1 harmonized and data collection ongoing.
- The Regional Seas Core Indicators Set (adopted at the 17th Global Meeting of RSCAPs) refined and reporting thereon progressed.

### 2.2 Capacity promoted across all regions:

- Peer learning and sharing of best practices and information between RSP member states and different RSCAPs enhanced.
- Monitoring and data collection advanced.
- Preparation of regional assessments advanced.
- Regional reporting strategies designed.
- Stakeholder engagement strengthened, including relevant global MEAs, RFMOs and other sectoral organisations.

### 2.3 Synergies enhanced across reporting requirements to reduce duplication of efforts:

- Modular reporting piloted across relevant MEAs with reporting under Conventions and Protocols of the Regional Seas.

## Science-policy dialogue

### 2.4 Research fostered to deepen understanding of marine environments, in particular deep-sea ecosystems:

- Emerging threats identified, including seabed mining, underwater noise pollution and other novel pollutants.
- Scientific support provided to increase understanding of marine and coastal environmental changes, in particular those that are abrupt, accelerating or irreversible with potentially significant global consequences.
- Relevant policy responses identified.

### 2.5 Science-policy dialogue enhanced on marine and coastal issues:

- Preparation of global environmental assessments contributed to, including through RSP-specific assessment chapters/sections.
- Findings of assessments (produced by RSCAPs) communicated and engagement in dialogue with decision makers increased to support evidence-based decision-making to assist RSCAPs in advocating for enforcement of existing obligations under regional MEAs.
- Regional-specific knowledge provided to support policymaking for protection and sustainable use of marine ecosystems towards ensuring food security and sustainable livelihoods in support of a sustainable Blue Economy and poverty eradication.



Cuttlefish congregate off the coast of Whyalla, Upper Spencer Gulf Marine Park, in South Australia. Many species of fish and sea creatures abound in this unique marine habitat, being one of only a handful of inverse estuaries in the world. Photo Dr. Karen Raubenheimer.

## **GOAL III: Increase reach and mainstreaming of the Regional Seas Programme, including advocacy, political support and dialogue for furthering action**

The focus of Goal III is to intensify cooperation and coordination between relevant multilateral bodies and other processes at national, regional and global levels to achieve a systems response to meet growing needs and expectations, as well as to increase the reach and mainstreaming of the activities of the Regional Seas Programme at all levels. This necessitates fortifying partnerships and reaching out to new partners, including deepening interaction with the UN Environment Assembly to increase the role, visibility and impact of the Regional Seas Programme. This will enable the Regional Seas Programme to most effectively address an array of challenges facing the ocean, thereby responding directly to the call of the 2030 Agenda to enhance the nexus between the ocean agenda and socio-economic considerations.

### **3.1 The relationship of the RSP with the UN Environment Assembly enhanced**

and the profile of the RSP as a mechanism for delivering on ocean-related aspects of SDGs increased:

- UNEA is regularly informed of progress made by the RSP.
- UNEA resolutions provide guidance to further the work of the RSP.

### **3.2 Cooperation enhanced with relevant UN bodies, MEAs, international financial institutions, philanthropies and other relevant processes:**

- Ocean-related activities of MEAs supported, including the process towards the agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ).
- Ocean-related work of UN bodies and task forces supported, including UNEP's role in the One Health High-Level Expert Council.
- Resources and sustainable funding mobilized for delivering RSP activities.

### **3.3 Collaboration between Regional Seas strengthened,** in particular through the Regional Seas Programme Annual Meeting:

- Twinning, capacity building and knowledge exchange between RSCAPs promoted.
- The capacity of Regional Activity Centres (RACs) and regional action plans to provide support at the national levels strengthened.

### **3.4 The delivery of RSP activities promoted through national action plans:**

- Adoption, participation and implementation of national action plans of Regional Seas Conventions and Protocols promoted.
- The marine environment and ecosystem approach mainstreamed into national strategies and action plans under relevant global MEAs, including the CBD and Paris Agreement.

### **3.5 RSP activities mainstreamed into country programming:**

- Resident Coordinators, UN Country Teams (including all agencies, funds and entities operating at the national level) engaged.
- RSP priorities and activities aligned in UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and other national planning processes.

# Measurement, Advocacy and Reporting

A phased approach for the development of indicators during 2022-2025 will assist in further harmonizing the work of the RSCAPs, helping to better understand global progress that will be essential to interpret the state of ocean health and adopt necessary global responses. The development of indicators will benefit reporting at the Global Annual Meeting of the RSCAPs and reporting to UNEA.

## A phased approach to developing RSP targets and indicators

1. **RSSD 2022-2025 adopted** – Initial set of targets and indicators agreed at the Global Annual Meeting of RSCAPs 2021.
2. **Mid-term RSSD reporting** – RSCAPs report against indicators for which information is available, indicating N/A where information is not available.
3. **UNEP leads development of RSP impact and response indicators** – RSSD mid-term reporting reviewed by UNEP and RSCAPs for preliminary assessment of trends, gaps and suitability of RSP indicators going forward.
4. **Global Annual Meeting of RSCAPs 2025 reporting** – RSCAPs report against indicators for which information is available, indicating N/A where information is not available.

## Reporting is provided in two streams

1. Progress on implementing the Strategic Directions agreed for the period 2022 – 2025 shall periodically be reported on by the RSCAPs, with a final review provided at the Global Annual Meeting of Regional Seas and Action Plans to be held in 2025.
2. The Strategic Directives can serve as a high-level instrument that enables the RSCAPs to regularly report on progress to the UN Environment Assembly, reciprocally, enabling the Assembly to take decisions, when necessary, to guide further action by the RSP.

Support is provided by UNEP through the development of a RSCAP reporting template and consolidation of regional data and regional/national progress reports to inform UNEA and MTS review.



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Above: Humpback whale calf Ha'apai, Tonga, 2015. Humpback whales are known for their magical songs, which travel for great distances through the world's oceans. These sequences of moans, howls, cries, and other noises are quite complex and often continue for hours on end. Humpbacks are powerful swimmers, and they use their massive tail fin, called a fluke, to propel themselves through the water and sometimes completely out of it. Photo by Glenn Edney. Courtesy GRID-Arendal. [www.grida.no/resources/3544](http://www.grida.no/resources/3544)