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United Nations Environment Assembly Background Guide 2024

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NATIONAL MODEL UNITED NATIONS

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the 2024 National Model United Nations Conference in Washington, DC (NMUN•DC)! We are pleased to introduce you to our committee, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA). This year's staff is: Director Catherine Tomczyk and Assistant Director Steven Vanhulle. Catherine is originally from St. Petersburg, Florida, and holds a master's degree in Public Administration from the University of New Haven. Steven is from Denver, Colorado, and holds a Master of Arts from the University of Denver in Global Economic Affairs.

The topics under discussion for UNEA are:

1. Environmental Sustainability in the Tourism Industry
2. Addressing Marine Plastic Pollution

UNEA is the principal governing body of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). It is tasked with ensuring the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders in UNEP's governance and fostering a robust science-policy interface. UNEA plays a unique role in global environmental governance. This high-level and universal forum is the only platform where stakeholders from all countries can discuss ecological challenges. Additionally, UNEA acts as a coordinator, overseeing UNEP's work during the Rio+20 negotiations to strengthen and upgrade its initiatives. UNEA has emerged as a central body for identifying, prioritizing, and coordinating global responses to environmental issues.

This Background Guide serves as an introduction to the topics for this committee. However, it is not intended to replace individual research. We encourage you to conduct additional research, explore your Member State's policies in-depth, and examine the policies of other Member States to improve your ability to negotiate and reach consensus. In preparation for the conference, each delegation will use their research to draft and submit a [position paper](#). Guidelines are available in the [NMUN Position Paper Guide](#).

The [NMUN website](#) has many additional resources, including two that are essential both in preparation for the conference and as a resource during the conference. They are:

1. The [NMUN Delegate Preparation Guide](#), which explains each step in the delegate process, from pre-conference research to the committee debate and resolution drafting processes. Please take note of the information on plagiarism and the prohibition on pre-written working papers and resolutions. Delegates should not discuss the topics or agenda with other members of their committee until the first committee session.
2. The [NMUN Rules of Procedure](#), which include the long and short form of the rules as well as an explanatory narrative and example script of the flow of procedure.

In addition, please review the mandatory [NMUN Conduct Expectations](#) on the NMUN website. They include the conference dress code and other expectations of all attendees. We want to emphasize that any instances of sexual harassment or discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, age, or disability will not be tolerated. If you have any questions concerning your preparation for the committee or the conference itself, please contact the Under-Secretary-General Kenny Nguyen at usgkenny.dc@nmun.org or Secretary-General Chris Duggan at secgen.dc@nmun.org.

We wish you all the best in your preparations and look forward to seeing you at the conference!

Sincerely,
Catherine Tomczyk, Director
Steven Vanhulle, Assistant Director



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Committee Overview

Introduction

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is the primary governing body of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and is the international community's highest-level decision-making body on environmental matters.¹ In partnership with other United Nations institutions, it outlines the international environmental agenda and sets priorities for the international community.² Although its resolutions are not binding, UNEA brings together relevant international actors to address global environmental issues and shape environmental governance.³

Mandate, Functions, and Powers

Twenty years after the adoption of the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* (1992), the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development called for the strengthening and upgrading of UNEP so it could better execute its mandate.⁴ UNEA was created in 2012 as the successor to UNEP's Governing Council.⁵ Whereas the Governing Council was composed of 58 Member States and sat within UNEP, UNEA is structured as a distinct entity and enjoys universal membership with 193 Member States.⁶ As a high-level governance body, UNEA reviews and coordinates the work of the international community on environmental matters while serving as a forum for and initiator of debates to be continued by other, more specialized bodies.⁷

While the following list is not exhaustive, the mandate of UNEA can be summarized as:

- **UNEA will generally:** set broad priorities for global environmental policy; identify emerging themes in environmental governance; progressively develop international environmental law and begin negotiations on environmental treaties; define the work and priorities of UNEP; create ad-hoc committees and subsidiary bodies to further discussions on specific areas of environmental concern when necessary; make recommendations to Member States and other international organizations.⁸
- **UNEA will not generally:** engage in operational projects; complete negotiations on environmental treaties, but rather identify emerging issues and promote an architecture for future environmental governance.⁹

UNEA and UNEP are distinct entities.¹⁰ UNEA is the primary governing body and priority-setting mechanism of UNEP and does not operationalize these priorities itself.¹¹ In contrast, UNEP undertakes

¹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

² Ibid.

³ United Nations Environment Programme. *Q&A: UN Environment Assembly*. N.d.

⁴ United Nations, General Assembly. *The future we want (A/RES/66/288)*. 2012. p. 18.

⁵ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

⁶ Ibid.; United Nations Environment Programme, Governing Council. *Proceedings of the Governing Council at its Nineteenth Session (UNEP/GC.19/34)*. 1997.

⁷ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *The United Nations Environment Assembly's Role as a Governance Architect*. 2022.

⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *What you need to know about the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

⁹ Ibid.; International Institute for Sustainable Development. *The United Nations Environment Assembly's Role as a Governance Architect*. 2022.

¹⁰ Office of the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth. *UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme*. N.d.; International Institute for Sustainable Development. *The United Nations Environment Assembly's Role as a Governance Architect*. 2022.

¹¹ Office of the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth. *UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme*. N.d.



programs, projects, and awareness campaigns and provides support to national governments to achieve environmental obligations in line with the priorities set out by UNEA.¹²

Governance, Structure, and Membership

All 193 United Nations Member States are represented in UNEA.¹³ The Assembly meets every two years to set priorities for global environmental policy, discuss developments in the area of environmental legislation, and assist in the implementation of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda)* (2015).¹⁴

Consisting of ten Ministers who each serve a two-year term and are selected based on geographical rotations, UNEA's Bureau is responsible for the general conduct of business.¹⁵ UNEA also has a Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR), a subsidiary inter-sessional organ of UNEA that meets at least four times a year.¹⁶ The CPR contributes to the preparation of the UNEA agenda, holds an advisory role in policy matters, and monitors the implementation of decisions.¹⁷ The CPR also holds discussions on key issues, promotes the inclusion of non-resident members of the Committee, and performs other tasks given by UNEA.¹⁸ The CPR consists of all accredited Permanent Representatives to UNEP and is led by a five-member Bureau that is elected for two years.¹⁹

UNEP relies on three main financial sources: earmarked funds, the Environment Fund, and the United Nations's regular budget.²⁰ Earmarked funds, also known as earmarked contributions, are funds appropriated for specific projects, themes, or countries.²¹ These funds aim to expand and/or replicate the results of UNEP's work in more countries and in cooperation with more partners.²² The Environment Fund aids in maintaining the capacity, balance, and efficiency needed for UNEP to function.²³ Earmarked contributions and the Environment Fund are voluntary contributions; hence, 95% of UNEP's income is received voluntarily from Member States.²⁴ The United Nations' regular budget supports the regular work of UNEA and the UNEP Secretariat.²⁵

¹² Ibid.

¹³ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *Committee of Permanent Representatives*. N.d.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *How is UNEP funded*. N.d.

²¹ Ibid.; United Nations Environment Programme. *Earmarked Contributions*. N.d.

²² Ibid.

²³ United Nations Environment Programme. *How is UNEP funded*. N.d.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.



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[https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2997\(XXVII\)](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2997(XXVII))

United Nations, General Assembly. *The future we want (A/RES/66/288)*. 2012. Retrieved 17 March 2024 from: <http://undocs.org/en/A/RES/66/288>



1. Environmental Sustainability in the Tourism Industry

Introduction

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the tourism industry is one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the world, contributing 10% of the global gross domestic product (GDP).²⁶ The tourism industry attracts significant economic investment, generates jobs, and increases exports and emerging technologies, making it an essential pillar of economic growth according to UNEP, especially in the least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS).²⁷ From 1990 to 2018, the number of international tourists tripled that of 1950 and is projected to reach 1.8 billion international tourist arrivals.²⁸ However, international tourism contributes to more than five percent of global greenhouse gas emissions (GHG).²⁹ Additionally, international tourism is a significant contributor to the global plastic pollution crisis, with UNEP reporting that eight out of ten tourists visit coastal areas, adding to the eight million tons of plastic entering the oceans annually.³⁰ The low price of single-use plastic products has made them a vital part of the global economy, especially in the tourism industry.³¹

In 2017, the United Nations General Assembly, alongside the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), designated 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development to highlight the importance of government policies, business practices, and consumer behavior for building a more sustainable tourism sector.³² UNWTO defines sustainable tourism as tourism that takes complete account of the current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts while addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities.³³ The promotion of ecotourism can be used as an avenue to adopt sustainable tourism practices while mitigating environmental degradation caused by the tourism industry.³⁴ Particularly in LDCs, sustainable tourism has the potential to bolster economic resilience and reduce poverty, especially after the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).³⁵

International and Regional Framework

In May 2002, the World Ecotourism Summit was held in Canada to discuss ecotourism policy and planning, the overall promotion of ecotourism, and monitoring costs and benefits of ecotourism.³⁶ UNEP organized this summit and later adopted the *Québec Declaration on Ecotourism*, which was a significant step for the promotion and involvement of local communities in ecotourism, ensuring their economic and social benefits and fostering collaborative efforts towards conservation and sustainable practices.³⁷ Additionally, in 2002, UNEP published *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability*, alongside the International Ecotourism Society.³⁸ This publication outlined ecotourism and how it can impact every sector and level of an economy for Member States; this was published before the COVID-19

²⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *Tourism*. 2024.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The World Counts. *45 arrivals every second*. 2024.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *How can tourism fix its plastic problem?*. 2023.

³¹ United Nations Environment Programme. World Travel & Tourism Council. *Rethinking Single-Use Plastic Products in Travel & Tourism- Impacts, Management Practices and Recommendations*. 2021. p. 2.

³² United Nations World Tourism Organization. *2017 International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development*. 2024.

³³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Sustainable tourism*. N.d.

³⁴ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *Ecotourism and Protected areas*. 2024.

³⁵ United Nations, 5th United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5). *Thematic Areas*. 2024.

³⁶ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *World Ecotourism Summit*. 2002.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. International Ecotourism Society. *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability*. 2002.



pandemic, which dramatically affected the tourism industry and ecotourism.³⁹ In 2015, the General Assembly adopted resolution 69/313, now known as the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda*, which aimed to monitor the impact of sustainable development on different economic activities, especially sustainable tourism.⁴⁰ The Addis Ababa Action Agenda encourages international financial institutions to develop transparent measurements of progress on sustainable development outside of per capita income while building on current initiatives.⁴¹ General Assembly resolution 69/283, also referred to as the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction* (2015), strives to enhance and strengthen more inclusive policies within all industries to integrate disaster risk management approaches throughout numerous sectors, including the tourism industry.⁴² In 2022, General Assembly resolution 76/258, “Doha Program of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2022-2031,” was adopted to help foster a partnership between LDCs, the private sector, and governments.⁴³ This program of action is committed to finding and using innovative and sustainable solutions within LDCs, namely within the tourism industry.⁴⁴

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015 by the General Assembly through resolution 70/1, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”⁴⁵ Several SDGs directly relate to tourism, such as SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), which aims to promote long-lasting, fair, and sustainable economic growth, along with creating ample, meaningful jobs and decent work opportunities for all.⁴⁶ More specifically, target 8.9 aims to devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.⁴⁷ Tourism is identified as a tool in target 14.7 to increase economic benefits to SIDS and LDCs.⁴⁸ In 2015, the General Assembly adopted resolution 69/233, “Promotion of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environment protection,” to bridge the gap between the fight against poverty and the tourism industry.⁴⁹ This resolution also recognized the potential sustainable tourism has to reduce poverty and improve individual livelihoods at the local level through community development projects.⁵⁰ In 2021, the General Assembly expanded upon the SDGs with the adoption of resolution 76/202, “Promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, building on Agenda 21,” which highlights the need to achieve the SDGs by 2030.⁵¹ In 2016, the General Assembly adopted resolution 70/200, the “Global Code of Ethics for Tourism,” which created a set of principles to guide stakeholders in tourism development and help minimize the negative impacts of tourism on the environment and cultural heritage while maximizing benefits for residents of tourism destinations.⁵² This code also recognizes the importance of sustainable

³⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. International Ecotourism Society. *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability*. 2002.

⁴⁰ United Nations, General Assembly. *Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa Action Agenda) (A/RES/69/313)*. 2015. p. 36.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² United Nations, General Assembly. *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (A/RES/69/283)*. 2015. p.15.

⁴³ United Nations, General Assembly. *Doha Program of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2022-2031 (A/RES/76/258)*. 2022. p. 2.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 38.

⁴⁵ United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. p. 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 15.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 20.

⁴⁸ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Sustainable tourism*. N.d.

⁴⁹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Promotion of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environment protection (A/RES/69/233)*. 2015. p. 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 2.

⁵¹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, building on Agenda 21 (A/RES/76/202)*. 2022. p. 3.

⁵² United Nations General Assembly. *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (A/RES/70/200)*. 2016. p. 2.



tourism as a tool for the eradication of poverty, the protection of the environment, and the improvement of the quality of life for all people.⁵³ Target 8.9 of the SDGs aims to devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local and cultural products, which coincides with the goals of the “Global Code of Ethics for Tourism.”⁵⁴

The “Global Code of Ethics for Tourism” has ten articles that cover the economic, social, cultural, and environmental components of travel and tourism.⁵⁵ More specifically, article three highlights using tourism as a factor of sustainable development through the creation of stronger infrastructure, ecotourism, and the potential benefits to the local economy.⁵⁶ In 2022, the General Assembly adopted resolution 77/178, “Promotion of sustainable and resilient tourism, including ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environmental protection,” which highlights the importance of supportive fiscal measures for the promotion of the employment sector after the COVID-19 pandemic by supporting decent job creation for all.⁵⁷ Assessing the effectiveness and sustainability of these frameworks is imperative, and UNWTO’s Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (SF-MST) provides a structured approach to accomplishing this task.⁵⁸ The SF-MST is designed to support the presentation of data regarding the sustainability of tourism while tracking tourism’s economic, environmental, and social connections.⁵⁹

Role of the International System

UNEP, under the governance of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), works internationally to mainstream sustainability into tourism development by demonstrating the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural benefits.⁶⁰ This is done by supporting governments with policies at local, regional, and international levels while promoting supply chain planning (SCP) patterns within the tourism value chain.⁶¹ In 2016, the Conference of Parties (COP) met to discuss the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, which included sustainable tourism practices in the “Cancun Declaration on Mainstreaming the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity for Well-Being.”⁶² Member States who signed the Declaration committed to taking action to integrate biodiversity into economic policies and social development to help drive nature-based tourism and ecotourism.⁶³ The Declaration brings attention to the benefits ecotourism has for the economy, the employment sector, and the visitors.⁶⁴ UNWTO established the Committee on Tourism and Sustainability (CTS) in 2013 to monitor the implementation of sustainable tourism measures.⁶⁵ At the CTS’s 15th meeting in 2021, UNWTO focused on COVID-19-related travel restrictions and the One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme of UNWTO.⁶⁶ The One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme of UNWTO focuses on mainstreaming SCP in the tourism industry, guided by the Global Strategy for Sustainable Consumption and Production 2023-2030.⁶⁷ This program works to advance the tourism sector towards the implementation of SDG 12 (responsible consumption

⁵³ Ibid. p. 2.

⁵⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Sustainable tourism*. N.d.

⁵⁵ United Nations General Assembly. *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (A/RES/70/200)*. 2016. p. 2.

⁵⁶ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism*. 2020.

⁵⁷ United Nations, General Assembly. *Promotion of sustainable and resilient tourism, including ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environmental protection (A/RES/77/178)*. 2022. p. 5.

⁵⁸ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *Statistical Framework for Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (SF-MST)*. 2023. p. 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 1.

⁶⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *Tourism*. 2024.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Conference of Parties. *Cancun Declaration on Mainstreaming the Conservation and Sustainable use of Biodiversity for Well-Being*. 2016. p. 2.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 6.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 6.

⁶⁵ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *Committee on Tourism and Sustainability (CTS)*. 2024.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *The One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme*. 2024.



and production) while connecting SCP to SDGs 13 (climate action), 14 (life below water), and 15 (life on land).⁶⁸ UNWTO has also launched its platform allowing Member States to track their achievement of the SDGs concerning sustainable tourism; this platform has been modeled off the United Nations SDG Knowledge Platform.⁶⁹

More regionally based, UNEP has the Regional SCP Roadmap that seeks to facilitate sustainable tourism within Asia and the Pacific.⁷⁰ This roadmap facilitates the integration of SCP patterns at the regional and national level through awareness and capacity building, financial assistance, and engagement with the private sector.⁷¹ The roadmap is also linked to the SDGs and contributes to the implementation of SDGs 8.9, 12.1, 12.b, 13.b, and 14.7.⁷² In 2018, the Organization of the American States (OAS) and UNWTO had their first joint publication titled *Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: Good Practices in the Americas*, which highlights tourism as a vital part of achieving sustainable development in this region, while also encouraging public-private partnerships at the local, national, and international levels.⁷³ The OAS reports that 8.5% of GDP and 10% of employment in the Americas depends on some form of tourism, making it highly beneficial for the region to move to more sustainable tourism measures.⁷⁴ This partnership also highlights the impact of ecotourism in the region and its relationship with the private sector.⁷⁵ The Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) works more directly with hotels and those involved in the tourism industry to bring the benefits of positive impacts.⁷⁶ The GSTC criteria serves as global standards for sustainability in the tourism industry by focusing on four main pillars: sustainable management, socioeconomic impacts, cultural impacts, and environmental impacts.⁷⁷ Hotels, governments, NGOs, and travel operators are all eligible for GSTC membership.⁷⁸ There are roughly 30 certified sustainable destinations by the GSTC, including Berg en Dal, Netherlands and Huatulaco, Mexico showing that anywhere in the world is able to achieve sustainability in the tourism sector.⁷⁹ Members and volunteers of the non-profit organization are tasked with overseeing implementation and giving out endorsements on behalf of the GSTC.⁸⁰ The GSTC also offers numerous online and onsite training programs for those in the tourism industry to learn how to implement sustainable tourism methods in their area.⁸¹ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is actively engaged in Member States, focusing on the development of ecotourism to foster sustainable development and economic growth while preserving biodiversity through responsible travel practices.⁸² This project by UNDP works to increase awareness and capacity of stakeholders in the development of ecotourism, testing of methodical framework for the development of ecotourism, and the implementation of possible frameworks.⁸³ Similarly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) plays a crucial role in safeguarding World Heritage Sites worldwide.⁸⁴ Through its World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Program, UNESCO fosters collaboration between the tourism industry stakeholders and the

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *Join us on the 2030 Journey*. 2024.

⁷⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *Sustainable Tourism*. 2024.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Organization of American States. *OAS and UNWTO Launch Report "Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: Good Practices in the Americas"*. 2018.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ United Nations World Tourism Organization. Organization of American States. *Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals - Good Practices in the Americas*. 2018. p. 42.

⁷⁶ Global Sustainable Tourism Council. *What is Sustainable Tourism?*. 2024.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Global Sustainable Tourism Council. *About the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)*. 2024.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Global Sustainable Tourism Council. *What is Sustainable Tourism?*. 2024.

⁸² United Nations Development Programme. *Ecotourism*. 2024.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. *World Heritage*. 2024.



environment.⁸⁵ This program aims to promote sustainable tourism practices while ensuring the preservation of natural environments in these areas.⁸⁶

Advancing Ecotourism Practices

Ecotourism minimizes the negative impacts upon the natural and socio-cultural environment and contains educational features for visitors.⁸⁷ Ecotourism has been at the forefront of UNWTO's work since the early 1990s and has grown increasingly more prominent in recent years.⁸⁸ The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE), which helped UNWTO and UNEP begin to work together to promote ecotourism.⁸⁹ One way this has been done is through the *Québec Declaration on Ecotourism* in collaboration with UNEP and the International Ecotourism Society, which emphasized the role of local communities in ecotourism.⁹⁰ This approach has had a notable impact on the coffee industry, particularly in Costa Rica.⁹¹ The coffee market is rapidly expanding due to increasing consumption in emerging economies and a growing interest in specialty coffee products worldwide.⁹² As the most widely traded tropical product, coffee involves up to 25 million farming households globally, accounting for about 80% of the world's output; it also attracts travelers to these regions.⁹³ Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was reported that Costa Rica had about three million tourists annually.⁹⁴ Those who work in the coffee industry in Costa Rica are often located in very scenic areas and provide guided tours and hikes for tourists to promote ecotourism.⁹⁵

The International Ecotourism Society works with industry leaders to develop global ecotourism experiences while mainstreaming sustainability in this industry.⁹⁶ They work with other NGOs, businesses, and local governments to enhance international ecotourism efforts.⁹⁷ UNDP has established four specially protected natural areas (SPNA) across Belarus, aiming to raise awareness about ecotourism and implement strategies for its development and promotion.⁹⁸ This partnership with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of Belarus and UNDP has worked to create new safe travel opportunities in the post-COVID-19 travel world.⁹⁹ So far, three of these four zones in Belarus have become more accessible for people with disabilities due to the efforts of this program.¹⁰⁰ A more accessible entrance, wooden flooring on the existing eco-trail, and a wheelchair ramp have been added to three of the four zones to make access to these protected spaces easier for those with physical disabilities.¹⁰¹

Prefaced in General Assembly resolution 69/233 (2015), "Promotion of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection," ecotourism can be an essential driver of

⁸⁵ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *Fighting poverty by building on least developed countries' tourist assets (UNCTAD/PRESS/PR/2010/038)*. 2010.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *Ecotourism and Protected areas*. 2024.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *World Ecotourism Summit*. 2002.

⁹¹ Rushby. *The Guardian*. *The perfect blend: how coffee farms in Costa Rica are mixing wildlife, agriculture, and tourism*. 2023.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ International Ecotourism Society. *Our Mission*. 2019.

⁹⁷ International Ecotourism Society. *Our Members & Partners*. 2019.

⁹⁸ United Nations Development Programme. *Ecotourism*. 2024.

⁹⁹ United Nations Development Programme. *Three Belarusian Reserves to Become More Inclusive Thanks to the Project on Ecotourism Development*. 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.



sustainable economic growth and decent job creation, leading to a positive impact on education and the fight against poverty.¹⁰² The resolution also recognized how ecotourism can create many opportunities for biodiversity conservation by encouraging indigenous communities in host areas and tourists to preserve the natural area.¹⁰³ In 2020, Secretary-General António Guterres expanded upon this during the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting that international tourist arrivals fell by 44% in the first four months of 2020.¹⁰⁴ This prompted UNWTO to begin work on their “Global Guidelines to Restart Tourism” as the world continues to recover from the social and economic effects of the global pandemic.¹⁰⁵ These guidelines were later launched in collaboration with the Global Tourism Crisis Committee of UNWTO in May 2020 to support governments and the private sector recovery by implementing security protocols, partnering with Google, and prioritizing sustainability.¹⁰⁶

Promotion of Sustainable Tourism in LDCs

Sustainable tourism provides development potential for LDCs, especially after COVID-19.¹⁰⁷ In 2020, LDCs saw a decline in international tourist arrivals by 67%, along with numerous social effects like the struggle to sustain livelihoods and satisfy basic necessities.¹⁰⁸ According to the United Nations 5th Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5), LDCs can seek to capitalize on the COVID-19 to mobilize finance and attract public and private partnerships for long-term sustainability.¹⁰⁹ Due to the findings of LDC5, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) recommends effective debt relief and management, export diversification, stronger productive capacities, increased investment capacity, and a sustainable low-carbon transition in LDCs as the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹⁰ LDC5 found that the private sector in LDCs should focus on sustainable energy, agriculture and rural development, connectivity, climate change, and sustainable tourism as they work to recover from the pandemic.¹¹¹ The effects of climate change have been found to negatively affect LDCs, which can stall their development process disproportionately, but working to promote sustainable tourism methods can help mitigate these effects.¹¹² At LDC5, UNWTO centered tourism as a critical pillar for sustainable development for LDCs.¹¹³ In many LDCs, COVID-19 also impacted the informal sector of the tourism value chain, more specifically with marginalized groups who may have been displaced into seasonal agricultural work.¹¹⁴ In African LDCs, the sudden halt in tourism compromised biodiversity and conservation efforts and worked against ecotourism efforts.¹¹⁵ The environment, as well as health and safety protocols, should also be included when assisting LDCs in cultivating a sustainable tourism

¹⁰² United Nations, General Assembly. *Promotion of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environment protection (A/RES/69/233)*. 2015. p. 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ United Nations, General Assembly. *Promotion of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environment protection (A/75/267)*. 2020. p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *UNWTO Launches Global Guidelines to Restart Tourism*. 2020.

¹⁰⁷ United Nations, 5th United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5). *Sustainable Tourism*. N.d.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *UNCTAD at the 5th UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5)*. 2023.

¹¹¹ United Nations, 5th United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5). *Thematic Areas*. 2024.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *Tourism's Potential Outlined at LDCV, UN Conference on Least Developed Countries*. 2023.

¹¹⁴ Kampel. Trade for Development News by the Enhanced Integrated Framework. *LDC tourism: Making strides towards sustainable, resilient recovery from COVID-19*. 2020.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.



approach.¹¹⁶ At LDC5 the Executive Director and Head of UNEP represented the body and pushed for enhanced capacity building of LDCs for the betterment of the environment.¹¹⁷ During LDC5, the TUI Care Foundation and UNWTO announced their new Tourism for Development Fund in which the TUI Care Foundation pledged to invest a minimum of €10 million by 2030 to support LDCs.¹¹⁸ This fund will help support vocational training for disadvantaged communities, biodiversity conservation, sustainable agriculture projects, and the protection of marine environments.¹¹⁹ Additionally, at LDC5, UNEP affirmed its commitment to the Doha Programme of Action for the LDCs.¹²⁰

The Pacific Sustainable Tourism Alliance (PSTA) works primarily in Pacific Island nations to help improve the lives of those living there through the use of sustainable tourism and guided by the goals of UNEP.¹²¹ PSTA is committed to maximizing the benefits of tourism for local communities, protecting the Pacific region's natural and cultural assets by conserving land and marine resources, and embedding sustainability practices in daily management and marketing.¹²² More specifically, in Fiji and Samoa, both considered LDCs, PSTA has upheld its commitment to sustainability in the local tourism industry by collaborating with local stakeholders, training over 100 hotel managers on best practices, and equipping 100 hotels with a sustainability management system (SMS).¹²³ The work of the PSTA in Fiji and Samoa focuses on the long-term impacts of sustainable tourism in LDCs.¹²⁴ These impacts include reduced consumption of nonrenewable resources, decreased amount of waste and pollution generated by the tourism sector, increased resource efficiency, reduced dependence on imports through local production, less carbon emissions generated from imported goods, increased tourism-related jobs, increased awareness and appreciation of local culture.¹²⁵

Before COVID-19, UNCTAD stated that tourism could be used as a catalyst for development in the agricultural sector in LDCs and, therefore, boost their economies.¹²⁶ According to UNCTAD, the tourism industry in LDCs made up 71% of Member States GDP.¹²⁷ Tourist development can be approached from the viewpoint of sustainable development through the protection of the environment and local heritage in LDCs.¹²⁸ UNESCO does this for all Member States by adopting and protecting World Heritage Sites.¹²⁹ UNESCO also has a World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme, which focuses on enhancing the dialogue between stakeholders in the tourism industry and those in the environmental sector to implement sustainable tourism measures further while protecting the natural environment in these areas.¹³⁰ Through the designation and safeguarding of World Heritage Sites and the Sustainable Tourism Programme, UNESCO upholds its commitment to the implementation of sustainable tourism practices and protect these valuable natural areas.¹³¹

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ United Nations Environment Programme. *5th United Nations Conference on the Least Developed countries (LDC5)*. 2023.

¹¹⁸ TUI Care Foundation. *TUI Care Foundation's Tourism for Development Fund*. 2024.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *5th United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5)*. 2023.

¹²¹ Sustainable Travel International. *Pacific Sustainable Tourism Alliance*. 2024.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Sustainable Travel International. *Sustainable Tourism Enterprise Program for the South Pacific*. 2024.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *Fighting poverty by building on least developed countries' tourist assets (UNCTAD/PRESS/PR/2010/038)*. 2010.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. *Sustainable Tourism*. 2024.

¹³¹ Ibid.



Conclusion

The tourism industry can offer economic growth and opportunities for development through the implementation of sustainable tourism practices.¹³² The rapid growth of international tourism has also worsened issues, such as GHG emissions and plastic pollution.¹³³ To mitigate these issues, UNEP and UNWTO have worked closely together with the “Global Code of Ethics for Tourism” and have increased their efforts to achieve the SDGs through the use of sustainable tourism.¹³⁴ Promoting ecotourism can help foster the implementation of sustainable tourism methods and minimize environmental degradation due to tourism.¹³⁵ LDCs can also use sustainable tourism as a tool for economic resilience and poverty mitigation, as discussed at LDC5.¹³⁶ Despite the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritizing sustainable tourism efforts can have beneficial impacts on LDCs and Member States as they work to recover.¹³⁷

Further Research

As delegates conduct further research and consider addressing this topic, they should consider the following: What challenges may LDCs face when implementing and enforcing sustainable tourism practices? How can local communities stay engaged and empowered in the sustainable tourism development process? What role does sustainable development play in promoting ecotourism? In what other ways can ecotourism help the tourism industry recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic? What environmental benefits does ecotourism offer? How can the international community promote and support ecotourism practices?

¹³² United Nations Environment Programme. *Tourism*. 2024.

¹³³ The World Counts. *45 arrivals every second*. 2024.

¹³⁴ United Nations General Assembly. *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism (A/RES/70/200)*. 2016. p. 2.

¹³⁵ United Nations World Tourism Organization. *Ecotourism and Protected areas*. 2024.

¹³⁶ United Nations, 5th United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5). *Thematic Areas*. 2024.

¹³⁷ Kampel. Trade for Development News by the Enhanced Integrated Framework. *LDC tourism: Making strides towards sustainable, resilient recovery from COVID-19*. 2020.



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<https://www.tuicarefoundation.com/en/take-action/tourism-for-development-fund-application#:~:text=Throug%20its%20new%20Tourism%20for,of%20development%20in%20many%20LDCs>

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2. Addressing Marine Plastic Pollution

Introduction

According to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, the amount of new plastic that ends up in marine environments is equivalent to around 2,000 garbage trucks being dumped into the ocean every day.¹³⁸ Plastic pollution threatens progress towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 (life below water), as waste continues to accumulate in marine ecosystems.¹³⁹ The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has defined marine litter as any solid manufactured or processed material that has been discarded or otherwise improperly disposed of in a marine environment.¹⁴⁰ In total, plastics account for about 85% of all marine litter, and UNEP estimates that if this continues, there will be about 50 kg of plastic per meter of coastline worldwide by 2040.¹⁴¹ As the world's largest ecosystem, oceans are a crucial component in preserving global biodiversity and facilitating international trade in the emerging blue economy.¹⁴²

A sustainable blue economy attempts to balance economic and social growth by protecting, restoring, and maintaining marine ecosystems to be “diverse, productive, and resilient.”¹⁴³ To achieve this, UNEP has been supportive of a circular approach that emphasizes sustainable practices by reducing the production of harmful new plastics and extending the life cycle of existing sources through reuse, recycling, and reduced consumption.¹⁴⁴ UNEP estimates that transitioning towards a circular economy for plastics could reduce total costs for Member States and decrease the amount of new plastic entering the ocean by 80% in 2040.¹⁴⁵ Single-use plastics are a type of plastic product that is meant to be used once and then thrown away, usually as packaging and other disposable items.¹⁴⁶ According to UNEP, much of the rapid growth in marine plastic pollution has been driven by the increase in new single-use plastic production, costing marine-based industries like tourism, fisheries, and aquaculture around \$6-19 billion in 2018.¹⁴⁷ Many single-use and larger plastics in the ocean are a result of commercial fishing operations from abandoned, lost, or otherwise discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) like gillnets, traps, longlines, driftnets, and crabbing gear.¹⁴⁸ Ghost gear, a type of ALDFG that includes fishing equipment left on the ocean floor, makes up approximately 70% of ocean macroplastics and reduces fish stocks by approximately 30%.¹⁴⁹

¹³⁸ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *World must ‘work as one’ to end plastic pollution: Guterres*. 2023.

¹³⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 11.

¹⁴¹ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Comprehensive assessment on marine litter and plastic pollution confirms need for urgent global action*. 2021; United Nations Environment Programme. *Understanding the State of the Ocean: A Global Manual on Measuring SDG 14.1.1, SDG 14.2.1 and SDG 14.5.1*. 2021.; United Nations Environment Programme. *Comprehensive assessment on marine litter and plastic pollution confirms need for urgent global action*. 2021.

¹⁴² United Nations Environment Programme. *Sustainable Blue Finance*. N.d.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *Innovative pathways to achieve sustainable consumption and production*. 2019. p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *Historic day in the campaign to beat plastic pollution: Nations commit to a legally binding instrument*. 2022.

¹⁴⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *Single-use plastics: A roadmap for sustainability*. 2018. p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ United Nations Environment Programme. *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. 2021. p. 14.

¹⁴⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *Abandoned, Lost or Otherwise Discarded Fishing Gear (ALDFG)*. 2009. p. 27.

¹⁴⁹ Jackson. Global Seafood Alliance. *The Hidden Cost of Ghost Gear Lost by Fishing and Aquaculture*. 2021.



Plastic pollution lowers the amount of marine natural capital available to Member States or the total number of renewable and non-renewable resources in the marine environment that can be used for productive uses.¹⁵⁰ In 2019, the Marine Pollution Bulletin found that the volume of plastic in the world's oceans resulted in a 1-5% loss in marine natural capital from reduced access to ecosystem services.¹⁵¹ Further, seafood constitutes a primary source of animal protein for over 1.6 billion people around the world, leading to concerns about the potential dangers that microplastics pose for global food security and human health from consuming contaminated food sources.¹⁵² For example, a study by the University of California, Davis, estimated that the average individual consumes about 50,000 plastic particles per year.¹⁵³ According to UNEP, a microplastic is any plastic particle that is smaller than 5mm in diameter.¹⁵⁴ Along with this, microplastics commonly enter the marine environment from a process called leaching, which UNEP has defined as the “washing out” of toxic chemical compounds into the soil, groundwater, and other waterways.¹⁵⁵ By addressing marine plastic pollution at the source through the elimination of single-use plastics and more effective waste management systems, Member States can begin to make progress towards implementing approaches that emphasize recycling and reuse of new and existing plastics while starting to move towards sustainable alternatives.¹⁵⁶

International and Regional Framework

In 2012, at the United Nations Conference for Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, General Assembly resolution 66/288, “The Future We Want,” laid the groundwork for sustainable development, expressing concern over the effects on marine biodiversity from the presence of harmful plastic particles.¹⁵⁷ Building on this, General Assembly resolution 70/1, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (2015), established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that outline the key priorities for development moving forward.¹⁵⁸ Marine plastic pollution jeopardizes progress towards SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), and SDG 13 (climate action).¹⁵⁹ SDG 14 (life below water) seeks to achieve the sustainable use of the ocean and its resources, which is undermined by plastic pollution.¹⁶⁰

Since 2011, UNEP has partnered with the United States of America's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to host the International Marine Debris Conference (IMDC) to understand the impacts of marine litter better, promote action toward solving the issue, and improve relationships between different interest groups through multi-stakeholder engagement, culminating with the adoption of the *Honolulu Strategy*.¹⁶¹ The Honolulu Strategy emphasizes preventative approaches by reducing the

¹⁵⁰ United Nations, System of Environmental Economic Accounting. *Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services FAQ*. N.d.

¹⁵¹ Beaumont et al. Marine Pollution Bulletin. *Global ecological, social and economic impacts of marine plastic*. 2019. p. 193.

¹⁵² Beaumont et al. Marine Pollution Bulletin. *Global ecological, social and economic impacts of marine plastic*. 2019; United Nations Environment Programme. *Microplastics*. 2019.

¹⁵³ Kerlin. University of California, Davis. *Plastic for Dinner: A Quarter of Fish Sold at Markets Contain Human-Made Debris*. 2014.

¹⁵⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *Microplastics*. 2019.

¹⁵⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. 2021. p. 11.

¹⁵⁶ European Commission. *Plastics Strategy*. N.d.

¹⁵⁷ United Nations, General Assembly. *The future we want (A/RES/66/288)*. 2012. p. 31.

¹⁵⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. pp. 14-26.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 14-26.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p.23.

¹⁶¹ International Marine Debris Conference. *History of the International Marine Debris Conference*. 2024; United Nations Environment Programme. *The Honolulu Strategy*. 2018.



production of new plastics and managing existing sources, including plastic pollution.¹⁶² In 2023, the most recent iteration of the IMDC (7IMDC) focused on creating a plan to achieve zero waste.¹⁶³ 7IMDC provided a sample policy guide for participants to demonstrate how this might work in practice by identifying potential sources of waste, how they can be reduced, potential and actual costs, and prohibiting most single-use plastics.¹⁶⁴ In support, General Assembly resolution 77/161, “Promoting zero-waste initiatives to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (2022), designates 30 March as the International Day of Waste, advocating for national action plans and sustainable production and consumption to address marine plastic pollution.¹⁶⁵

In 2017, the United Nations General Assembly, UNEP, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared 2021-2030 as the “Ocean Decade.”¹⁶⁶ Led by the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC), the “Ocean Decade” is a focal point for the international community to foster collaborative, science-informed policies and information sharing between different stakeholders to combat the negative impacts of marine plastic pollution.¹⁶⁷ The “Ocean Decade” introduced ten challenges that need to be prioritized to promote more sustainable and resilient oceans.¹⁶⁸ In particular, Challenge 1 (understand and beat marine pollution), Challenge 2 (protect and restore ecosystems and biodiversity), Challenge 4 (develop a sustainable and equitable ocean economy), and Challenge 6 (increase community resilience to ocean hazards) are threatened by plastic waste in the marine environment.¹⁶⁹ In 2023, the IOC published a progress report on actions in support of the Ocean Decade, finding a total of 277 projects in 58 countries.¹⁷⁰ In addition, the IOC partnered with the Kingdom of Spain to host the 2024 Ocean Decade Conference in April 2024 to assess progress and establish joint priorities for future actions.¹⁷¹

In 2019, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) adopted resolution 4/6, “Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics,” establishing an ad-hoc working group to analyze existing measures for eliminating plastic and microplastic discharges into the ocean and to foster collaboration between Member States.¹⁷² In addition, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has tried to address plastic waste from commercial fishing through *Voluntary Guidelines on the Marking of Fishing Gear* to provide better oversight for ghost gear and other types of ALDFG.¹⁷³ The FAO guidelines are designed to assist Member States by clarifying their obligations under international law and expected norms for responsible fishery operations.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶² International Institute for Sustainable Development. *Marine Debris Conference Adopts Honolulu Commitment*. 2011.

¹⁶³ International Marine Debris Conference. *Zero Waste*. 2024.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ United Nations, General Assembly. *Promoting zero-waste initiatives to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/77/161)*. 2022. p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Who we are: The Ocean Decade in a Nutshell*. N.d.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *10 Challenges: Ocean Decade Challenges for collective impact*. N.d.

¹⁷⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. *Ocean Decade Progress Report, July 2022 - June 2023: The United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development*. 2023. p. 2.

¹⁷¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. *2024 Ocean Decade Conference*. N.d.

¹⁷² United Nations Environment Assembly. *Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics (UNEP/EA.4/Res.6)*. 2019.

¹⁷³ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Voluntary Guidelines on the Marking of Fishing Gear*. 2019.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*



In 2021, UNEP published a report titled *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution* that assessed the severity and scope of marine plastic pollution and current efforts to inform discussions at UNEA 5.2 the following year.¹⁷⁵ In 2022, UNEA built on this to take tangible steps towards a compliance and enforcement mechanism for marine plastic litter with the adoption of resolution 5/14, “End Plastic Pollution: Towards an International legally binding Instrument.”¹⁷⁶ This landmark document called for a legally binding framework on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, that addresses the complete life cycle of plastic and encourages cooperation to reduce new and existing marine plastic pollution.¹⁷⁷ In addition, resolution 5/14 (2022) created the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution to begin developing the legally binding instrument, which will convene in November 2024 to continue negotiations for formal implementation.¹⁷⁸

Role of the International System

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), up to 80% of marine plastic pollution originates from land-based sources, and as such, there is a growing emphasis by UNEP and other organizations in the international community to evaluate plastics as part of an interconnected life cycle.¹⁷⁹ The Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter (GPML) is a multi-stakeholder platform administered by UNEP that addresses marine litter by facilitating collaboration and knowledge sharing through the 3Rs principle.¹⁸⁰ The 3Rs principle focuses on reducing the production of new plastics and extending the value of existing plastics through recycling and reuse.¹⁸¹ In 2018, the European Union and five of the Group of Seven (G7) countries adopted the Oceans Plastics Charter at the Leaders Summit in Charlevoix, advocating for a complete life cycle approach to plastics and increased attention on coastal cleanup efforts.¹⁸²

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) regulates marine plastic pollution from commercial shipping, is crucial for operationalizing frameworks and facilitating cooperation between Member States and other UN bodies.¹⁸³ In 2018, the IMO partnered with the Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (GESAMP), UNEA, and FAO to create an Action Plan to move towards zero plastic waste discharges by the shipping industry in marine environments by 2025.¹⁸⁴ To achieve this, the Action Plan has focused on strengthening cooperation between United Nations agencies like UNEP and FAO to establish new norms that reduce plastic fishing waste through mandatory markings, improved reporting mechanisms and transparency, and public awareness campaigns.¹⁸⁵ For example, the IMO and FAO have partnered with the Kingdom of Norway to implement the GloLitter Partnerships Project, which focuses on assisting Member States in developing national and regional action plans for reducing plastic

¹⁷⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. 2024. pp. 14-16.

¹⁷⁶ United Nations Environment Assembly. *End plastic pollution: towards an international legally binding instrument (UNEP/EA.5/Res.14)*. 2022. pp. 3-4.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p. 4.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 3; United Nations Environment Programme. *Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution*. 2024.

¹⁷⁹ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *The plastic pollution crisis. 2022*; United Nations Environment Programme. *How can a life-cycle approach curb the plastic pollution crisis?*. 2022.

¹⁸⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter*. 2024.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² Government of Canada. *Oceans Plastic Charter*. 2018.

¹⁸³ International Maritime Organization. *Brief History of the IMO*. 2019.

¹⁸⁴ International Maritime Organization. *Action Plan to Address Marine Plastic Litter from Ships (MEPC 73/19/Add.1)*. 2018.

¹⁸⁵ International Maritime Organization. *Marine litter*. 2019; International Maritime Organization. *Strategy to Address Marine Plastic Litter from Ships (MEPC 77/16/Add.1)*. 2021. pp. 4-10.



waste from commercial shipping and fishery activities.¹⁸⁶ Likewise, UNEP and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have worked together to harness emerging technologies that can better monitor marine plastic pollution in real time by strengthening partnerships with the science community through specialized environment laboratories and skill development training.¹⁸⁷

The GPML has emphasized the development of national and regional action plans and strengthening links between technical expertise and policymaking through improved data collection and innovative financing.¹⁸⁸ In addition, the GPML has worked towards developing baseline indicators for marine plastic litter and microplastics that can help inform policymakers on potential risks, predict marine plastic pollution at the source, and better understand the impacts of chemical leaching from microplastics.¹⁸⁹ In support of this, UNEP partnered with the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat) and the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom to map out marine litter hotspots along coastal regions in Africa and South Asia.¹⁹⁰ Hotspots were identified using geographic information system (GIS) modeling and were then evaluated concerning land-based waste infrastructure for potential gaps in investment.¹⁹¹ Regional organizations like the Arctic Council have followed suit by focusing on integrating national action plans into a regional strategy that mitigates risks from marine plastic pollution by reducing shipping waste.¹⁹²

Along with better planning and coordination in response measures, several entities have focused on reducing marine plastic pollution by reconceptualizing how trade functions at the system level through programs like UNEP's Clean Seas Campaign, which encourages "voluntary open-ended" coalitions between governments, civil society, industry, and academia.¹⁹³ As part of the Clean Seas Campaign, the Tide Turners Plastic Challenge Badge engages youth in 30 countries in Africa and Asia to foster awareness about marine plastic pollution and equip participants with the skills necessary to become environmental leaders in their communities.¹⁹⁴ Further, the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) has emphasized the role of public-private partnerships (PPPs) as one strategy to finance costly infrastructure improvements and foster knowledge sharing.¹⁹⁵ For example, the Voices of the Ocean expedition is one UNEP-supported PPP initiative through the Clean Seas Campaign to promote innovation along the complete life cycle of plastics and to structure education efforts on marine plastic pollution on an expedition to 40 Member States.¹⁹⁶ Additionally, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like Ocean Wise have helped provide technical expertise on the interactions between plastic pollution and mobilizing volunteer shoreline clean-up efforts.¹⁹⁷

¹⁸⁶ International Maritime Organization. *About GloLitter Partnerships*. 2024.

¹⁸⁷ Couture. International Atomic Energy Agency. *IAEA and UN Environment Partnership: Over 40 Years of Collaboration to Improve Monitoring of Marine Pollution*. 2017.

¹⁸⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *GPML: What we do*. N.d.

¹⁸⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *Recommended Indicators to Address Key Sources of Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics in Support of Developing Action Plans to Address Plastic Pollution*. N.d.

¹⁹⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *Marine Litter Hotspots*. N.d.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Arctic Council. *Sneak peek on the Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter with Elizabeth McLanahan*. 2021.

¹⁹³ United Nations Environment Programme. *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. 2021. p. 16; United Nations Environment Programme. *Global Partnership on Plastic Pollution and Marine Litter*. 2024; United Nations Environment Programme. *About: The Campaign*. N.d.

¹⁹⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *Tide Turners Plastic Challenge Badge*. N.d.

¹⁹⁵ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Climate-Smart Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) - Building Low-Carbon and Resilient Infrastructure in Partnership with the Private Sector*. 2023.

¹⁹⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *Voice of the Oceans*. N.d.

¹⁹⁷ Ocean Wise. *Pollution & Plastics*. 2024.



Environmental Impacts of Microplastics

In 2021, the UNEP report, *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*, highlighted the rapidly growing number of microplastics in marine environments and the negative consequences they pose for marine biodiversity and global food security.¹⁹⁸ More troubling, the Marine Pollution Bulletin estimates that seafood is a primary source of protein, making up at least 20% of the diet for around 1.4 billion people globally.¹⁹⁹ With the firm reliance on fish stocks as a food source for many Member States, the high prevalence of plastic particles found in many species is particularly troubling.²⁰⁰ For example, a coalition of academic researchers from the United States found that at least 386 marine species of a possible 555 had consumed plastic of some form with an incident rate of 26%, creating “a major pathway” in which to distribute plastic particles along the entire ecosystem.²⁰¹

According to the Institute for Marine and Coastal Research, the consumption of plastic particles has severe consequences for the health of marine organisms from entanglement, strangulation, and malnutrition.²⁰² According to UNEP, as fish ingest microplastics, their relatively small size allows them to become embedded in the soft tissues and digestive tract, and at high enough levels, they can negatively impact brain and liver functioning and cause behavioral changes.²⁰³ Chemical leaching from synthetic microplastics like those found in many pesticides used in agriculture and consumer goods like cosmetics further complicates the issue.²⁰⁴ UNEP found that microplastics can become “suspended in seawater” and can be transferred to humans through the consumption of filtering organisms like mussels, oysters, and clams.²⁰⁵ In response to these findings, UNEP has increased scrutiny of the relationships between microplastics in marine environments, marine biodiversity, and global health.²⁰⁶

In 2019, UNEA acknowledged that chemical leaching causes microplastics to be highly mobile and have been detected far from the disposal source in some marine organisms that live up to 10 kilometers below the ocean’s surface in sediment.²⁰⁷ Large urban centers contribute heavily to these microplastic streams.²⁰⁸ In general, waste management systems have trouble adequately preventing microplastics from contaminating waterways, which then feed into the ocean.²⁰⁹ According to Ocean Wise, around 98% of all microplastics in the ocean come from land-based sources.²¹⁰ Tourism, commercial shipping, and

¹⁹⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. 2021.

¹⁹⁹ Beaumont et al. Marine Pollution Bulletin. *Global ecological, social and economic impacts of marine plastic*. 2019.

²⁰⁰ Savoca et al. Global Change Biology. *Plastic ingestion by marine fish is widespread and increasing*. 2021.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Kurtela et al. Institute for Marine and Coastal Research. *The Problem of Plastic Waste and Microplastics in the Seas and Oceans: Impact on Marine Organisms*. 2019. pp. 53-54.

²⁰³ Savoca et al. Global Change Biology. *Plastic ingestion by marine fish is widespread and increasing*. 2021; Kurtela et al. Institute for Marine and Coastal Research. *The Problem of Plastic Waste and Microplastics in the Seas and Oceans: Impact on Marine Organisms*. 2019.

²⁰⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *Microplastics*. 2019; Namazi. Bioimpacts. *Polymers in our daily life*. 2017.

²⁰⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. 2021. p. 32.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Global Chemicals Outlook II: summary for policymakers (UNEP/EA.4/21)*. 2019. p. 8.

²⁰⁸ Ocean Wise. *Microplastics*. 2024.

²⁰⁹ Wood et al. eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the tropics. *Plastic Marine Waste and its Potential for Indonesian Indigenous Communities*. 2020; Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection. *Sources, Fate, and Effects of Microplastics in the Marine Environment: Part 2 of a Global Assessment*. 2016. p. 20.

²¹⁰ Ocean Wise. *Microplastics*. 2024.



fisheries also contribute to microplastics in the marine environment.²¹¹ In particular, ships are considered a primary source of microplastics due to the presence of synthetic paints that are chemically leached into the oceans as part of routine cleaning.²¹²

The prevalence of seafood in coastal and Indigenous communities means that the distributional effects related to contaminated fish and marine invertebrates are not spread evenly between or within Member States.²¹³ A recent joint study conducted by the University of California, Davis in the United States and Hasanuddin University in Indonesia compared the levels of microplastic contamination for fish at seafood markets in the two countries, finding wide disparities between the two, in part due to differences in waste infrastructure and water management systems.²¹⁴ In addition, for many coastal indigenous communities, fishing and marine organisms often have significant cultural and social value, compounding the issue significantly since transitioning away may not be feasible or preferred, especially in geographically remote Member States.²¹⁵

Despite this, IUCN has further emphasized small island developing states (SIDS) contribute little to plastic production or pollution globally, while their relatively small economies limit their ability to influence upstream actors.²¹⁶ There is strong support among many SIDS and coastal countries to make progress towards a binding global plastics treaty.²¹⁷ In addition, FAO's Fisheries and Aquaculture and Climate Change program focuses specifically on building resilience for SIDS by helping bridge the gap in infrastructure capacity and funding research for alternative food sources with a lower carbon footprint.²¹⁸ UNEP has partnered with the Global Environment Facility to help bridge the gap in funding for infrastructure in SIDS and other developing countries through the Implementing Sustainable Low and Non-Chemical Development in Small Island Developing States (ISLANDS) program.²¹⁹ ISLANDS has helped over 30 SIDS improve waste management systems so that they can better address the negative impacts of chemicals and other hazardous waste.²²⁰

Adopted in 2014 by UNEP and the Caribbean Environment Programme, the *Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter Management (RAPMaLi) for the Wider Caribbean Region* called for increased coordination between Caribbean countries to promote education and awareness campaigns on marine plastic pollution and more robust regulatory and enforcement mechanisms.²²¹ Enhanced coordination through

²¹¹ Plastic Soup Foundation. *Paint: A Great Source of Microplastics at Sea*. 2020; Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection. *Sources, Fate, and Effects of Microplastics in the Marine Environment: Part 2 of a Global Assessment*. 2016. p. 20.

²¹² Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection. *Sources, Fate, and Effects of Microplastics in the Marine Environment: Part 2 of a Global Assessment*. 2016. p. 24.

²¹³ United Nations Environment Programme. *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. 2021. pp. 14-33; International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *Small Island Developing States call for ambitious Global Plastics Treaty - INC-2 Paris*. 2023.

²¹⁴ Kerlin. University of California, Davis. *Plastic for Dinner: A Quarter of Fish Sold at Markets Contain Human-Made Debris*. 2014.

²¹⁵ Wood et al. eTropic: electronic journal of studies in the tropics. *Plastic Marine Waste and its Potential for Indonesian Indigenous Communities*. 2020.

²¹⁶ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *Small Island Developing States call for ambitious Global Plastics Treaty - INC-2 Paris*. 2023.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Fisheries and Aquaculture and Climate Change*. 2024.

²¹⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *UNEP and Small Island Developing States (SIDS)*. 2024. N.d.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ United Nations, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Caribbean Environment Programme. *Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter Management (RAPMaLi) for the Wider Caribbean Region*. 2016.



comprehensive action plans is one strategy for reducing the number of microplastic contaminants in the ocean through clean-up efforts and strong regulatory frameworks.²²² Data collection on microplastics in marine environments has been inconsistent in large part due to a lack of standardization among different actors.²²³ As part of the Nuclear Technology for Controlling Plastic Pollution (NUTEC) Plastics Initiative, IAEA is partnering with countries to create a network of independent research laboratories to monitor marine microplastics by harmonizing data collection protocols, technology transfer and facilitating information sharing on past experiences and best practices.²²⁴

Marine Plastic Pollution and Economic Sustainability

A 2016 World Economic Forum report titled *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the Future of Plastics* found that if left unchecked, plastics would outweigh fish in the ocean by 2050.²²⁵ In particular, the World Economic Forum report attributed much of the growth in marine pollution to single-use plastics.²²⁶ Waste from commercial fishing operations like ALDFG contributes around 10% of all marine plastic pollution.²²⁷ The Global Seafood Alliance notes that aquaculture-based industries produce over half of all seafood that is consumed by humans and is the fastest-growing food-producing sector globally.²²⁸

With reuse and recycling rates lagging far behind the production of new plastics, significant costs are generated for Member States, businesses, and consumers alike.²²⁹ UNEP estimates that the total cost incurred annually from single-use plastic packaging is \$40 billion, losing 95% of its material value.²³⁰ The Global Seafood Alliance found that ALDFG from lobster harvesting increased costs for the industry by \$138,000 annually in Canada's Southwest Nova Scotia fishing zone in 2020.²³¹ In total, single-use plastics make up about 26% percent of all new plastic products and generate significant externalities due to their reliance on fossil fuels for production and low recycling rates.²³² There is growing support from UNEP to reduce marine plastic waste indirectly at the source by reconceptualizing the relationship between marine plastic waste and land-based production processes as mutually constituted.²³³ UNEP has argued that the easiest way to reduce the volume of plastic that can enter the ocean is by no longer producing it at the same rate as before.²³⁴

As such, UNEP has recently focused on ways to embed sustainability directly into economic decision-making.²³⁵ The Sustainable Blue Economy Initiative is a framework developed by UNEP to

²²² Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection. *Sources, Fate, and Effects of Microplastics in the Marine Environment: Part 2 of a Global Assessment*. 2016. p. 92; United Nations, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Caribbean Environment Programme. *Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter Management (RAPMaLi) for the Wider Caribbean Region*. 2016.

²²³ Isobe et al. *Microplastics and Nanoplastics. A multilevel dataset of microplastic abundance in the world's upper ocean and the Laurentian Great Lakes*. 2021.

²²⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency. *NUTEC Plastics*. 2024.

²²⁵ World Economic Forum. *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics*. 2016; Harvey. International Atomic Energy Agency Office of Public Information and Communication. *More Plastic Than Fish by 2050 – IAEA Event Gathers Experts Working Together to Save Marine Environments from Plastic Pollution*. 2022.

²²⁶ World Economic Forum. *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics*. 2016. pp. 13-14.

²²⁷ United Nations Environment Programme et al. *Abandoned, Lost or Otherwise Discarded Fishing Gear (ALDFG)*. 2009.

²²⁸ Jackson. Global Seafood Alliance. *The hidden cost of ghost gear lost by fishing and agriculture*. 2021.

²²⁹ Ibid. p. 7.

²³⁰ World Economic Forum. *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics*. 2016. p. 7-12.

²³¹ Jackson. Global Seafood Alliance. *The hidden cost of ghost gear lost by fishing and agriculture*. 2021.

²³² World Economic Forum. *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics*. 2016. p. 7-8.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *Sustainable Blue Economy*. 2024.



facilitate sustainable ocean-based economic growth while also ensuring marine environmental sustainability that is inclusive and resilient.²³⁶ UNEP estimates that a sustainable blue economy would be equal to the seventh largest economy in the world by linking ocean, coastal, and inland water systems, increasing resilience to address transboundary hazards.²³⁷ UNEP has focused on how a circular economy can help achieve these goals.²³⁸ The One Plastics Initiative attempts to help address marine plastic pollution by “reducing the size of the problem, designing for circularity, ensuring circularity in practice, and deal[ing] with the legacy” of existing plastic pollution.²³⁹

In addition to structural approaches like the Sustainable Blue Economy Initiative, there are several specific efforts to address marine plastic pollution.²⁴⁰ The Global Ghost Gear Initiative (GGGI) is a multi-stakeholder collaborative that attempts to find solutions to ALDFG by bringing together the fishing industry, private business interests, academia, and governments.²⁴¹ To reduce existing marine plastic waste, the Ocean Cleanup has focused on the accumulation of single-use plastics in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which is estimated to cover 1.6 million square miles and is made up of 99% plastic.²⁴² The Plastics Free Waste Islands project addresses plastic waste generated as part of the tourism industry in SIDS.²⁴³ As part of the project, Plastic Waste Free Tourism toolkits have been distributed to guide transitions towards zero plastic waste, significantly reducing the number of single-use plastics in the ocean.²⁴⁴ In addition, UNEP has explored the viability of alternatives to single-use plastics for production and consumption, like the use of mushrooms, which can reduce the amount of waste created due to their organic nature while also helping with clean-up efforts by breaking down existing marine plastic pollution.²⁴⁵

Conclusion

According to UNEP, marine plastic pollution threatens progress toward sustainable development, driving inequality and harming the marine environment.²⁴⁶ To reverse this trend, Member States have been encouraged by UNEP to focus on solutions that reduce the amount of plastic produced, clean up existing plastics, and provide accountability for irresponsible plastic waste disposal.²⁴⁷ In particular, single-use plastics and ALDFG have significantly increased the amount of plastic in the ocean and impose significant costs on communities.²⁴⁸ Along with this, the small size and chemical composition of microplastics present

²³⁶ Ibid; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Diving into the blue economy*. N.d.

²³⁷ United Nations Environment Programme. *Sustainable Blue Economy*. 2024.

²³⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *About the One Plastics Initiative*. 2024.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Global Ghost Gear Initiative. *About Us*. N.d; International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *Plastic Waste Free Islands project launches zero plastic waste toolkits for the tourism sector in Small Island Developing States*. 2021.

²⁴¹ Global Ghost Gear Initiative. *About Us*. N.d.

²⁴² The Ocean Cleanup. *Oceans - How It Works*. 2024; The Ocean Cleanup. *The Great Pacific Garbage Patch*. 2024.

²⁴³ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *Plastic Waste Free Islands project launches zero plastic waste toolkits for the tourism sector in Small Island Developing States*. 2021.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Calma. *The Verge*. *Meet the Mushroom that could one day replace plastic*. 2023; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Plastic-busting fungi may help tackle pollution, climate change: UN Environment*. 2018.

²⁴⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *From Pollution to Solution: A Global Assessment of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution*. 2021.

²⁴⁷ Ibid; World Economic Forum. *The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics*. 2016.

²⁴⁸ Jackson. Global Seafood Alliance. *The Hidden Cost of Ghost Gear Lost by Fishing and Aquaculture*. 2021; Kurtela et al. Institute for Marine and Coastal Research. *The Problem of Plastic Waste and Microplastics in the Seas and Oceans: Impact on Marine Organisms*. 2019; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Microplastics in Fisheries and Aquaculture: What Do We Know? Should We Be Worried?*. 2019.



severe concerns for marine biodiversity and global food security from contamination of ocean environments.²⁴⁹ As such, UNEP has emphasized that new approaches like circularity and a sustainable blue economy can help Member States make the world's oceans more resilient while also facilitating sustainable economic growth.²⁵⁰

Further Research

As delegates conduct further research and consider how to address this topic, they should consider the following: What progress can be made toward a sustainable blue economy? How do microplastics interact with the marine environment? What approaches can be employed to reduce single-use plastics? What are the best strategies for lowering commercial fishing and shipping waste? How is marine biodiversity affected by contaminated food sources? How can waste management systems be improved? What can be done to facilitate transitions towards a sustainable blue economy? What steps can be taken to strengthen enforcement and accountability mechanisms for marine plastic pollution?

²⁴⁹ Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection. *Sources, Fate, and Effects of Microplastics in the Marine Environment: Part 2 of a Global Assessment*. 2016.

²⁵⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *Sustainable Blue Economy*. 2024.



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